

# Bittersweet Memories

REDISCOVERING 'A STAR IS BORN'

by Nick Zegarac

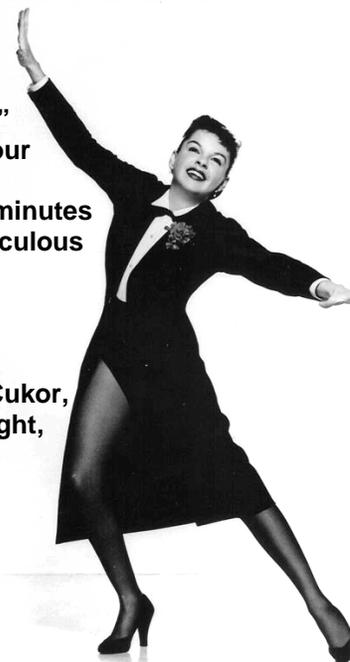
The story has been made and remade three times under the title of *A Star Is Born*, and countless more mutations masquerading as something new, but it's George Cukor's masterful 1954 reworking of the melodrama as musical that perfectly captures the essence of lost opportunities and tragic circumstances. It could have just as easily been re-titled '*A Star Is Re-Born*,' in reference to the film's leading lady.

Judy Garland had not worked in films for three years. During that time she had gone from being A-list musical megastar at MGM to forgotten has been. Divorced from second husband, director Vincente Minnelli and newly hitched to maverick producer Sid Luft, Garland was effectively floating in the ether when Jack Warner, a gambling man, liked the idea so much that he imported Fox's newly christened Cinemascope process for the occasion. Cukor, who had never worked in either widescreen or color proved his adeptness at both, generating a visual style that few novices to the format achieved.



But the film was disadvantaged by Warner's need to interject the lavish – if absurd – “Born in a Trunk Medley.” After theater exhibitors complained that the near three hour running time was hampering their ability to make a quick buck, Warner hacked into the melodrama – removing 40 minutes without Cukor's consent that adversely affected his meticulous story construction and pacing.

Nearly three decades later, film historian Ron Haver managed to reassemble much of the lost footage into a reconstruction. But none of it seemed to matter – Cukor, who had always considered the alterations a personal slight, had died the night before.



## THE SAGA BEYOND THE FOOTLIGHTS



Director George Cukor (left) was renowned throughout the film community as a women's director. His skills, though formidable and expansive, could effectively be distilled into managing temperamental beauties. However, on **A Star Is Born**, Cukor's adeptness at managing Judy Garland proved trying.



Garland was by then considered washed up. Studio sanctioned Benzedrine, uppers and weight loss drugs at MGM had made her a substance abuser while in her early

teens. Though she made valiant frequent attempts to rid herself of that dependency, once pushed by MGM to perform, Garland found solace in her old nemeses. Garland's erratic behavior ultimately led to her dismissal from MGM. It would be three years before she set foot inside a studio again – this time Warner Brothers.

Cukor, a patient man was pushed to the brink of distraction with Garland's tardiness on the set, though he understood Garland's backstage struggles. Jack Warner (upper right), however, was not quite so forgiving. In fact, he contemplated shutting the production down on more than one occasion. But Warner was also a gambling man. As a result of his maverick ways he managed to hold on to his post as CEO of the studio longer than most of his contemporaries had and, in the process made some very solid films. **A Star Is Born** would therefore rank amongst his finest achievements.



What was so damn exasperating about it all was the fact that Judy herself did not want to be a nuisance. If she was miserable on moment she could be winsome and charming the next – working diligently with cast a crew until the appropriate mood and tone of performance had been met. But it was during those other times on the set – when gripped by fear and self-loathing and withdrawal from her medication that Garland managed to alienate her allegiances with nearly everyone who worked on the film at one point or another.

After assembling a rough cut of the film, Jack Warner was unenthused. He failed to see that what Cukor's meticulous plotting had achieved was a sumptuous melodrama with music added in, rather than the glossy musical he (Warner) had been expecting, and ultimately demanded that **A Star Is Born** be. At the objection of Cukor, and considerable cost, Warner concocted the lavish, and somewhat garish, gargantuan 'Born in a Trunk' medley. Inserted into the film at its half way mark of one and a half hours, the sequence was actually a musical recap of the entire story thus far. Though it featured a brilliant performance by Garland, it tended to slow the film's pacing down. Warner ordered Cukor to cut into his melodrama. He also scrapped the idea to road show 'Star' with an intermission – something that almost seems to be expected at the end of the medley, and, originally had been allotted for.

Cukor worked tirelessly on making trims to his footage to accommodate the medley that would not damage the flow or pacing of his own work. Eventually Warner concurred with the choices and the film premiered at 132 minutes to glowing and near unanimous praise.





**A Star Is Born** ought to have been Judy Garland's grand comeback to motion pictures. Oscar-nominated for her poignant, affecting and tragic performance, Garland was ultimately overlooked by Academy voters in favor of Grace Kelly's rather languid turn in **The Country Girl**. It was the first, last and only time Garland would earn the nomination. Sinking deeper into her chronic addiction to prescription pills, she starred in only two more movies, appearing briefly and to good effect as Irene Hoffman in Stanley Kramer's Judgment At Nuremberg. At the age of 46, Garland's demons got the better of her and she died of an apparent overdose.

