

Yesterday

A summertime whimsy arrives from England with “Yesterday,” a comedy-musical with a cute but outlandish premise: provincial musician Jack Malik (Himesh Patel) awakes from a freak accident: he is riding his bike during a worldwide electrical blackout when he is hit by a bus. He awakes unscathed but, while hanging out with friends -- including his “manager” Ellie Appleton (Lily James)--he plays and sings the plaintive “Yesterday” and discovers that none of them know the tune or anything of the Beatles and their music. His scouring of the Internet finds there is no trace of the group.

Jack’s awareness that only he knows the Beatles music leads him to pass off their music as his own, and he and Ellie team up with a local recording studio to promote his new-found song-writing skills. Wracking his memory of the group’s catalogue, he is slowly recognized as a talent, especially by current popstar Ed Sheeran (playing himself), and taken up (in fact, almost swallowed up) by ravenous Hollywood agent Debra Hammer (Kate McKinnon), and becomes a global phenomenon. Fame, however thrilling, just doesn’t suit Jack, and it distances him from Ellie, so he decides to resolve his dilemma.

The movie’s set-up is both fanciful and clever, allowing for sly jokes throughout, as when Jack’s suggests actual Beatles record titles for his first album--all of which are rejected. Or when he periodically struggles to remember the lyrics to “Eleanor Rigby.” Or when his version of “Hey, Jude,” is changed by the current taste-makers to “Hey, Dude.” The general lack of Beatles awareness also makes for smart lines like the one a character offers after first hearing Jack’s “Yesterday:” “Well, that was nice, but it wasn’t Coldplay.” Other sly evidences of the world’s collective amnesia surface, as when he finds out that no one has ever heard of Coca Cola or Harry Potter either.

Cute this all is, but the ingenious premise cannot be sustained, and the concert dénouements (played out back in Jack’s provincial seaside hometown of Lowescroft and at Wembley Stadium) feel soft and tossed-off. It probably too much to ask to bring this sweet fantasy to a satisfying conclusion.

“Yesterday” was directed by Danny Boyle, a versatile English filmmaker who has made a string of distinct and memorable films over 25 years from “Slumdog Millionaire” through “127 Days” to “Steve Jobs.” The picture was written by the light-hearted Richard Curtis, famous for rom-com hits such as “Love Actually,” and “Notting Hill.” His specialty is grin-worthy, if not laugh-out-loud dialogue.

Lead actor Patel is most effective when he is singing Beatles hits. His pleasant, mid-range voice suits most of the Fab Four’s songs, and he is especially successful in delivering their ballads. As a character, however, he is basically one-note, varying visage and demeanor little over the course of the film. Lily James is well-cast as the darling, supportive friend, but her love for Jack from afar seems stretched to the breaking point. Her Ellie could have exhibited more grit. Kate McKinnon is an odd woman out in this film. She comes out raging as the cynical American hustler, as over-the-top as one of her “Saturday Night Live” skit characters and out of tune with the gentler humor of the film.

The best reason to see “Yesterday,” for Beatles’ fans anyway, is to be nostalgically tossed back into the group’s songbook and be tested, as Jack is, to see how many lyrics you can recall.

(The film is rated PG-13 and runs 116 minutes.)

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