GREASE IS THE WORD

EXPLORING A CULTURAL PHENOMENON

EDITED BY OLIVER GRUNER AND PETER KRÄMER

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INTRODUCTION

Oliver Gruner and Peter Krämer

The crowd takes a moment to recognize his denim-clad figure, emerging tentatively from the shadows. But when they do, cheers ring out. Hands are raised in the traditional 'sign of the horns' salute. Accompanied by a familiar bass line, John Travolta arrives in Rockville. Or, to be more precise, he appears on stage at 'Welcome to Rockville', an annual music festival held in Jacksonville, Florida. It's April 2018 and the actor has just been summoned into the spotlight by Foo Fighters frontman Dave Grohl. With little more than a wave and a nod, he disappears back from whence he came. This fleeting cameo has, however, left quite an impression. 'I got chills, they're multiplying', intones Grohl. And, gesturing in the direction of the now absent Travolta, he pays tribute to his special guest: 'For the power you're supplying. It's electrifying.'[1] The audience certainly appears electrified, roaring with approval, singing along. The Foo Fighters must have been electrified; they played that song throughout their 2018 tour. 'That's a bass line,' Grohl told fans at a Long Island gig in July of that year. 'That's a real bass line.'[2] The source of Grohl's rapture is, of course, the opening few bars to *Grease* sing-along 'You're the One That I Want'. Like so many aspects of *Grease*, that immortal bass line has throbbed with a consistent vitality, electrifying many a record player, theatre, cinema, television screen, digital device, dance hall and concert. When it comes to endurance, longevity – sheer belovedness – *Grease*, to paraphrase one of Rydell High's less illustrious graduates, *is the most to say the least*.

The very least. From humble beginnings at Chicago's Kingston Mines Theatre in 1971, it did not take long for *Grease* to explode on the American and global public. Fragments of this popular sensation have scattered the world over, embedding themselves into a cultural landscape stretching almost fifty years. For its legions of fans, *Grease* is undeniably 'the Word'. But even those less susceptible to its charms have likely partaken in testaments to its legacy. A school play, a fancy dress party, a summer festival, a karaoke, a long drive with the radio blaring, a hip rock gathering – who, at one time or another, has *not* followed in the incandescent wake of that hot-rod's race down the ages?

This book explores *Grease* from a variety of historical and contemporary perspectives. Bringing together a group of scholars from diverse backgrounds, *'Grease Is the Word'* provides close readings of visual and aural material associated with this cultural phenomenon, and examines its various production, promotion and reception contexts. From the stage musical's first appearance in Chicago to contemporary British twentysomething responses to the 'Grease Megamix', we chart the birth and many rebirths of a long life

in popular culture. We shine a spotlight on heretofore obscured corners of a musical that spawned a raft of hit songs, iconic characters, quotes and scenes – a musical as resonant today as it was in 1971 or 1978. Whether offering fresh perspective on familiar issues such as nostalgia, gender roles, stardom and the soundtrack, providing detailed accounts of production and marketing strategies, or reflecting on important, under-researched topics such as online fan cultures and the film's representation of Los Angeles, each chapter situates *Grease* within broader sociocultural debates, past and present.

Accordingly, we build on Barbara Brickman's excellent book-length study of the 1978 film.[3] Brickman concludes by noting that *Grease* 'with its complex production, dissemination, and reception histories, deserves more than dismissal and oversimplification'.[4] She takes to task those that have brushed it off as 'Greasy Kid Stuff',[5] offering instead a multifarious analysis of the film's gender relations, youthful protagonists and place within industrial and fan debates. Many of us are in dialogue with Brickman, engaging with or providing alternative perspectives to her arguments. Most chapters similarly use the *Grease* film as a lynchpin or nucleus around which analysis of all other artefacts swirl. At the same time, even when focusing on the movie, all chapters in this book are aware of the complex dynamics in play whenever *Grease* emerges/re-emerges in the public sphere. To study a 'cultural phenomenon' is, as Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott established in their classic account of the James Bond franchise, to problematize any notion of a singular artefact, author or interpretation.[6] Rather, one must explore them as palimpsestic canvases upon which are written a range of culturally and ideologically resonant narratives. In a recent article revisiting the Bond phenomenon, Bennett describes the various merchandise now available for consumption as 'textual meteorites' or 'highly condensed and materialised chunks of meaning'.[7] This book similarly considers the 'chunks of meaning' to have circulated in relation to *Grease* at different historical moments. Following its many transitions between stage, screen and record, we trace a 'process of metamorphosis', in Charles R. Acland's words, as *Grease* moves through 'a life cycle of commodity forms', traversing a multimedia landscape and array of historical and social contexts.[8]

