Country music's top entertainers played to a sold-out Grand Ole Opry House, joining hands and talent in a "Country Music CARES" benefit to fight the AIDS epidemic. Some 29 hosts and artists performed 36 songs in a four-hour show that raised $100,000 to be used exclusively for "Nashville CARES," a group providing services for AIDS patients and education on the dreaded disease.

Performers for the benefit included Rodney Crowell, Billy Ray Cyrus, K.T. Oslin, Tracy Lawrence, John Michael Montgomery, Emmylou Harris, the Desert Rose Band, Kathy Mattea, Holly Dunn and Radney Foster. The show coincided with "World AIDS Day" observance all over the world.

Albrook and Richard Collins advise there is a fan club for K.T. Oslin, headquartered at 42 Music Square West, Ste. 180, Nashville, Tenn. 37203.

The year also saw the return of K.T. Oslin, who dropped out for a while, and the resurgence of Emmylou Harris, who after nearly two decades moved away from Warner Bros. to record for the Asylum label.

Following the BMI awards, I decked out in my black dress with sequins and on the arm of the young and handsome John Brannen, we turned right (instead of left ) and went to the Hall of Fame, where Robert K. Oermann and Mary Bufwack were being honored for their wonderful book, Finding Her Voice—The Saga of Women in Country Music. There I spied K.T. Oslin, Live 'n Kickin', Connie Smith, Kitty Wells and hubby Johnny Wright, Victoria Shaw, Bob Millard, Chet Flippo, Liz Thiel, Roy Wunsch and Mary Ann McCready, Donna and Patsy Stoneman, Sandy and Chuck Neese, Tommy Goldsmith and Renee Elder, Rose Lee and Jody Maphis, Marty Stuart and Bonnie Golden, Charlie Dick (husband of the late Patsy Cline), Lolo Jean Dillion, Pam Tillis, Janie Friddle, Joy White, Suzy Bogguss and Mercury Records fabulous promo man from Dallas, Jeff Hackett. Would you believe this party started around midnight, and there was all kinds of wonderful food, and we were eating it at that time of night? Only in Nashville.
‘Love’ Makes a Disturbing, Saddening Eulogy for Phoenix

By Roger Ebert

Of course you go to River Phoenix’s last finished film in a certain state of mind. You remember his clarity and power in films like “Running on Empty” and “Dogfight,” and against those images you hold the shots of his dead body on the sidewalk outside the Viper Club. His death still seems all wrong. How could he have been so careless of his responsibility to his own future?

These thoughts are there as Peter Bogdanovich’s “The Thing Called Love” begins, but there are more pragmatic thoughts, too: Will his performance reveal signs of the drug use that ended his life? Or will this farewell performance show him at the top of his form?

The film is about four young singer-songwriters who arrive in Nashville hoping to be discovered. They all gravitate to the Bluebell Cafe, which features new acts on weekend nights, and where a lot of stars have gotten their starts. Maybe, these kids dream, lightning will strike again.

The movie stars Samantha Mathis as Miranda Presley (“That’s my real name, and I’m no relation!”). At first, she is naive and not very talented, but she has a sweetness about her that impresses Lucy, the veteran owner of the Bluebell, played by country singer K. T. Oslin. “If I don’t read your name,” Lucy always says at the end of the weekly auditions, “that just means I don’t think you’re ready yet.”

Among the other young singers hoping to be discovered are Kyle (Dermot Mulroney), a would-be cowboy from Connecticut; Linda Lue (Sandra Bullock) from Alabama; and James Wright, the River Phoenix character, who comes from Texas and obviously has the most talent of the crowd.

In Phoenix’s first scene, it is obvious he’s in trouble. The rest of the movie only confirms it, making “The Thing Called Love” a painful experience for anyone who remembers him in good health. He looks ill—thin, sallow, listless. His eyes are directed mostly at the ground. He cannot meet the camera, or the eyes of the other actors. It is sometimes difficult to understand his dialogue. Even worse, there is no energy in the dialogue, no conviction that he cares about what he is saying.