Jack Warner's truncated version of **A Star Is Born** infuriated critics and audiences who had seen the film in its entirety. Though many called for, and some demanded, the excised footage to be reinstated – after the first two weeks of the film's premiere only the edited version continued to play in theaters. Sadly, Warner saw no reason in keeping the footage he had taken out. Presumably, much of what was cut has been lost for all time.

Thanks to the late Ronald Haver all of the cut musical footage was eventually rediscovered from a variety of source material, as well as the complete audio track. But the poignant melodrama – the scenes which so effectively established and forever cemented the enduring romance between Esther and Norman remain missing. With the complicity of AMPAS, Warner Brothers and a crew of historians, Haver reconstructed 'Star' from this footage, using still photographs to supplement the scenes that do not exist. It is this version of the film that has found its way to DVD.

**PLOT:** Esther Bloggett (Judy Garland) is a singer with the Glenn Williams Orchestra. While performing for a star-studded benefit she is accidentally introduced to reigning male superstar, Norman Maine (James Mason) after he drunkenly stumbles out in the middle of her act. Sobering up and grateful for Esther's tact at getting him off stage, Norman pursues Esther around the Hollywood nightclub scene. He discovers her warbling a throaty torch song in an all-night jazz club and is so impressed by her talent that he decides to get her a screen test.

However, before Norman can make good on his promise he is carted off on location leaving Esther, who has quit the band, to fend for herself waiting tables until his return. The screen test granted, Norman coaxes his boss, Oliver Niles (Charles Bickford) into hiring Esther for the new musical the studio is planning after their first choice bows out. The film transforms the virtually unknown Esther Bloggett into overnight sensation, Vicki Lester. Norman and Esther marry and build a new home on the coast. But Norman's career has taken a turn for the worst. His contract cancelled he now must rely on Esther to support him.

The humiliation of becoming a has been drives him to drink. During Esther's triumphant acceptance speech during the Oscar telecast



sacrifice to his own folly.

Norman shows up intoxicated and belligerent. He uses the occasion to beg for a job before accidentally striking Esther with his fist. Destroyed, alone and friendless – except for Esther's love – Norman sinks further into depression. He temporarily dries out at a halfway house, but one time publicist Matt Libby (Jack Carson) pushes Norman's fragile ego over the edge again, and this time he winds up in night court to face the music. Remanded into Esther's custody, Norman is horrified to learn that his wife intends on giving up her career to nurture him. Norman decides that Esther's career is one thing he will not

After setting Esther to work in the kitchen, Norman steps out into the surf and drowns himself. At his funeral, Esther is assaulted by her rabid fans. Overcome with grief, Esther goes into seclusion – a self-imposed exile that ends when her good friend and former band accompanist, Danny McGuire (Tom Noonan) browbeats Esther into accepting an invitation to perform at an actor's benefit. Esther complies, stepping on stage and introducing herself as Mrs. Norman Maine, to a thunderous standing ovation.



**THE TRANSFER:** Warner's transfer on **A Star Is Born** is quite good, considering the rocky road the original camera negative has traveled. The anamorphic widescreen Cinemascope image at times simply glows with the magnificent hues of Technicolor. At its best the image is crisp, well defined and free of age related artifacts. Blacks are velvety and deep. Whites are clean and polished.

Unfortunately, there are moments when it becomes obvious which scenes have been restored to the film. Presumably coming from less than stellar source material – these scenes have a color palette that is less accurately balanced with slightly muddy colors and usually slightly yellow whites. Film grain and dirt and scratches are more obvious during these scenes as well. The insertion of sepia toned stills to



supplement the missing footage is jarring to the continuity of the story. One sort of wishes that Warner Bros. had released two versions of the film on DVD – one with all of the rediscovered footage, and one minus the portions for which no moving image currently exists, if for no other reason than to compare the two.

The audio has been remixed to 5.1 stereo, and it is saying much – while dated, and suffering from the fact that no satisfactory six track recording of the original existed by the time Haver and his crew got their hands on the elements – that despite these limitations the resulting effort sounds quite good. Though dialogue appears somewhat flat the musical portions have retained a robust characteristic that has been properly re-channeled for this presentation.

Extras include several musical outtakes of 'The Man That Got Away' as well as a brief deleted portion of 'Born in A Trunk' in which Garland sings 'When My Sugar Walks Down The Street.' There's also the film's televised premiere – a glamorous affair in which nearly every star in Hollywood seems to have turned out. Unfortunately, the image quality is deplorable. Sourced from a rather warped looking black and white print, the contrast levels are weak. Grain is prevalent as well as age related artifacts.

**BOTTOM LINE:** As a film purist and ardent admirer of this great American classic, I pine for the day that the excised dramatic portions are found and restored. Perhaps Warner Brothers will eventually commit themselves to a complete digital restoration of the existing film elements, making 'Star' sparkle again as it originally did in '54.