Of course, production, reception and fan studies scholars have long examined a cultural text within shifting discursive practices. That *Grease*'s development was influenced by many creative voices, that its significance can (and does) change over time, that there are, to borrow Henry Jenkins's phrase, 'rogue readers' who have appropriated aspects of the musical in the service of their own creative responses, will come as no surprise to those familiar with such approaches.[9] But the range of examples cited and innovative connections made throughout this book – concerning, among other things, industrial impacts, online fan uses of the film's final scene, and the popularity of rockabilly culture, disco and country music – shed new light on *Grease*'s numerous identities. Introducing their collection of essays devoted to the *Mamma Mia!* phenomenon, Louise Fitzgerald and Melanie Williams begin with a question that is both obliquely evocative and fundamental to all subsequent essays: what makes this musical-turned-film-turned-major event so 'special'? With its focus on the enormous box-office takings, 'cross media flow' and, naturally, the importance of ABBA's music as a narrative and promotional device, this volume, along with Yannis Tzioumakis and Siân Lincoln's edited collection on *Dirty*

Dancing (1987), provided much inspiration for our *Grease* project.[10] Both books begin by pointing out the unexpectedness of these blockbusters. *Dirty Dancing* was, in Tzioumakis's words, a 'rare phenomenon in the American film industry' to the extent it did not contain the action-centred and special effects laden narrative one might usually associate with 1980s 'franchise' films.[11] And yet in its immense success on the big screen, on VHS and DVD, in consumer culture (product tie-ins, advertising) and in the 2004 stage adaptation, *Dirty Dancing* has become a veritable institution.

To an extent, something similar might be said of *Grease*. Brickman points out that its spectacular box-office success challenges any straightforward notions we might have about a 'typical' blockbuster's form and content.[12] *Grease*'s success requires us to situate the film in a longer narrative of Hollywood blockbusters and, especially, the blockbuster musical. Ever since Hollywood's conversion to sound in the late 1920s, many of its biggest hits (and also many of its most expensive productions) had been musicals, ranging from the first two Al Jolson vehicles *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and *The Singing Fool* (1928), the Busby Berkeley choreographed spectacles of the 1930s and 1940s, through to an unprecedented cluster of hugely successful releases of the mid-1960s, including *Mary Poppins* (1964), *My Fair Lady* (1964) and *The Sound of Music* (1965).[13] The genre's track record becomes even more impressive if we include, as we should, Disney's animated features, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to *The Jungle Book* (1967). After its auspicious, decades-long reign at the top of the box-office charts, the musical lost some of its status in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Barbra Streisand's debut *Funny Girl* (1968) and *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971) did, however, become the top-grossing films of their year of release in the United States. Other examples of the genre, among them more Streisand vehicles and various pop and rock musicals, also continued to do well. Nonetheless, compared to earlier decades, when many of the highest-grossing musicals, notably *My Fair Lady* and *The Sound of Music*, had been based on some of the longest-running Broadway shows, the number and success of such films declined in the 1970s. Grossing more money – both in the United States and worldwide – than any other release from 1978, *Grease* indicated that there were still lucrative financial rewards to be had in Broadway adaptations. It was a rare musical able to compete with the action-oriented *Jaws*/*Star Wars* juggernauts of the period.[14] Adjusted for inflation in 2019, its original $190 million US box-office makes it, according to *Box Office Mojo*, the 28th highest-grossing film of all time and the third highest-grossing live action musical (after *The Sound of Music* (1965) and *Mary Poppins* (1964)).[15] In terms of popular success, however, *Grease*'s achievements far transcend the cinema screen.

