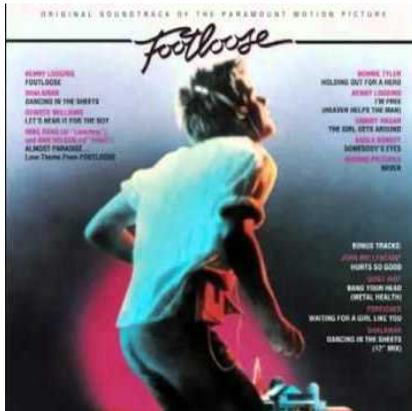


“Footloose”—Kenny Loggins (1984)

Added to the National Registry: 2017

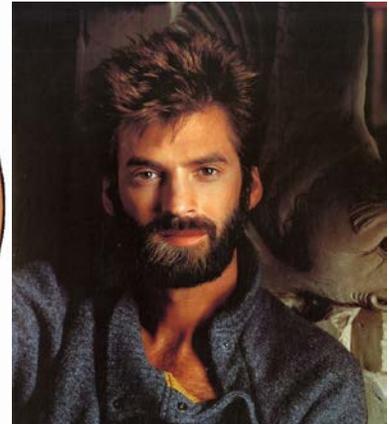
Essay by Cary O’Dell



Soundtrack album



Original 45 label



Kenny Loggins

Though it arrived in theaters coated in a heavy patina of Hollywood gloss, believe it or not, the 1984 big screen smash “Footloose” was based on a true story. Actually, from the dawn of the evil of “rock and roll” and the gyrating hips that people like Elvis seemed to inspire, many small towns throughout the US had turned to laws and bylaws to protect the (assumed) innocence of their youth.

One such town that did just that was Elmore City, Oklahoma, a town deep in the heart of America’s Bible Belt. Elmore City though didn’t wait for rock to take a no-dancing stand. A ban on any type of moving to music had been on the books in the city from before the turn of the century. Among other local efforts this ban impacted was the fact that their high school had never held a prom.

That was until 1980, when the city council bravely rescinded the old law and the town’s local high school was finally free to let their seniors move about in dresses and tuxes in front of a punch bowl inside the school’s gym.

The long-delayed arrival of rock and roll in this small, rural community drew a variety of nationwide news mentions in various newspapers. And one of the people who happened to see a short article on Elmore was songwriter (and soon to be movie screenwriter) Dean Pitchford.

The Hawaii-born, Yale-educated Pitchford had, with composer Michael Gore, already helped revive the movie musical by collaborating on the music for the big screen hit “Fame” in 1980. The Pitchford-Gore title tune to that film won the two men an Oscar. When Pitchford read the mention in the paper about Elmore, he got an idea for a film. And though he had never written a screenplay before, that did little to deter him. Pitchford, alongside Craig Brewer, would go on to write the movie.

In some ways, “Footloose” seemed to, naturally, follow “Fame” while also—perhaps inadvertently—giving a nod to 1983’s massively successful “Flashdance,” another film about dancing your way to freedom. This handful of films (which also counts in their number “Streets of Fire” from 1984 and “Dirty Dancing” from 1987) are all part of this late 20th century genre reinvention: mixing rock and roll with MTV-inspired dance steps and editing against a slightly grittier backdrop than Hollywood had explored in the days of “Singin’ in the Rain” and “42nd Street.”

If “Fame” and “Flashdance,” helped pave the dance floor for “Footloose,” “Footloose” benefited itself from not only its historical origins but, immeasurably, from the emerging star quality of Kevin Bacon who took on the film’s starring role—more or less marking the start of his long, individualistic and still-evolving career.

Along with a cast that also included John Lithgow, Lori Singer, Dianne Wiest, Sarah Jessica Parker and Chris Penn, the film was deeply enhanced by the presence of the late Peter Tramm who doubled for Bacon in the majority of Bacon’s on-screen dance shots, including the exuberant, gymnastic solo performance performed in the barn near the beginning of the film.

