

Nick Davis  
Film Discussion Group  
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## *A Star Is Born* (dir. Bradley Cooper, 2018)

### Cast

Jackson Maine: Bradley Cooper: *Silver Linings Playbook* (12), *American Sniper* (14)  
Ally: Lady Gaga: won a Golden Globe for acting in *American Horror Story* (15-16)  
Bobby (J's brother): Sam Elliott: Western icon; great in *Mask* (85), *I'll See You in My Dreams* (15)  
Rez (A's manager): Ravi Gavron: part of the ensemble of a new TV version of *Catch-22* (19)  
Lorenzo (A's dad): Andrew Dice Clay: divisive 1980s comedian; good in *Blue Jasmine* (13)  
Ramon (A's friend): Anthony Ramos: lead role in *Monsters and Men* (18), a great movie out now!  
George (J's friend): Dave Chappelle: comedy superstar who grew notoriously shy of the spotlight

### Off Camera

Director: Bradley Cooper: three-time Oscar nominee for acting, in directorial debut  
Co-Screenwriters: Eric Roth: Oscar for *Forrest Gump* (94); I prefer *The Insider* (99), *Munich* (05)  
Will Fetters: Wrote heartthrob vehicles for Robert Pattinson and Zac Efron  
Cinematography: Matthew Libatique: Oscar nominee for *Black Swan* (10); lots with Spike Lee  
Film Editing: Jay Cassidy: worked on three Cooper films, including *American Hustle* (13)  
Production Design: Karen Murphy: assisted on Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!* (01), *Gatsby* (13)  
Costume Design: Erin Benach: outfitted Cooper in the very good *Place Beyond the Pines* (12)  
Original Score: Jocelyn Pook: made a memorable debut on Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (99)

### Direct forerunners to this version of *A Star Is Born*...

*What Price Hollywood?* (1932) – Often omitted from media narratives about the history of *A Star Is Born*, only because of its different title but clearly the template for the later versions. In this non-musical, black-and-white version, a diner waitress (Constance Bennett) meets a famous, dashing film director (Lowell Sherman); around the time she wins the Best Actress Oscar, he shoots himself. The inspiration for her character was Colleen Moore, an actress in the 1920s and early 1930s who later went on to co-found the Chicago International Film Festival!

*A Star Is Born* (1937) – This Technicolor version starred two early Oscar winners, Janet Gaynor and Fredric March, as an aspiring actress from the Midwest and a big star in alcoholic decline.

*A Star Is Born* (1954) – George Cukor, who had also directed *What Price Hollywood?*, rebuilt the material as a Judy Garland showcase, which almost inevitably meant turning it into a musical.

*A Star Is Born* (1976) – This version, with Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson, was the first where both characters were singers. Reviews were mixed, but the movie was an enormous hit.

### Some more good movies that overlap with *A Star Is Born*...

*New York, New York* (1977) – This extravagant, World War II-era musical starring Liza Minnelli and Robert De Niro was a misfire with most audiences and critics when it premiered (despite giving us the immortal title song) but many now view it as one of Scorsese’s creative peaks. The story is about a singer (Minnelli) and a saxophonist (De Niro) who meet at a USO event and fall in love, but who turn out to have a toxic relationship and different career trajectories.

*Crazy Heart* (2009) – Jeff Bridges finally won an Academy Award, 38 years after his first nomination, as the alcoholic country/rock singer Bad Blake, who inherits a shot at stability when he starts a relationship with a single-mom journalist (Maggie Gyllenhaal). His music is close in style to Jackson’s in this *Star Is Born*, and his speaking voice is similar to Cooper’s.

*Beyond the Lights* (2014) – The commercial failure of this movie was one of the most undeserved of recent years; audiences who did see it loved it, as did critics. Pop superstar Noni Jean (Gugu Mbatha-Raw, unrecognizable from *Belle*, which she made the same year), is on the brink of suicide but is saved, first literally and later emotionally, by a security guard (Nate Parker) who becomes her lover. The movie’s specific angles on black stardom are rare and rewarding.

### Facts about *A Star Is Born* you may appreciate...

Around 2011, Warner Bros. was keen to launch another *Star Is Born* with Beyoncé as its female lead... and Clint Eastwood was eager to direct. Several men were floated as her co-star, with Leonardo DiCaprio surfacing most often, but the difficulties of scheduling two superstars for a long shoot as well as script concerns from the actors’ teams kept stalling the project. Eastwood finally dropped it around the time he was directing *American Sniper*, starring Bradley Cooper, a leading man who had been eager to try his hand at directing. His passion sold everybody.