A Phenomenon Is Born

Already by the end of 1971, *Grease* was demonstrating itself to be an alluring commercial prospect, destined for widespread appeal. Created for the stage by two actors-turned-writers, Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey, it premiered at the Kingston Mines Theatre – a converted trolley barn in the Lincoln Park area of Chicago – on Friday 5 February 1971.[16] As Chapter One of this book discusses, the *Grease* that appeared at Kingston Mines was far removed from the version with which most audiences are familiar. Drawing

on archival materials contained in the Warren Casey Papers at Chicago Public Library, Scott Warfield provides an illuminating history of the show's Chicago run. Situating the play within wider theatrical developments as well as changing audience demographics and tastes, Warfield examines the songs, themes and characters that appeared on the Kingston Mines stage and their eventual rewriting for Broadway. In its extensive analysis of draft scripts, advertisements, lyrics and other primary sources, this chapter offers fresh insight into *Grease*'s earliest production.

With expletive-riddled dialogue, acerbic humour and references to Chicago landmarks, the *Grease* of 1971 was billed throughout its run as a 'not-so-fond' revisiting of 1950s styles, attitudes and beliefs.[17] Certainly, the original Chicago run established a series of important themes which would pervade debates on *Grease* throughout the 1970s and beyond. 'Kingston Mines is an amateur theater with weak acoustics', wrote *Chicago Tribune* critic William Leonard in one of the first reviews of the musical in 1971, 'but these amateurs are doing a show worth seeing (for those who don't mind dirty four letter-words and lots of them).'[18] New York theatre critic Michael Feingold wrote two positive notices for the *Village Voice*. The first, published in March 1971, recounted a trip to Chicago where he witnessed rehearsals for the show, describing it as 'a deromanticized and defused *West Side Story*' and 'authentic to the point of provoking tears of nostalgia in the children of that decade'.[19] When he finally caught a full performance, Feingold elaborated on these themes in a review. *Grease*, he argued, productively combined the 'myth of what teenage life in the '50s was like' with a 'very sharp comic sense of reality'.[20]

We can note here the references to explicit language and rough-and-ready production values, aspects that, according to many critics, were softened as it transferred to Broadway in 1972.[21] When, in 2011, a new stage revival returned to Jacobs and Casey's original 1971 book, the cry was '*Grease* Gets Its Grit Back'.[22] Furthermore, the discussions of nostalgic content – provoking 'tears of nostalgia', as the above review suggested – established what would become an ongoing fascination with the show's remembering of the 1950s. As has been well rehearsed, *Grease* was part of a broader 'Fifties cultural revival' taking place throughout the 1970s.[23] Daniel Marcus argues that an obsession with all things fifties began 'in earnest' in 1969 when critics, radio DJs and pop groups – most famously Sha Na Na – began revisiting the era's music. By the early 1970s, argues Marcus, this revival had entered the mainstream and now encompassed a full range of media, from television reruns, movies and fashions to stage plays like *Grease*.[24] Writing in May 1971, *New York Times* commentator Andrew H. Malcolm noted that 'a year after student anti-war protests closed dozens of colleges and universities across the country, thousands of the same youths are caught up in a new pursuit – nostalgia for the good old days.'[25] In a kaleidoscopic overview of rock 'n' roll revivals, proms, sock hops, ducktails, pleated skirts and quiffs, the article suggested such nostalgia to be a reaction to the social and political upheaval that had come to define, in the minds of many, the sixties. 'Today's college student', claimed one interviewee, 'missed out on the college life of panty raids, clubs and big weekends. They had politics instead.' Thus, some students 'may feel like they really missed something.'[26]

