

Review: 'Top Secret' is slow but good slapstick

By SHAWN BEHLEN
Staff Reviewer

"Top Secret" would make a great movie for dollar night, but it's really worth four bucks. Unfortunately, it doesn't live up to the past success of its writers and directors, the Abrahams and David and Jerry Zucker, who were responsible for the highly popular "Airplane!"

The film revolves around the misadventures of a famous Elvis-style

rock singer, Nick Rivers, who arrives at the portal of fame and fortune because of his hit skeet songs. (Yes, skeet songs. How does "Skeet Surfin'" and "Your Skeetin' Heart" sound?)

He travels to present-day East Germany to perform in a cultural festival and bring rock 'n' roll to the commies. Of course, just a bit more than that happens to our hero. He gets caught up with a group of revo-

lutionaries that are trying to stop the takeover of West Germany by East Germany. Suddenly, he is rescuing damsels in distress and singing, getting thrown in jail and singing, parachuting out of a plane and singing, falling in love and singing, and rescuing an imprisoned scientist and singing. Oh yeah, he also sings every once in a while.

"Top Secret" is a spoof of World War II adventure films and every Elvis film ever made. It tries to do those two genres what "Airplane!" did to the airport movies, but it doesn't cut it until the end. There are inspired moments throughout, but generally, the first half of the movie is just way too slow. For a while, you get a gag about every three minutes and that, friends and neighbors, is dragging.

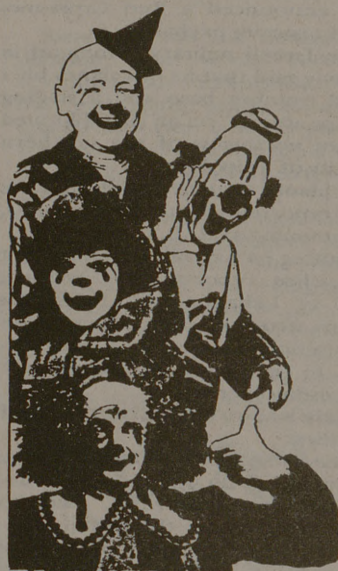
Once Nick hooks up with the revolutionaries, things start rolling and then the movie accomplishes its goal. It seems as though the writers were sitting around one day and came up with, "Hey, let's do a spoof of the big rescue scene in all those old war movies." Then they had to write a beginning to get us there.

Some of the best lines in the film are near the beginning but just flounder. "In a woman's tennis match, I always root against the heterosexual," is priceless. Also, a short spoof of "Blue Lagoon" is great. It makes that movie seem sillier than it did when I first watched it — a feat I didn't think was possible.

The slowness of the first half is really my only complaint. Other than that the movie was the high-spirited spoof that I expected.

Val Kilmer is great as Nick Rivers. His Elvis gyrations are authentic without becoming maudlin (see Kurt Russell). He places himself above the gags and, therefore, gives them an air of authenticity. Also, Lucy Guttridge is appropriately vacuous as Hillary, the damsel in distress. The scene-stealer, though, is Christopher Villiers, an English actor, as Nigel, the leader of the revolution. He and Daisy the Cow are above reproach.

Big top is back in town



Here's your chance to run off and join the circus: The 113th edition of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus is coming to the Summit in Houston Tuesday July 17 for 18 performances through July 29.

The show, produced by Irving and Kenneth Feld, will feature Gunther Gebel-Williams, renowned for his big animal acts.

Gebel-Williams will perform with elephants and Lippizan stallions as well as with his troupe of lions and tigers. This year Gebel-Williams' 12-year-old son Mark Oliver will debut with his performing goats.

Also in the show is the usual entourage of acrobatic, highwire and trapeze acts, including the high-walking Carillo Brothers. New this year is a pack of trained baboons, an act that has been absent from the long-running circus for over 50 years.

If for no other reason, at least go see the clowns — they're what make the circus special year after year. Tickets are on sale at the Summit box office and at all Ticketmaster and Ticketron locations.