Cooper inherited the problem of settling on the right female lead, with Beyoncé long gone from the project, until he saw Lady Gaga sing at a Hollywood party at a famous friend’s home—where she sang “La Vie en Rose,” the Edith Piaf song that is Ally’s first number in the movie. The two quickly began spending time together, recording footage of their musical collaborations and their interpersonal chemistry, which finally convinced the skeptical studio she could act.

Cooper had hired Willie Nelson’s son (who is visible throughout as the main backup guitarist in Jackson’s ensemble) to train him on guitar and consulted members of Metallica about the staging of live performance. He had not, however, imagined training quite so long on singing until Gaga convinced him not only how necessary this was but that they both needed to sing their vocals live on set if the movie was going to be as persuasive and intimate as they wanted. Cooper also worked with a vocal coach to get his speaking and singing voice so much lower.

Several concert performances in the movie incorporate footage that was shot during major music festivals (Coachella, Glastonbury) and at Gaga’s shows during the year the film was made.

Warner Bros. premiered this *Star Is Born* out of competition at the Venice Film Festival, an event typically devoted to art films. This was a major sign of their confidence in Cooper’s film. During the world-premiere screening, lightning literally struck the theater, causing an 18-minute power outage. But figurative lightning also struck: reviews have mostly been raves.

## Broad conversation topics...

**Maybe It's Time to Let the Old Ways Die:** This is an awfully rich thing to say or sing amidst the fifth version of the same story, especially in the single song that Jackson's fans most often demand from him. But what did you assume inspired the song, or how does it resonate in a film where all the following are true: both Jackson and Ally are eager to break from their fathers' examples, though they also remain attached to those men, perhaps excessively so; Jackson's genre of music still fills stadiums but is having trouble competing with synthetic pop; Jackson is appalled that a pecan farm, even a desolate one, is replaced by a wind farm.

**Fame:** We get several cues that fame itself is now, for Jackson, an "old thing" that he'd happily let die. Moreover, this is the first *Star Is Born* I've seen where the upward trajectory of the female ingénue doesn't come across as 100% appealing: quickly qualified artistic integrity, command performances of tacky songs, mercenary manager, garish new hairstyle... I'm also not convinced that Jackson is jealous of Ally's newfound success, though that dynamic has been strongly at play in earlier versions of this tale. Is this movie [disenchanted with fame](#)?

**Ambition and Compromise:** I do not take this film as remotely vilifying Ally, but I do think it opens opportunities for critique or skepticism about the terms by which she succeeds. We groan or sympathize as the label sculpts her into a more alien version of her initial look and style, but is that wholly different from her super-quick adoption of country-rock fashions and musical expressions after meeting Jackson? Or indeed, from her quasi-drag routines as Édith Piaf, etc.? Does Ally, whose last name we never hear, have an identity of her own? In the Grammy speech that Jackson grossly interrupts, she thanks her manager first: "I always wanted to be a singer on a big stage, and because of him I am." What has she done to get there? What does the finale, including Ally's movie-ending close-up into camera, tell us?

**Perspective:** Cooper decided early to film the concern scenes exclusively from the point of view of the artists on stage, rather than indulge standard cutaways to the audience or their vantage on the performers. That's just one way in which this *Star Is Born* feels strongly rooted in the experience and wisdom of the genuinely mega-famous; early scenes emphasizing the impolite or demanding appetites of fans do not turn out to be the main source of conflict as the story unfolds. What does *A Star Is Born* gain by sticking so closely to Jackson's and Ally's sides?

**Support Systems:** Two old stories in American popular art, rightly or wrongly, are how successful people often drop the folks who got them there, and how white artists often build their fortunes on the backs of artists and communities of color, whose styles and trends they repackage for a "mainstream." Note how many of Jackson's and Ally's intimate pals are people of color (Dave Chappelle's and Anthony Ramos's characters, many of the drag queens), and how quickly and often they drop out of the movie after playing cheerleader and/or nursemaid to the leads.

**They've Seen This Movie:** The song Ally writes for Jackson as their relationship is *just* starting is about "always remembering us this way," as if assuming a later moment when things will have fundamentally changed. The song Jackson writes for Ally, pre-crisis, is a lament for someone whose lover has gone forever. Is it always clear to both of them how everything will unfold?

### Specific touches worth contemplating...

**Sound:** OMG, *loud!* The volume of the opening concert definitely evokes the adrenalin rush of the event, even/especially from the stage, though I like how it also emerges as a double character-point: no wonder Jackson can no longer hear well, and no surprise that his music is as much about blocking things out as emitting feelings. Speaking of sound, when Jackson enters his limousine, the high keen of his tinnitus is actually *sparked* by his swig from the bottle, rather than a problem he tries to *solve* by drinking, which might have been more predictable.

