

A Star Is Born Review

Bradley Cooper and Lady Gaga turn to Hollywood's favorite creation myth in order to permanently recreate how we see them.

[David Crow](#) September 8, 2018

Several times throughout ***A Star is Born***, Bradley Cooper purrs the lyrics, "Maybe it's time to let the old ways die." We think he doth protest too much, particularly in a film that so lovingly updates not only a few old ways of moviemaking, but also a very specific, older Hollywood myth. Indeed, Cooper's pensive directorial debut, which likewise stands as a remarkable introduction for Lady Gaga in the role of movie star, is the fourth version of this tale (not counting the many knockoffs) in which a fading star gives birth in his last gasp of fame to a new pop culture sun. Like the misbegotten 1976 version with Barbara Streisand and Kris Kristofferson, 2018's ***A Star is Born*** moves the showbiz fable from movie studios to the music industry. But unlike that vanity project, Cooper uses American entertainment's favorite creation myth to recreate how audiences will forever perceive him and Gaga.

Drawing from a well-worn yarn about the price of fame and the anguish of losing it, it is via an unexpected intimacy that Cooper is able to craft something refreshing and unique. Like an acoustic cover of a brassy old standard, he strips away the glitz and bombast to make a passion play that feels raw and unplugged. Garbling his way through a slurring Western drawl, his protagonist Jackson Maine already seems to have one foot in the darkness off-stage right when he accidentally stumbles into a bar after midnight. Despite being technically a drag queen event on this given night, Gaga's Ally remains the local diva of the haunt due to her undeniable talent—

talent that even while in a drunken stupor Jackson takes an immediate shine toward.

Having almost entirely given up her dreams of ever making it in the music industry—a disappointment that her father constantly echoes in her ear (played by an unrecognizable Andrew Dice Clay)—Ally is initially very reluctant to believe Jackson's effusive praise that she is a great songwriter, a great singer... and even a great beauty. In fact, it's been her nose that she reveals has kept her from ever being taken seriously as a talent by anyone remotely adjacent to the music industry, but that nose suits Jackson just fine, especially when he can kiss beneath it or look up toward it when she's dragging him off the floor. Soon enough, he is bringing her onstage and, like the title says, a star is born.

It could be easy to dismiss Cooper's aging rocker "discovering" Lady Gaga when, in fact, Gaga has very obviously made it in the music industry for almost a decade now. Yet the film offers an honest commentary about the price of fame today, and the concessions the likes of Gaga or her character Ally must make. The real Gaga, Stefani Germanotta, struggled for years as a singer-songwriter until she embraced the pop star aesthetic in the extreme, so much so that many often forget the talent beneath all the performance art. ***A Star is Born*** removes the artifice to re-introduce the frequently overlooked skills of Germanotta, who also co-wrote most of the original songs in the movie, before building her back up into another pop star version of Gaga.

It is that trajectory which makes this arguably the most creative remake of ***A Star is Born***, for unlike the other versions, this is less a reconfiguration of the Svengali archetype as it is a man on the verge of breaking—he's even a rock star going deaf—simply letting a young woman make herself. Ally breaks into the music industry without the pop aesthetic and without

Jackson doing more than giving her a microphone, which makes their subsequent marriage and its bittersweet trajectory more emotionally poignant rather than manipulative or saccharine.

There is an undeniable grace with how Cooper builds his film, in which he plays a convincingly greasy, crooning cowboy who has more to do with the indie scene of Austin than modern Top 40 radio. And by casting Sam Elliot as Jackson's older brother—their father had Cooper's character late in life—he also allows himself to borrow Elliot's gravelly roar to accompany the popping blood vessels in his red face whenever he gets on stage. This complemented by Gaga—the astonishing singer—creates a harmony that can never last. Yet its elegiac refrain for most of the film's first two acts gives the film a soulful chorus that is sure to worm its way into many audiences' memory. As does a wistful cameo by Dave Chappelle.

The film is again a major coup for Gaga. Having already appeared in front of the camera to lesser effect on multiple seasons of [American Horror Story](#), she has never seemed more natural or at ease as an actor than in ***A Star is Born***. Intentionally recreating her heroine as the opposite of the ingénue archetype, Gaga does well with the material and crackles against Cooper, even as the film wisely uses careful scripting and editing to play to Gaga's acting strengths. Appearing to have a set range, Gaga seems less comfortable with moments of extreme duress, yet can dominate the entire frame when a mic is in her hand or when warily exposing Ally's (and maybe even her own) vulnerabilities to Jackson.

In truth, ***A Star is Born*** is a multi-pronged star vehicle. It offers a showcase for Gaga's many talents, as well as a marker for Cooper's arrival as a major directorial one. With confidence and an adept eye for gliding cameras and Steadicam shots, Cooper displays a swagger every bit as broad as his own onscreen cowpoke, whose ever-darkening gloom is the real centerpiece

performance of the movie. One that will likely be in constant discussion all the way until Oscar's telecast.

Yet despite returning to one of Hollywood's favorite bedtime stories as his opening salvo, Cooper offers audiences a mature and remarkably adult melodrama at a time when such stories seem almost forgotten by the increasingly juvenile industry. The third act veers into the maudlin destinies of the original film, but for the first time since 1937, we have **A Star is Born** that is as comfortable in the dark as in the light, which makes it all the brighter.

A Star is Born premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival and opens nationwide on Oct. 5.

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David Crow is the Film Section Editor at Den of Geek. He's also a member of the Online Film Critics Society. [Read more of his work here](#). You can follow him on Twitter [@DCrowsNest](#).

Rating:

4 out of 5

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Written by

David Crow | [@DCrowsNest](#)

David Crow is the movies editor at Den of Geek. He has long been proud of his geek credentials. Raised on cinema classics that ranged from...

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