The enduring connection between *Grease* and nostalgia is discussed further below (and indeed in many of the following chapters). But we might, here, imagine the audiences

attending *Grease* at the Kingston Mines Theatre as walking the very same North Lincoln Avenue that – barely two and a half years previous – had borne witness to the fabled political uprisings of August 1968, when anti-war protestors clashed with police on the streets outside of the Democratic National Convention. Intriguingly, Jacobs had himself scored a bit part in *Medium Cool* (1968), Haskell Wexler's filmic account of the protests and conflicts to bedevil the city that year, playing one of the young people supporting the presidential nomination of Robert F. Kennedy. From 'The Whole World Is Watching' to 'We Go Together' – from political zeal to nostalgic evocation – Jacobs's latest take on Chicagoan life was both timely and prescient. At the very moment that, according to Marcus, national interest was shifting from the middle-class, left-wing, intellectual 'Beat' to the working-class, apolitical, highly physical 'greaser' as the 'true progenitor of postwar American youth culture', *Grease*'s Danny Zuko and Sandy Dumbrowski (not changed to Olsson until the movie) enjoyed their first stage outing.[27] On Kingston Mines' makeshift stage a major cultural text was born, one which would be rewritten, altered, shaped and reshaped over the forthcoming years, with increasingly lucrative results.

The process of adaptation has remained a topic of debate throughout *Grease*'s lifetime. In one way or another, each new iteration has been in dialogue with the concept created by Jacobs and Casey, but at the same time stands on its own as a production emerging from discrete industrial, cultural and political circumstances. *Grease* is, to borrow Linda Hutcheon's term, a 'multilaminated' work, one informed by its source text but also by its manifold contexts.[28] Stage producers Maxine Fox and Kenneth Waissman visited Chicago for a performance and saw enough potential in its nostalgic appeal to secure the rights for a New York run. Jacobs and Casey were tasked with cutting at least some of the obscenity and pruning down the Chicago-specific locales in the hope that this would widen the show's audience base.[29] *Grease*'s New York premiere was held at the off-Broadway Eden Theater on 14 February 1972. The book upon which this version was based contains the bulk of the narrative and content that would transfer to Broadway later that year. Barring the occasional oblique reference to places like 'Edgebrook Heights' and 'Lake Forest Academy' – which do allude to a district and school that might have been familiar to Chicago natives – there is little in the way of a detailed locale.[30] Rather, here were the origins of the universalized coming-of-age love story that, in different forms, would go on to take the world by storm.

A modicum of salty dialogue remains in this script – certainly more 'fucks' than would make it to the big screen – but this is not the every-other-line-a-swearword that commentators associated with the original *Grease*.[31] Gone is the Chicago-centred 'Foster Beach', where Danny and Sandy reflected on their summer romance in the original *Grease*. In its place is the catchy duet 'Summer Nights'. Other songs from Chicago – such as 'Freddy, My Love', 'Beauty School Drop Out' and 'It's Raining on Prom Night' – did, however, remain in the New York show, going on to become instantly recognizable classics of the stage musical. In a more general sense, large chunks of the original book were apparently cut, with more emphasis placed on music. Stephen Tropiano notes Jim Jacobs's estimate that 'the show went from three quarters book [which in musical theatre provides the show's narrative arc, character development, stage directions and spoken dialogue] and one quarter music to one quarter book and three quarters music'.[32]

Transferring to Broadway in June 1972 – first to the Broadhurst and then, in November of that year to the Royale – *Grease* received mixed reviews throughout its original run. Some critics admired its vibrancy and recreation of 1950s youth culture, while others chastised its lack of intellectual or emotional depth.[33] Nonetheless, it certainly found its audience, going on to enjoy a highly successful (for the time record-breaking) run of 3,388 performances on Broadway through the 1970s and into 1980. A national tour began in Boston in December 1972, and successful runs in Mexico City and London commenced the following year. The Broadway show remains an important point of reference in many of the chapters to follow, so we refrain from discussing it in excessive detail here. But it is worth noting its significance for both establishing *Grease* as a national and international phenomenon, and for the fact that some of the creative figures involved in this production – choreographer Patricia Birch, musical director Louis St. Louis, and actor Jeff Conaway, for example – would go on to play key roles in bringing *Grease* to the big screen.

