



**EDGAR WRIGHT'S LONDON AFTER DARK**

# Beat Girl

A personal favourite of mine, this exposé of late 1950s Soho and the nocturnal world of beatnik coffee shops and illicit strip joints is filled with famous faces: Christopher Lee, Adam Faith, Oliver Reed, Shirley Ann Field, as well as a would-be Bardot in Gillian Hills (a 60s Zelig-like figure of many a cult movie). Most gloriously, John Barry's first score is genuinely brilliant and much-sampled to this day.

**Edgar Wright**

## **'Beat Girl': Dig that, daddy-o!**

If anybody tries to tell you homegrown rock and roll wasn't much cop before the Beatles, don't believe it. Even if the earliest British popsters gyrated slightly more stiffly than lithe-hipped American Elvis Presley, plenty of great pre-Fabs sounds belted out across Blighty. Tommy Steele swung his grey flannels suggestively, urging kids to 'Rock With the Caveman', singer-songwriter Billy Fury shook it out like a rock 'n' roll marionette, Cliff made everybody 'Move It' and Vince Taylor's baby drove up in a 'Brand New Cadillac'. On television, Jack Good was rewriting the rulebook for teen music on screen, and suddenly, at the pictures, beat bad-boy Adam Faith was warning audiences that he was going to rock it – in *Beat Girl*.

If my old man is to be believed, it was shortly after *Beat Girl* hit the cinemas that Adam Faith (aka Terry Nelhams) became a big enough pop star (on this side of the pond, at least) to be known – just like Elvis – simply by his first name. But he would never look so cool again. *Beat Girl* Adam, leather jacketed, hair in a rough fringe, seems distinctly Hamburg style. His carefully-messy mop top anticipates the Beatle cut by years. Soon, sure enough, tamed Adam, sporting shiny suit, would sing of the lonely pup in the Christmas shop, with cutesy kiddie choir and pizzicato backing, but for now he was ultra-cool. Even if he didn't quite realise it. Adam's entertaining autobiography *Poor Me* reveals he wasn't especially keen on the movie – '*Beat Girl* was no film epic... personally I found most of the lines as corny as anything' – nor did he dig director Greville. 'I don't think it helped us to have a director...who though an Englishman, works in France when the story was set in Soho.' But our Adam – a canny businessman – did dig that the flick made money. 'The reason is, I suppose, that its rather lurid story appeals to teenagers' tastes. And John Barry's music fits the action perfectly.'

Admittedly, Adam's performance as guitar man Dave isn't the most polished in the world (he'd be better by *Budgie*). But so what? British rock 'n' roll was still young, heartfelt, home-made and the better for it. On 'Runk Bunk', one side of a recent raucous flop 45, Adam had accidentally started to sing again before the instrumental break was over, but sheer energy saw him through – just as it does in *Beat Girl*.

As for the *Beat Girl* herself, Gillian Hills, she sets the screen alight from the word go. As neglected teen Jennifer she sulks, seethes and sideways-glances her way to screen immortality, making her moody manifesto clear from title sequence dance routine onwards, petulantly pouting, tutting, sneering, huffing and puffing, chucking expensive gee-gaws about, rightly dismissive of puffed-

up Pater. Daddy (an immeasurably square David Farrar, perfectly cast) is a horrifying old bore in a humungous stripy suit donated by Dennis the Menace's demobbed Dad, worn with the hanger still in it. Intriguingly, his horrific housing project City 2000 fascinates him far more than his younger French wife (Noelle Adam). Eager to appease wild-child Jennifer with her thoroughly modern manners, she even fibs that she wears slacks and sweaters 'in the house'. Note too that while Pops is keen to flog his nightmarish concrete-clad apartment-block to visiting politicians for the housing of grubby hoi-polloi far overseas, he himself inhabits a posh property in Kensington, well away from home-grown poor folk.

Maybe Gillian is so terrific as Jennifer because the role allowed her to explore the stress her sudden voyage into showbiz had wrought: 'Playing at being Jennifer meant I could also vent my frustration, my disgust, the helplessness and despair, and the anger at what had happened to my life in recent months.' Disdainful of sensible cardigans and pretty frocks, sneaking out on school nights, shirt untucked, hair piled high, Jennifer is first to 'rock it' in smoky cellars, and last to tug her head away playing dare on the train tracks. She's the greatest Brit teen silver-screen bad girl of all time, and she's wild for kicks. There's no way Jennifer could ever grow up merely to become an attractive appendage to a rich, dreary architect – is there?

Let's not claim that *Beat Girl* is some kind of *vérité* expose of the troubled world of teenagers; but it is a bizarre British exploitation piece of the highest order. As a depiction of generation gap conflict it is beautifully, hypnotically, intoxicatingly, ludicrously brilliant. Pre-ironic, peopled by outrageously absurd pretend adults getting hysterically uptight with outrageously absurd pretend adolescents – spouting-straight-from-the-fridge hipster slang no-one ever spouted, doing the kind of naughty things its scriptwriter Dail Ambler (aka unsung female British hard-boiled pulp fiction hack Betty Mabel Lillian Williams) might have seen in a cheapo rip-off of a James Dean movie – *Beat Girl* inadvertently speaks volumes about the mythical, misunderstood clash between young and old that may or not have happened in pre-permissive Britain. Back when rock and roll was still a cottage industry invented by the Americans, uncertainly adapted by the English, back before anyone had the vaguest clue what being a teenager was really all about, other than that it might mean money. Sure enough, *Beat Girl* was ultimately concocted by a gang of squares trying to appeal to the kids, you dig? And they got it wrong, of course, but somewhere between the idea and the execution, there might be some kind of truth...