Some small part of this performance may possibly have been inspired by Phoenix’s desire to emulate James Dean or the young Brando in their slouchy, mumbling acting styles. And maybe that’s how Bogdanovich and his associates reassured themselves as they saw this performance taking shape. After all, Phoenix came to the project as one of the most promising actors of his generation, and perhaps somehow an inner magic would transmit itself to the film.

It does not. The world was shocked when Phoenix overdosed, but the people working on this film should not have been. It is notoriously difficult to get addicts to stop their behavior before they have found their personal bottoms, and so perhaps no one could have saved Phoenix, who was not lucky enough to find a higher bottom than death. But this performance in this movie should have been seen by someone as a cry for help.

Bogdanovich does what he can. Samantha Mathis is plucky and spirited in the lead role, and the milieu is entertaining (everyone in the movie, even cops and taxi drivers, seem to be aspiring songwriters). But at the center of the film is an actor whose mind and heart are far, far away, and he is like a black hole, consuming light and energy. He’s running on empty. Sometimes there are even scenes where you can sense the other actors scrutinizing Phoenix in a certain way, or urging him, with their tones of voice, to an energy level he cannot match. It is all very sad.
If Paramount Pictures could have figured out how to tastefully market “The Thing Called Love” as “The Last Movie River Phoenix Made Before He Died,” this modest and likeable romantic drama from director Peter Bogdanovich might have popped up at regular neighborhood theaters.

Not only couldn’t Paramount figure out a tasteful way to market “The Thing,” it couldn’t figure out a way to market it at all. So, the Music Box Theatre, 3733 N. Southport Ave., Chicago, begins showing it on the silver screen today before it premieres on home video next month.

The marketing problem with “The Thing” is understandable. The subject matter, young people struggling to make it in the fiercely competitive world of country western music, is too narrow for mainstream audiences. But its romance treatment is too mainstream for hard-core country western audiences.

Phoenix has top billing in the credits, but “The Thing” belongs to Samantha Mathis, a still relatively unknown talent who’s appeared in “Super Mario Bros.” and “This Is My Life.” With her smooth skin, high cheek bones, Elvis-like sneer and well-trained brows, Mathis could pass as Phoenix’s sister.

In “The Thing Called Love,” she plays Miranda Presley, a would-be singer-songwriter who arrives in Nashville at the Bluebird Cafe, where every weekend the affable and fair cafe manager (K.T. Oslin) auditions new acts for the coveted Saturday night slot and a chance to be discovered.

Miranda meets another aspiring performer, a moody and self-centered talent named James Wright (Phoenix). He has a buddy, a less talented but much nicer fellow named Kyle Davidson (Dermot Mulroney). Miranda also makes a friend, a flighty but harmless not-talent singer with the telling name of Linda Lue Linden (the seemingly omnipresent Sandra Bullock) who eventually invites Miranda to be her roommate so they can save some money.

These four characters become emotional bumper cars, constantly repositioning themselves as they bounce back and forth in their relationships. Kyle desperately loves Miranda. But she becomes fascinated by the moody James. Meanwhile, Linda Lue and Kyle become a number. You can just imagine the turbulence below the surface smiles in this group.

In a curious way, “The Thing Called Love” is like the current drama “Ruby in Paradise” — about a struggling independent young woman seeking a new life in a Florida resort town — filtered through the familiar trappings of a John Ford Western. Early in

“Thing,” James takes Miranda on a cheap date: watching a drive-in movie from a nearby hill. They watch Ford’s “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance,” a Western in which Jimmy Stewart and John Wayne vie for the affections of the same woman.

Director Peter Bogdanovich doesn’t go for flash or fancy commercial hooks in “The Thing.” (His sequel to his classic “Last Picture Show,” called “Texasville,” attests to that.) He lets his characters play out the scenes with small incremental bits of revelation. He uses a couple of trite musical montages to communicate the feelings of his characters, but snips them before they become grating.

“The Thing Called Love” offers some dandy music and appearances by C&W stars such as Trisha Yearwood, Pam Tillis, Katy Moffatt and Jimmie Dale Gilmore. Plus, the movie contains solid characters and a storyline that keeps us just enough off-balance to be surprised by how things turn out.