By most accounts, Hollywood's *Grease* radically altered, and further sanitized, the Broadway production, changing the setting (the film takes place in Los Angeles), songs and plot twists.[34] Certainly, in 1978, reviewers would be discussing the polished – *too* polished according to several accounts – rendition of high school life then sweeping cinema screens.[35] 'Travolta, executive producer Robert Stigwood and the film's other assemblers seem to have forgotten that grease is black and oily,', wrote the critic Richard Corliss in what can be considered a representative quote. 'They've remembered only that it is slick.'[36] And while such dismissals are challenged throughout this book, the 'slick' *Grease* attacked by so many critics undoubtedly found more than a warm reception with the public. Not only did the film prove a hit in cinemas, so profound was its impact that, for many, *this* version has become *the* version. It went on to influence subsequent stage revivals, with elements of the movie narrative and songs written specifically for the film such as 'You're the One That I Want', 'Hopelessly Devoted to You' and 'Grease' ultimately becoming standards on Broadway and beyond.[37]

In Chapter Two of this volume, Alexander G. Ross provides a detailed microanalysis of the film's production history. Marshalling an array of primary material, including his own extensive interview with its director Randal Kleiser, Ross crafts a behind-the-scenes account of *Grease*'s journey from stage to screen. If Kleiser features prominently, Ross's chapter also unravels the significant contributions made by other figures – producers Robert Stigwood and Allan Carr, screenwriter Bronte Woodard, choreographer Patricia Birch and cinematographer Bill Butler, for example – thus aligning his analysis with recent work on 1970s Hollywood that has called for examinations of 'multiple-authorship'.[38] *Grease*, as Ross argues, was a collaborative venture, one which recruited the expertise of various individuals. Discussing the soundtrack's development, he also highlights an aspect that will be crucial to Chapter Three and its examination of *Grease* star Olivia Newton-John. Certainly, music – in all its aural and visual incarnations – is central to understanding Newton-John's impact on the *Grease* phenomenon.

By the time *Grease* reached cinemas, the centrality of popular music to its commercial success was a given. R. Serge Denisoff and William D. Romanowski highlight the spectacular success of *Grease: The Original Soundtrack from the Motion Picture*. Released in

April 1978, two months before the film's opening, it sold five million copies within four months.[39] Once again, *Grease* continues a venerable tradition, both within the musical genre and beyond. From the beginnings of annual album charts in the United States in 1957, a substantial share of top-ten titles were original cast Broadway albums and the soundtrack albums of their film adaptations. From the outset, and into the 1970s, soundtracks of non-musical films also often sold exceptionally well.[40] Ultimately, the *Grease* album became the second-largest selling soundtrack of all time, just behind *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), which was also produced by Robert Stigwood and starred John Travolta.[41] Four singles from the soundtrack were certified platinum (i.e. selling more than one million copies): 'You're the One That I Want', 'Grease', 'Hopelessly Devoted to You' and 'Summer Nights'.[42] The role of business impresario Stigwood in driving this success cannot be underestimated. The head of entertainment company the Robert Stigwood Organization (RSO), he was by the mid-1970s at the centre of the film and music industries. Michael DeAngelis observes that Stigwood had built a reputation as master of the crossover hit, whereby 'a project in one media form could function as tried-and-true promotional hype for another version of the same project in a different medium'.[43] Work on the film-musical crossovers *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and *Tommy* (1975) paved the way for the phenomenal success of *Saturday Night Fever*. And as his association with groups like The Who (for *Tommy*) and the Bee Gees (for *Saturday Night Fever*) attests, Stigwood had enough pop savvy to collaborate with some of the era's biggest names.