**Editing:** After starting with Jackson alone, *A Star Is Born* soon starts cross-cutting between his and Ally's paths toward the club that night: i.e., the edits weave back and forth between two parallel threads, which eventually converge. Near the end, the film will repeat this behavior, cross-cutting between Ally's stadium gig and Jackson *not* managing to join her, before ending on Ally alone. This is one of many symmetries built into the movie, which also features many "doubled" scenes: i.e., he wakes her in a girly bedroom, and later she wakes him in one, etc.

**Dialogue:** "UGGHH! MEN!" Ally screams in her first scene, after breaking up over the phone with her latest partner. Both audiences I've seen the movie with laughed with her exasperation but it's also worth noting that this boyfriend was a lawyer. Whether or not by her own design, Ally keeps meeting and attracting men with more access to money and power than she has.

**Scene-Construction:** Ally may or may not recognize Jackson at the bar where she sings; either way, she saves her rose for her friend Ramon, not for the famous man beside him. (Ramon's shirt, incidentally, is black and covered with red roses.) Jackson, for his part, seems taken with her performance, but Cooper's expressions in this scene and focusing of his attention reveal he's at least as smitten by how the crowd *reacts* to Ally as by her personally—if only at first.

**Point of View:** Because *A Star Is Born* almost refuses any audience-POV shots during its concerts, it stands out that Ally gets one in the drag bar: we watch Jackson's impromptu rendition of "Old Ways" exactly from her vantage in the wings. Even though she's behind a fringed curtain, he knows she's there; as soon as he finishes the song, he looks right at her, and therefore at us.

**Dialogue:** "27 acres of nuts, Navajo, and nowhere to go": that's Jack's description of his father's pecan farm, which doesn't quite sound like a spontaneous expression. I imagine this is rhetoric he cooked up for good celebrity-interview copy and stuck with or a sign of his tendency to wax poetic about his upbringing and his father (even when technically critiquing them), or both.

**Location:** The Super A Foods grocery where Jackson and Ally have their nighttime talk has been pegged by Los Angelenos as a store in Highland Park in Northeast LA. This matters because many viewers and even many [film critics](#) have found themselves confused about where exactly *A Star Is Born* takes place. Key culprits behind this uncertainty are Ally's father and his pals, with their thick New Yawk accents—but it seems this crew, including her starstruck and wannabe-Sinatra father, set out for LA long ago with dreams of making it big. It's also arguable that *A Star Is Born*'s refusal of easy geographic markers (lots of the time, we could be anywhere) speaks to the life of touring musicians, for whom places become interchangeable.

**Dialogue:** “I don’t have the same disease as you,” Ally insists to her father. She explicitly refers to his obsession with celebrity (to explain why she is not automatically reciprocating Jackson’s overtures), but in the same speech she highlights that Jackson is a drunk, and that Lorenzo knows all about drunks. In a way, *A Star Is Born* is about the collision of these two “diseases.”

**Lighting:** In the concert where Jackson and Ally debut “The Shallow,” they share an amazing moment of personal and artistic communion, but the lighting sort of resists that: she inhabits a series of luscious, kaleidoscopic reds and color filters, but Jackson, at least as the song begins, is filmed apart, almost entirely in black and white. One shot, seemingly from Ally’s POV, even captures him alone in silhouette, in a halo of wispy white, almost as if he’s already a ghost.

**Framing:** We won’t meet Rez until the concert where Ally wows the crowd with her first solo performance of her own song, but if you see the film a second time, you’ll notice Rez already hanging around the tour bus that Jackson and Ally rush into following their “Shallow” triumph. As disillusioned as he seems with Jackson and his music, he still trawls his shows for talent.

**Production Design:** Our peek into Ally’s bedroom finds an LP cover of Carole King’s *Tapestry* on her wall: a sign of singer-songwriter influence, and of how far her musical idiom evolves.

**Editing:** A wordless, two-second insert that speaks volumes: while Ally showers after Jackson wakes her up at home, he hovers awkwardly in the hall, holding her motorcycle helmet, rather than go downstairs and talk with her dad. This is not a man who finds casual socializing easy.