*Beat Girl* also features some seedy striptease routines – applauded by audiences of clammy old bald chaps, with bottle glass specs, monocles and moustaches – that caused consternation and immediately earned an X Certificate. According to Adam, the film was banned in Italy, Israel, South Africa, Turkey, and Malaya, while 'in Singapore, the censor wouldn't pass it because Gillian, as the wayward daughter, was rude to her parents. Dig that, daddy-o!' Still more distressingly, Adam noted, 'the film also ran into difficulties in Warwickshire, and I believe it can't be shown there.' As there is no record that this ban was ever lifted, viewers in Warwickshire might wish to consult the local constabulary before they watch.

Other cast-members en route to the top included Christopher Lee (never sleazier than here, almost breathing Brylcreem), Carol White and Shirley Anne Field. Meanwhile, Oliver Reed, ignoring any inadequacies in his part as 'Plaid Shirt', swaggers across the screen as if he owns it (he does).

So what does it all mean? Maybe nothing. Or maybe, as Dave notes at the end, stuffing his broken guitar into the dustbin, that ‘Only squares know where to go.’ Maybe he was right. Maybe a shiny suit is the way ahead. Rock it, Adam.

### Vic Pratt, *Beat Girl*/ Blu-ray/DVD booklet essay (BFI, 2016)

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#### BEAT GIRL

*Directed by:* Edmond T. Greville  
©: Willoughby Film Productions Ltd.  
*Production Company:* Renown Pictures Corporation \*  
*Presented by:* George Minter  
*Executive Producer:* George Minter \*  
*Produced by:* George Willoughby  
*Production Manager:* Al Marcus  
*Assistant Director:* Kip Gowan  
*Casting Director:* Harvey Woods  
*Story & Screenplay by:* Dail Ambler  
*Story:* Edmond T. Greville \*  
*Photographed by:* Walter Lassally  
*Camera Operator:* Neil Gemmell  
*Editor:* Gordon Pilkington  
*Art Director:* Elven Webb  
*Wardrobe Supervisor:* Harry Haynes  
*Make-up:* Sidney Turner  
*Hairdressing:* Anne Box  
*Music Composed and Arranged by:* John Barry  
*Additional Songs Sung by:* Adam Faith \*  
*Lyrics by:* Trevor Peacock, Hyam Maccoby  
*[Music] Played by:* John Barry and his Orchestra, The John Barry Seven  
*Recording Supervisor:* A.W. Watkins  
*Sound Recordists:* Gerry Turner, J.B. Smith  
*Sound:* Cyril Swern \*  
*Dubbing Editor:* Don Challis  
*Sound System:* Westrex Recording System  
*Made at:* Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer British Studios

#### Cast:

David Farrar (*Paul Linden*)  
Noelle Adam (*Nichole*)  
Christopher Lee (*Kenny*)  
Shirley-Ann Field (*Dodo*)  
Peter McEnery (*Tony*)  
Claire Gordon (*Honey*)  
Oliver Reed (*Plaid Shirt*)  
Michael Kayne (*Duffle Coat*)  
Anthony Singleton (*Green Pants*)  
Robert Raglan (*F.O. official*)  
Nade Bealle (*official's wife*)  
Margot Bryant (*Martha*)  
Nigel Green (*Simon*)  
Norman Mitchell (*club doorman*)  
Pascaline (*exotic strip dancer*)  
Adam Faith (*Dave*)  
Gillian Hills (*Jennifer*)  
Delphi Lawrence (*Greta*) \*  
Carol White \*  
Christina Curry \*

UK 1959©

89 mins

\* Uncredited

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#### EDGAR WRIGHT'S LONDON AFTER DARK

##### Passport to Shame (AKA Room 43)

Mon 18 Oct 20:50; Sat 13 Nov 18:10

##### Peeping Tom

Tue 19 Oct 20:30; Sat 6 Nov 18:20

##### Beat Girl

Fri 22 Oct 20:40; Sun 31 Oct 16:20

##### West End Jungle + Look at Life: Market Place

+ Look at Life: Rising to High Office

Sat 23 Oct 20:40; Sat 20 Nov 14:40

##### The Pleasure Girls + Look at Life: Members Only

Mon 25 Oct 20:50; Mon 29 Nov 18:20

##### Frenzy

Wed 27 Oct 20:45; Fri 19 Nov 18:30

##### Darling

Thu 28 Oct 20:30; Sat 20 Nov 13:20

##### Bitter Harvest + Look at Life: Coffee Bar

Fri 29 Oct 18:00; Tue 9 Nov 20:45

##### The Small World of Sammy Lee + Look at Life: In Gear

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##### Primitive London + Look at Life: Goodbye Piccadilly

Mon 1 Nov 20:50; Thu 25 Nov 20:50

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