This dance sequence, along with the brutal game of “chicken” played with tractors and the jubilant final school dance became the three primary—and soon to be, iconic--set pieces for the finished film.

Of course, also aiding the film’s wide, long-lasting appeal was all the great tunes that filled it up. After all, a musical is nothing without good music.

The “Footloose” soundtrack spawned several big and enduring hits including one each for Bonnie Tyler (whose rasp had recently been heard again via “Total Eclipse of the Heart”), she sang the film’s “Holding Out for a Hero”; and for Deniece Williams who had a big hit with the film’s “Let’s Hear It for the Boy.” Both songs had lyrics written by Pitchford.

But mention “Footloose’s” music to most and most will think of Kenny Loggins and the film’s title tune, co-written by Loggins and Pitchford.

Though he was just now about to have the biggest hit of his career, Kenny Loggins was hardly a neophyte in music. He’d been an active part of the industry since the early 1970s, either as a writer, or as one part of the duo Loggins & Messina (with fellow troubadour Jim Messina), or as a solo artist.

Loggins’s first entrance onto the charts was in 1972 with Messina with a song titled—ironically, it would turn out—“Your Mama Don’t Dance.” This song went all the way to #4. As a solo artist, Loggins made it to #5 with his recording of “Whenever I Call You ‘Friend’” (which just happened to feature Stevie Nicks singing harmony) in 1978. Other successful songs followed but Loggins would soon become highly associated with various movie themes. The playful comedy “Caddyshack” (1980) benefited from Loggin’s cover tune of “I’m Alright” which went all the way to #7 on the charts in the summer of ‘80. Later, Loggin’s would score again with the song “Danger Zone,” from the oh-so-‘80s, mega-hit “Top Gun”; that song got to #2 in the summer of 1986.

Still, in terms of how upbeat and successful these movie-ties were, nothing quite equals Loggins’s contribution to “Footloose” whose opening, hard-driving guitar-drum combo immediately inspires toe-tapping. Meanwhile, Pitchford’s lyrics further incites the party while echoing much of what plays out in the film--“That time's just holding me down/I'll hit the ceiling/Or else I'll tear up this town.” Once united, the two halves—music and lyrics--become a paean to that one, essential human longing—just Letting Yourself Go: “Kick off your Sunday shoes”..., “Cut loose”....

Released in early 1984, the song “Footloose” was as successful on the radio as the film was at the box office. Loggins’s song spent 16 weeks on the pop charts, three of those weeks at number one.

In the 30-plus years since then, “Footloose,” the song, has gone on to become a staple of everything from real-life proms and football games to “Dancing With the Stars” and even the video games “Rock Band” and “Just Dance.”

In many ways, the film “Footloose” has proved as hearty as the song “Footloose.” The original film is still a favorite on cable and a brisk seller as a DVD or as a download. Then, in 2011, “Footloose” got a big screen remake complete with a cover/remake of the titular song recorded, this time, by country artist Blake Shelton.

Prior to that, in 1998, “Footloose” bowed on Broadway, continuing the trend of turning beloved movies into big, sparkling stage shows. On stage, “Footloose” followed in the dance steps of “The Lion King” and just preceded live productions of “Thoroughly Modern Millie” and “Beauty and the Beast.”

For the stage version, Dean Pitchford, with Walter Bobbie, provided the book while Pitchford and Tom Snow added new songs to the already existing cannon of fan favorites. The curtain went up on “Footloose” on Broadway in late ‘98 and ran until 2000.

Now, in 2018, “Footloose’s” theme has been added to the Library of Congress’s National Recording Registry in recognition of its endurance, craftsmanship, and rebellious spirit. It is perhaps deeply suitable that it made its way onto the Registry the same year that Bill Haley’s famous anthem “Rock Around the Clock” did--while they are two different songs from two different eras, at their core, they both convey essentially the same message.

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).