At the centre of *Grease*'s musical 'package' was the hugely successful pop and country star, Olivia Newton-John. The 1960s and 1970s had witnessed a spate of pop and rock singers and bands – Elvis Presley, the Beatles, Barbra Streisand and The Who, to name just a few – enjoying success in the movies, even if this success was sometimes short-lived. In this sense, Newton-John's hiring for *Grease* was emblematic of Hollywood's faith in the movie-novice pop-star as a potentially lucrative draw.[44] She apparently received $125,000 simply for signing on to the project. According to one report, she ultimately earned $10 million for her performance in *Grease*.[45] While much popular and (some) scholarly writing has touted John Travolta as the film's main draw, Oliver Gruner argues in his chapter that Newton-John was clearly as important (if not more so) to *Grease*'s production history, script development, marketing preparations and success. Charting her emergence as a music and television personality in the late 1960s and 1970s, he identifies a series of key attributes associated with Newton-John, demonstrating the ways in which they fed into the film's script, impacted surrounding debates and influenced her own musical and filmic output of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Whether it was her comic acting in the film, singing of hit singles 'Hopelessly Devoted to You', 'You're the One That I Want' and 'Summer Nights', musically 'rebranding' herself for the 1978 album *Totally Hot*, or appearing in television shows, Newton-John was central (and remains central) to generating sustained interest in *Grease*.

Of course, and as the opening of this book indicated, when it comes to *Grease*'s stars, one would be hard-pressed to outdo John Travolta on the notoriety stakes. 'He's the hero of one of America's most popular TV series', began one advertisement doing the rounds in 1977, which, although somewhat exaggerated, pinpoints the main source of his initial stardom and thus situates him in a tradition of male movie stars (ranging from

James Dean and Paul Newman to Clint Eastwood) who got their start and sometimes achieved considerable fame on TV. 'He's got the lead role in "Grease." He's the dapper disco dazzler in the eagerly awaited new film, "Saturday Night Fever." ' And this was not all. According to the advert, there was 'no better time […] for you to capitalize on something else John Travolta does very well.'[46] For this advert, now was the opportunity to immerse yourself in his latest single, the schmaltzy crooner 'Slow Dancing'. Lesser known – and certainly paling in comparison to Newton-John with regard to sales – Travolta also graced turntables in the mid-1970s with a slew of pop numbers. His modest singing talents may not have been the catalyst for the 'Travolta Fever' so much a part of *Grease* lore. But as Adrian Garvey explains in Chapter Four, Travolta's numerous pre-*Grease* incarnations were significant in terms of impacting upon his performance and appealing to a wide range of audience demographics. Discussing his initial rise to fame in the television show *Welcome Back Kotter* (1975–79), his recording career in the mid-1970s and prominent status as a teen 'pin-up', Garvey unravels the historical circumstances that influenced Travolta's early success. He then goes on to provide a close analysis of his performances in *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease*. Comparing each film's rendering of masculinity, the chapter discusses how Travolta's star image walked a tightrope between seriousness and parody, strutting machismo and self-conscious awkwardness. In a more general sense, Garvey's chapter situates Travolta within broader scholarly debates on 1970s film stars and the attendant issues of sexuality and ethnicity.[47]