Not many easy-to-market movies have that much going for them.
Peter Bogdanovich is an excellent filmmaker fallen on hard times with “The Thing Called Love,” his new country and western youth romance musical. It’s one of his better recent films—and a good deal better than most of the formula blockbusters cutting their meaningless big-money swaths through the box-office gross lists.

But, like its hopeful young protagonists (four youngsters trying to make the grade in Nashville, while hanging around the famous showcase club the Bluebird Cafe), it can’t seem to buy a break. Not only did “The Thing Called Love” apparently fail some market research tests down South, but its leading man—River Phoenix—died recently in a well-publicized drug incident on the Hollywood club circuit.

One would think the River Phoenix tragedy might have inspired some interest in his film. But marketing research, once again, has triumphed over sentiment or art, and the film seems doomed to spotty distribution. And, most likely, any mention of Phoenix’s fine, touching performance will be treated as a footnote to his death, since the character he plays, Texas rebel-renegade James Wright, has whiskey throat tones, jaded bedroom eyes and looks and acts pretty wasted.

James, though he’s a dominant character, isn’t the center of the film: Samantha Mathis, as his girlfriend, collaborator and antagonist, is. The movie is really about her dreams, her odyssey, her slightly shrewd and self-centered rise. Mathis, as New Yorker Miranda Presley (“No relation,” prefaces her introduction), is an unusual American movie heroine—tougher, more caustic, spikier. But she believably conveys the kind of obsessiveness and grit that might break her. And the movie has another major female character: Sandra Bullock as sweet Linda Lue from Alabama, who can’t sing for shucks, is knockout beautiful, a little awkward, and, in every way, a more standard American movie dreamgirl than tough, short-haired little Miranda. But Linda Lue, we can sense, won’t make it—at least not at all a singer.

The fourth member of the movie’s quartet—Dermot Mulroney as Connecticut cowboy Kyle Davidson—is hampered by idealism and romanticism, too. Writer Carol Heikkinen and Bogdanovich take this foursome, move them briskly around an unusually well-detailed and lively milieu, and show us, in the end, exactly what we want to see, though not quite in the way we expected it.

The best things about “The Thing Called Love” are its cast, style and mood. It has a snap, pace and rhythm we don’t ordinarily see in today’s movies. The dialogue scenes have a headlong pace and cracking self-confidence reminiscent of Howard Hawks, and the three- and four-way love combats recall Ernst Lubitsch.

At its best, “The Thing Called Love” has the inner life and brash stylization of a movie like “To Have and Have Not.” At its weakest, it’s still pretty good, especially with the constant, ebullient C&W score.

Most of all it has likable, archetypal pop offbeat, and vigorously drawn characters—not just the central quartet, but also C&W stars K.T. Oslin (as Lucy, the earthy “angel” of the Bluebird Cafe) and Trisha Yearwood, amusing herself. And it has a performance by River Phoenix that’s heart-rending—not just because we sense death coming, as 1985 audiences did with James Dean in “Rebel Without a Cause,” but because Phoenix makes James such an engagingly lost and reckless character—a singer without defenses. Just as “The Thing Called Love,” which may just have been too smart for its early test audiences, is a movie without alibis.
The year also saw the return of K.T. Oslin, who had dropped out for a while, and the resurgence of Emmylou Harris, who after nearly two decades moved away from Warner Bros. to record for the Asylum label.

According to the conventional thinking, much of this female success is attributable to the settling of a few more women into positions of corporate influence in the Nashville music industry, where they are encouraging the signing of more "real" women, whom female fans identify with, as opposed to the TV weather-girl types.

If the conventional thinking is correct, doubting Thomases can take warning: Expect only more in '94.