Bird songs hit big on record charts

United Press International

LONDON — The latest long-playing BBC record is strictly for the birds. Or rather, from the birds.

"Your Favorite Bird Songs" is precisely that — an uninterrupted recording of the songbird pop charts, chosen by serious fans casting written votes.

"So now we have a Top 12 chart recording, for all time, of the Frank Sinatra of the bird world," said BBC executive James Fleming.

Britain abounds in nature lovers, including an army of binocular-clad bird watchers who find nothing odd in a record jacket phrase describing the willow warbler's "lyrical cadences epitomizing the joy of spring."

Recently the British Broadcasting Corp. tapped this enthusiasm by asking readers of its "Wildlife" magazine to vote for the birds whose songs they love best.

Votes poured in for 74 different species, said John F. Burton, who not only produced the resulting record but recorded 10 of its 12 wild birds. The winner was not the nightingale or wren but something of a surprise.

"The most melodious and No. 1 song bird," Fleming said, "turned out to be the blackbird."

The British species sings only from February to July amid the glories of an English spring.

"I was pleased when the liquid-voiced curlew had a respectable following," BBC wildlife expert Tony Soper said. He added he "found it difficult to imagine jays, sparrows, peacocks and sedge warblers" collecting "best singer" votes.

Instead of arranging the chart toppers in winning order, Burton said in an interview, "we use the listener's imagination, take them on a sort of country walk."

"So you just lay back, close your eyes and pretend you're on that walk."

Soper's description of this imaginary stroll "through the trees towards the pasture land where distant rooks can be heard above the bleating of the grazing sheep" verges on the rhapsodic.

He writes on the record jacket of the "rollicking ditty of a chaffinch," of the "chatty sub-song" of the blackcap while "the trilling of a wood war-

bler wafts to our ears from the copse."

"Suddenly a smallish brown bird rises from the grass ahead," he writes. "a skylark! as it spirals up, it bursts into its glorious, exuberant song..."

Fans voted the song thrush and skylark into joint second place in the BBC top-of-the-bird-pops poll, Burton said. They were trailed by the nightingale — "the conventional choice for first place," the British robin — a different bird from the North American variety — the mistle thrush, wren, willow warbler, blackcap, chaffinch, woodlark and garden warbler.

"The thrush family rivals that of Maria von Trapp with a chorus of seasoned performers," Soper said, which explains why several relatives of the thrush family made the songbird pop chart.

No matter how they thrill their human fans, Soper said, bird "singers, of course, are sublimely indifferent to your opinion of their performance."

"They sing in defense of their homes and to impress potential mates," among other reasons. Yet "like seasoned pop stars, birds make sure they can be heard while they vocalize. The song-post is chosen with care... to make sure their voices are distinctive."

The men behind "Your Favorite Bird Songs" make it clear that this is not a technical recording for scientists but one aimed at wide-selling popular enjoyment.

They know that despite the poll results, as Soper put it, "there will never be an end to the argument over which bird has the most beautiful song."

So Burton is now turning to an even more ambitious birdsong record project.

"We'll need cooperation from the Russians and the Americans, of course," he said, for a possible double album. "I've been to Moscow already and I expect to go to Cornell University, which has the largest collection of wildlife recordings in the United States."

The tentative title of this multi-national forthcoming blockbuster, he said, is "Wading Birds of the Northern Hemisphere."



"Top Secret"

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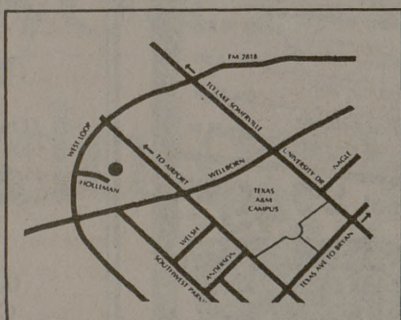


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