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Telstar at London Film Festival

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Nick Moran's film about the life and death of the record producer Joe Meek has the high-camp flavour of a Joe Orton farce. The credits screech to a halt outside Pam Ferris's handbag shop on Holloway Road in 1962. We apologise to Pam about the unpaid rent, stagger up several flights of rickety stairs to reach Meek's famous studio and then marvel at the absurd crush.

The guitar players pluck out melodies in the sitting room; a string quartet saws away in the kitchen; Gene Vincent bounces around the bedroom; and the backing singers are stacked on top of each other in the loo. The technical miracle is how Meek splices these splintered tracks into smash hits, notably the Tornados' title song. *Telstar* is littered with vintage covers and famous cameos, but it is Meek's personal demons that fascinate Moran, and they are legion.

Con O'Neill's pop pioneer is a colourful bully when glamour and money flow his way in the first reel, and a desperate fool when the magic dries up. The film hinges on Meek's fatal soft spot: a ruinous infatuation with a blond one-hit wonder called Heinz (played by JJ Feild). Heinz is utterly in awe of himself, but has just enough wit to work out that his solo hit, *Just Like Eddie*, is probably not going to pay for a yacht. He milks Meek for the vain and guilty tyrant that he clearly is. O'Neill's love-struck producer duly squanders a fortune on Heinz. He dispatches the dishy poster-boy on doomed tours with a bemused Billy Fury (Jon Lee) and Gene Vincent (Carl Barat); he sacks musicians who question his judgment; and he turns down the Beatles.

It's an intense performance by the burly O'Neill, and it doesn't leave much oxygen for sympathy. The boardroom tussles with Kevin Spacey, who plays Meek's tweedy business partner Major Banks, are rare bits of fruity joy. But otherwise this chamber piece is a gloomy watch. The film darkens minute by minute. The indie record label (RGM) falls apart like the star's sanity. Hopeful bands still humour Meek until he pulls a gun on a hapless young session guitarist. The 37-year-old producer eventually blows his brains out on February 3, 1967.

RELATED LINKS

- Theatre: Telstar

Meek's half-life as a tortured homosexual with an occult delusion that Phil Spector might be stealing his best tunes was always going to be a hard sell, but you have to admire the nerve. Moran has directed a genuinely tough and interesting film.