At the Centre of a 'Nostalgia Craze': *Grease* in the 1970s

John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John were both intrinsic to building and maintaining public interest in *Grease*. But star power was certainly not the only factor in generating this cultural phenomenon. The 1970s stage show and film may have been different in terms of form and content, but they were at least joined by a similar attempt to capitalize on the 'nostalgia boom' argued to have been present throughout the decade.[48] There has at times been a tendency to dismiss nostalgia for its 'depthlessness' (in Fredric Jameson's words), suggesting that it offers little more than empty pastiche and a regressive view of the past.[49] Thus, Jameson concludes that 1970s films such as *American Graffiti* (1973) are representative of an amnesiac culture in which any meaningful connection to history – in this case 1950s and early 1960s history – has been lost.[50] And we could certainly situate this argument within broader perspectives on the 'seventies' itself – an era sometimes stereotyped as a political and cultural wasteland, not least because it, according to some, witnessed the dissipation of transformative energies associated with its precursor, the 'sixties'. As Bruce Schulman wryly notes, ' "The Seventies" began, of course, in the wake of "the Sixties" and have remained ever since in their shadow – the sickly, neglected, disappointing stepsister to that bruising blockbuster of a decade.'[51] Historians like Schulman, Sam Binkley, Barbara Epstein and Sara Evans have countered that phenomena such as the Civil Rights, Women's Liberation and Gay Rights movements and the counterculture actually expanded in the 1970s, with many of their values becoming mainstream at this time.[52] One should not underestimate the seventies' political complexity, nor revert to simplistic notions of an inward-looking 'Me Decade'. Similarly,

nostalgia cannot be considered a monolithic concept; rather, as discussed throughout this book, it appears in various guises and within a range of wider public debates.

Film and cultural studies scholars such as Michael Dwyer, Daniel Marcus and Christine Sprengler have challenged the idea that nostalgia is in any way uniform in its uses and applications. Discussing the various sociological, cultural and medical approaches towards nostalgia, Dwyer reminds us that historically it has always been associated with more than just a style. 'Nostalgia is the product of an affective engagement with the present that produces a sense of loss', writes Dwyer.[53] Nostalgia is as much about feeling as it is about looking; it is an emotional encounter with the past. Situating fifties' nostalgia within wider political and cultural trends of the 1970s and 1980s, Dwyer contends, vis-à-vis Jameson, that there is no singular manifestation; rather, nostalgia 'can be directed toward diverse, overlapping, or competing interests'.[54] Certainly, we can see this in critical responses to the *Grease* phenomenon. If one theme has dominated analyses of *Grease* it has been the different ways in which it recalls the 'fifties'. Reviews of the stage production often spoke positively of its 'unsentimental' take on the era. In a review published just after *Grease* transferred to Broadway in 1972, *New York Times* critic Harris Green argued that 'nowhere in *Grease* is there that mad delight in the insipid past that has permitted nostalgia to rage like a plague on Broadway'.[55] Rather, the play is 'unsentimental about the brutishness of Elvis and the inanities of Annette [Funicello, star of teen films of the 1950s and early 1960s]'.[56] The *Los Angeles Times* also compared *Grease*'s representation favourably to 'all of the loving stage reconstructions of the 1930s and 40s'. The review noted that '*Grease* doesn't look at its era through a mist of romanticism'.[57] Interestingly, it also suggested that the play's famous ending – when the squeaky-clean Sandy transforms into a tough rocker to win the heart of her co-lead – appeared to 'kid the teen flicks of the period [the 1950s] by reversing their values'.[58] *Time* magazine described the musical's fifties representation as 'exquisite and excruciating in its details'.[59] This review, like so many others, also situated *Grease* within a broader fifties nostalgia craze. 'That dreary decade, the '50s, is apparently being dusted off for a revival', the article announced, highlighting the popularity of films such as *The Last Picture Show* (1971), books such as *The Boys of Summer* (1972) and successful reruns of television programmes such as the *Howdy Doody* show (1947–60).[60]