**Music:** As Ally conveys Rez’s exciting offer to Jackson, their entourage chills out to popular hip-hop—not what you’d expect from them. Not coincidentally, Rez works for Interscope Records, a label initially founded to give artists maximal control over their own products. It achieved much of its early success championing so-called gangsta rap and alternative rock. So Rez’s employer is itself linked to a label that arguably compromised some of its early convictions as it became bigger, both in its belief in “alternatives” and its tolerance for creative freedom.

**Dialogue:** “Would you listen to yourself?” Jackson asks Ally, as she begs off joining him in Memphis in order to stay in LA and work on her record, at Rez’s insistence. This sounds like the beginning of an art-vs.-commerce rebuke, but Jackson surprises us by clarifying that he is urging her to savor the level of opportunity she has already attained. That said, it soon becomes clear that Jackson *does* resent her decision not to join him, so perhaps he’s not 100% honest.

**Dialogue:** “You have to trust me,” Rez says, as he admonishes Ally for dropping the dancers that were supposed to join her for that big up-and-coming pop showcase in California. This is almost exactly what Jackson says when he first convinces Ally to sing on stage (“All you have to do is trust me”), which sustains the film’s pattern of doubling, even from opposed figures.

**Acting:** Ally can’t get enough of a compliment from George’s toddler son: “You think *I’m* pretty? You do??” One smart feature of Gaga’s performance is that she never stops underscoring how much Ally craves affirmation on the topic of her looks, which is part of what makes her prone to compromising on other fronts. She also presumes that other people want or need this kind of reassurance. “You look beautiful” she instinctually says to the woman presenting her Grammy.

**Editing:** *A Star Is Born* transitions almost immediately from Jackson's rooftop speech to Ally, urging her to cleave to her authenticity and maintain "something to say," to her appearance on *Saturday Night Live*, singing a song that totally abandons that conviction ("Why do you look so good in those jeans? Why'd you come around me with an ass like that?"). The immediacy of this edit underscores how quickly Ally is moving away from what Jackson advises, whether or not she means to. In general, the editing within and between scenes gets quicker as the movie goes, especially compared to that long, relaxed buildup of Jackson's and Ally's acquaintance on that first night—a formal way of signaling how fame sweeps you up in its rapid currents.

**Framing and Palette:** In the shot where Ally learns she has been nominated for three Grammys, her blazing-orange hair stands out completely from the rest of the dark shot. She has never looked less like herself, or less in sync with her surroundings, than amid this new career peak.

**Story:** Jackson gets warned by his brother that he's been demoted from headlining the Grammys' Roy Orbison tribute to second billing. When the show actually happens, there are *two* real-life performers supplanting him on stage. His downward trajectory is picking up momentum.

**Mistakes:** Cooper and Gaga allowed themselves a good deal of improv in their scenes in pursuit of authenticity. Twice, Gaga seems to flub a line but she and her screen partner just recover it and keep moving. One is the moment when Ally mistakenly calls Jackson her boyfriend after they've gotten married. Another is when she urges her father to eat his dinner, even though it's a morning scene: "Your dinner, your breakfast. My god, I don't even know what meal it is."

**Honesty and Retreat:** Ally arrives to Jack's rehab center in designer prints and what look like color contacts (though that may be an effect of lighting). As always, *A Star Is Born* refuses to make Ally an embodiment of "fakeness" or Jackson one of pure "authenticity," but it's notable how she can't quite respond honestly to his attempts at confession. "That's okay, don't worry about it," she interrupts him as he tries to atone in detail. "My father loves you," she assures him, but we're not sure about that. Truth scares other folks, too. When Jackson forces himself to make a sincere confession to his brother about having always idolized him, he quickly turns away... and Bobby, the brother, drives away from this frank admission as fast as he can.

**Production Design:** In the final scenes in Ally and Jackson's shared home, a neon sign that spells "La Vie en Rose" hangs over a doorway: a sentimental throwback to their first meeting, but also quite incongruous to their current, woodsy décor, and to the tone of their current life. (I see a link here to how Ally reprises the playful tracing of her nose—spontaneous and earnest at the end of their first night together—as a kind of routine trick in what turns out to be their final conversation. What was once new and fresh has become part of a script, however affectionate.)

**Music:** "I'll Never Love Again," the song Jackson writes for Ally as a kind of foreshadow-y suicide note, stretches both of their voices to the shaky tops of their registers. It's a *difficult* song to sing in more ways than one. By the second verse, Ally brings the key down, allowing her to generate more vocal power, and to allow a more show-stopping version of the tune.

**Dedication:** Elizabeth Kemp, to whom the film is dedicated at the end of the credits, was Cooper's mentor at the Actor's Studio and the acting coach to him and Gaga. She died in 2017 at 65.