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The Thing Called Love

The late River Phoenix, Samantha Mathis, Dermot Mulroney, and Sandra Bullock all play young country-music hopefuls in a touching romantic comedy-drama inspired by Nashville's Bluebird Cafe. For perverse reasons known only to itself, Paramount has elected to bury this movie, but the Music Box, bless it, has decided to open it anyway. It bears as little relation to the real Nashville as Altman's 1975 feature, but director Peter Bogdanovich, the talented cast, and the credited (Carol Heikkinen) and uncredited screenwriters (Bogdanovich, cast members, and Pump Up the Volume's Allan Moyle) are so busy conjuring up a charming world of their own that I certainly didn't mind. Mathis and Bullock are especially good, and Phoenix and Mulroney do a fair job of playing out a jealousy-prone friendship as if they were Jeff Bridges and Timothy Bottoms in Bogdanovich's The Last Picture Show. With Trisha Yearwood. Music Box, Friday through Thursday, January 21 through 27.

—Jonathan Rosenbaum
Tanya Tucker

Soon
Liberty 89048

Throughout the last decade, Tanya Tucker has seemed petrified to create a classic album, consistently powerful from start to finish. Soon is that breakthrough, and it is pleasantly surprising that the best album of her career concentrates on mature, well-written ballads rather than rowdy rockers or steamy, sexually suggestive grinders. Soon is so emotionally affecting, so shockingly serious and so thoroughly well-made that it suggests some radical change in Tucker's annual recording routines. But there's nothing obviously different on the surface. Unlike Willie Nelson on Across the Borderline, she didn't hire a hip rock producer; unlike Emmylou Harris on Cowgirl's Prayer, she didn't change record companies.

But something happened: There's nothing conventional or methodical or predictable about Soon. Tanya and her longtime producer, Jerry Crutchfield, have woven a strikingly forceful album about the multi-hued sentiments of affairs of the heart. The arrangements are sparse and sympathetic, and Tanya gets inside many of the songs to give them a complex depth that acknowledges that nothing is easy about love. But it can be worth the risk, she suggests on "Hangin' In" or "We Don't Have to Do This," or it can leave a person desperate and reckless, as she portrays on "Soon" and "A Blue Guitar."

Tucker has always flashed an unusual level of talent and passion, and she commits herself to a song like few other vocalists. But as she built her comeback over the last 10 years, she relied more on attitude and spirit than on knock-out material. She seemed to be taking it a little too safe. She put out songs that were cute and sultry and entertaining but not very substantial; she released a handful of memorable singles, but like so many country artists, only her greatest hits collection merited repeated listennings.

On Soon, even the sultry opener and the cute bouncy tunes come across as uncommonly amusing, even strong. "You Just Watch Me" is the kind of swampy, sexy, mid-tempo song that Tucker does better than anyone. This time, she offers a tantalizing threat, telling a man that she's gonna get him, no matter how he resists: I'm the moon above/A blanket of night comin' down to wrap you up. She applies a similarly sensual energy to "Sneaky Moon"—who could resist the way she growls How am I supposed to stay in bed/With a crazy little love song in my head?

On "Come On Honey," Tucker slyly prances onto fresh ground, putting a charming spin on this playful come-on by a woman who humorously lectures a friend while offering him her hand. He should have seen through his ex-lover's lies, she says; and he should know that when she whispers in his ear, she means what she says.

But it's the ballads that will make Soon last long after the hits subside. The title cut, already a hit, beautifully exposes the slow cruelty of empty promises. Just as stunning are "Silence Is King" and "Let the Good Times Roll" These former reveals how a couple watch their love wither because of hidden emotions and the fear of speaking out; the latter twists the familiar rock 'n roll

cheer into something else altogether, as it portrays a woman looking at old home movies of herself and a lover who is no longer with her. "We Don't Have to Do This" is similarly persuasive, as a gal meets her man at the door and tells him that maybe they're a little hasty in saying their goodbyes. Soon sounds like a keeper, an album to return to throughout the end of this century; it's about women in their 30's and 40's who must reconcile their dreams with their realities. It's the quiet reflection of the women K.T. Oslin so powerfully portrayed in "80's Ladies." They're still around, still struggling and laughing, and Tanya Tucker knows how they feel.

-TIM McCALL

cm 12/94