The idea of *Grease* riding a fifties nostalgia wave is present in articles throughout the 1970s. Sometimes it was declared to have single-handedly galvanized America's obsession with all things fifties. In an August 1972 article for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* entitled 'There's Money in Recalling the 50s', William A. Raidy began by listing various productions since the 1940s that had looked back upon the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. 'It was inevitable that eventually the 50s would have their day', wrote Raidy, 'and last February it happened. *Grease* opened off Broadway at the Eden Theater.'[61] Five years later Patricia Ann Luchak of the *San Francisco Chronicle* would call it simply the 'musical that launched the nostalgia craze'.[62] Other articles highlighted the popular trends with which the play had intersected. In 1973, *Variety* reviewed *Grease*'s London premiere. The correspondent noted how the musical 'opened on a tide of nostalgia for the '50s which is currently the single most potent force in British entertainment'.[63] With the release of films such as *That'll Be the Day* (1973), the sanctifying of fifties stars like James Dean, Bill

Haley and Elvis Presley and a revival in fifties fashions, Britain was clearly in the throes of its own nostalgia boom.[64] *Variety* was, however, somewhat critical of *Grease*'s nostalgic content. Its 1972 review lamented that 'a handful of numbers spoofing styles two decades old is mildly entertaining. But over the course of two-and-a-half hours and some 25 individual numbers, the parodies become ear jangling.' Thus, wrote the reviewer: 'The Jim Jacobs-Warren Casey book, music and lyrics provide excellent testimony that the 1950s was indeed a pop cultural wasteland.'[65] Again, in a 1973 review of the London show, the reviewer summarized that 'the plot line is too light and the era too unremarkable'.[66] Whether praised for its unflinching portrayal of the fifties, discussed as part of a craze, or derided for its 'unremarkable' content, the *Grease* stage show remained a flashpoint in debates on nostalgia and the fifties throughout the 1970s and beyond. One can certainly say the same about the film, which, on its release in 1978, and in subsequent analyses, elicited very different responses to its fifties representation.

'Given their cheerfully corny, clean-cut approach, *Grease* is not only about what it was like growing up in the '50s', wrote Kathleen Carroll of the *New York Daily News*. 'It is, strictly speaking, a '50s movie.'[67] Such sentiments were ever-present in reviews surrounding the film. In virtually the same words, David Ansen of *Newsweek* argued that it 'isn't just about the '50s, it is a '50s movie'.[68] While reviewers of the stage play emphasized *Grease*'s parodic elements and, often, its unsentimental view of the recent past, critics saw in the film not only a rose-tinted fifties, but an attempt to emulate the style of that era's teen pics. '*Grease*, the movie', wrote the *New York Post* reviewer, 'is a copy of a copy'.[69] Even Vincent Canby of the *New York Times*, whose review was far more positive than those cited above, informed readers that it 'uses the Eisenhower era – the characters, costumes, gestures and, particularly, the music – to create a time and place that have less to do with any real 50's than with a kind of show business that is both timeless and old-fashioned, both sentimental and wise'.[70] If Canby's review at least left open the possibility that the representation was more than empty pastiche, others were less forgiving. 'This is what the '50s were like, ho-ho-ho', snarled Andrew Sarris in his *Village Voice* piece, yet again pointing out the film's (in his view) failed attempts to recapture the spirit of 1950s cinema.[71] 'As a goody-goody in ponytail, Olivia Newton-John is blander than the movie stars she parodies', argued Molly Haskell in *New York* magazine.[72]

Chapters Five and Six of this book are, in different ways, attempts to deal with the film's historical subject matter. In Chapter Five, Celestino Deleyto highlights how echoes of the past – real and filmic – pervade *Grease* the movie's representation of Los Angeles. Analysing the cinematic allusions, cultural histories and political inferences embedded within the film's geography, Deleyto crafts a multilayered narrative that begins – like the film – at Leo Carillo State Beach, Malibu, and ends on the cement embankments of the Los Angeles River. On one level, this chapter is a detailed response to the kinds of comments noted above, providing, as it does, a nuanced account of the ways in which *Grease* invokes its cinematic heritage. On a second level, Deleyto's chapter pays attention to historical absences – phenomena that *Grease* evades on its journey through Los Angeles. If brief allusions to race and ethnicity appear by way of stereotypes (e.g. the vaguely coded Latina character of Cha Cha di Gregorio), the film is nonetheless at its