



MEMBER PICKS

Almost Famous

It's been four years since Cameron Crowe's last – and best – film *Jerry Maguire*. But during that period he hasn't been idle: returning to his journalistic roots, he found time to put together a 370-page book of interviews with Billy Wilder. Like Truffaut's famous book on Hitchcock, *Conversations with Wilder* (1999) offers the curious spectacle of an almost painfully sensitive and humane fan bowing down before a filmmaker with a much darker, more bitter sensibility. Perhaps critics who become filmmakers are destined to admire the qualities which they themselves lack. For one can't help noticing that Wilder's key virtues – cynicism, satirical bite, economy – are precisely those missing from Crowe's new film *Almost Famous*.

However, Crowe's worship of Wilder is still very relevant to a film that both addresses and embodies the idea of fandom. Loosely based on Crowe's own precocious teenage years – he was a contributor to rock magazine *Rolling Stone* at 16 – *Almost Famous* follows 15-year-old journalist William Miller (Patrick Fugit) on tour with the fictional band Stillwater. Just as William is thrilled to fraternise with Stillwater's cool lead guitarist Russell Hammond (Billy Crudup), so for Crowe the film provided an opportunity to hang out with his idols. At 16, Crowe wrote the sleevenotes for Peter Frampton's hit album *Frampton Comes Alive!* A quarter of a century later, Frampton returned the favour: credited as a technical consultant, he was responsible for training Crudup and his fellow band members and also has a cameo as the manager of one of his own bands, Humble Pie. It's tempting to imagine a sequel to *Almost Famous* in which the grown-up, successful William is able to throw some gainful employment the way of the now rather overlooked Russell.

Like Crowe himself, William feels the need for a mentor. (One of the more interesting revelations in *Conversations with Wilder* is that Crowe first approached his idol to ask him to appear in *Jerry Maguire* as veteran sports agent Dicky Fox, whose aphorisms inspire Jerry. Wilder turned down the role, but their meeting led to the interview project.) In *Almost Famous*, the mentor figure is the legendary, real-life rock journalist Lester Bangs, impersonated here by the unstoppably versatile Philip Seymour Hoffman. Bangs' crucial advice to William, delivered at two separate turning points in the film, is that his writing must be 'honest and unmerciful'. But this ideal is hard to live up to in the real world. Just as *Jerry Maguire* lost his job for displaying too much integrity in his mission statement, so William finds his warts-and-all profile of Stillwater spiked by *Rolling Stone* when the band refuses to confirm his unflatteringly truthful reporting.

I haven't read Crowe's music journalism, but on the strength of *Almost Famous* (and *Conversations with Wilder*, for that matter), 'unmerciful' isn't the first word that springs to mind. And his view of the rock scene circa 1973 seems a lot stronger on nostalgia than on honesty. Certainly, anyone who's seen Robert Frank's suppressed documentary *Cocksucker Blues*, which followed the Rolling Stones on a 1972 US tour, will be surprised by the comparative benignity of Crowe's version. Apart from one scene straight out of *This Is Spinal Tap*, where Russell and Stillwater's jealous lead singer Jeff Bebe (Jason Lee) argue about their relative positions on the band's new t-shirt, these rock stars are remarkably unegotistical and well behaved. The sex

is all safely behind closed doors – with William waiting patiently outside in the hotel corridor. Russell does drop acid at a party, but the scene is played for laughs.

Of course, launching a 15-year-old protagonist into a full-on orgy of sex and drugs would inevitably court controversy (not to mention an 18 certificate), and controversy isn't Crowe's bag. From his days as a boy journalist Crowe certainly has plenty of first-hand experience of the world he depicts; maybe he really is trying to tell us that the truth was much less extreme than the legend.

This isn't the only issue Crowe raises, only to shy away from. At the start of the film *Bangs* warns William that rock 'n' roll is over, and the subsequent arrival of a corporate smoothie who takes over Stillwater's management (and nearly gets them killed when he makes them give up their trusty tour bus for a plane) seems to confirm his doom-laden predictions. But in the film's closing montage we see Stillwater (still together, despite the rifts of the previous tour) setting off on their 1974 tour, which makes you think 1973 wasn't the end of an era after all.

Always a fluent writer of dialogue, Crowe puts some rip-roaring tirades in *Bangs*' mouth, delivered with verve by Hoffman. When, near the end of the film, William is stuck writing his Stillwater profile, *Bangs* reproaches him for getting too close to the musicians, letting them make him feel cool. The point, *Bangs* insists, is that people like him and William aren't cool; great art, he continues, is not made by cool people – 'great art is about guilt and longing.'

Despite personable performances from Billy Crudup, Kate Hudson and newcomer Patrick Fugit, these characters have none of the passion and incipient mania that made *Jerry Maguire* – or John Cusack's Lloyd Dobler in Crowe's debut *Say Anything* – so engaging. At one point William gets angry when Penny describes him as 'sweet'. But all the characters here are sweet, not least the self-destructive Penny. Crowe's refusal to call a groupie a groupie (the distinction is that band-aids only give blow-jobs) is symptomatic of a very un-Bangsian excess of mercy towards his characters. Crowe's most overtly ironic, Wilderesque touch – setting the scene in which Penny has her stomach pumped after an overdose to Stevie Wonder's sickly-sweet 'My Cherie Amour' – makes a traumatic event seem almost inconsequential. And sure enough, Penny is last seen heading for Morocco, happy, smiling and unscarred by her ordeal. In this rock 'n' roll circus there are, it seems, no casualties.

John Wrathall, *Sight and Sound*, January 2001

ALMOST FAMOUS

Director: Cameron Crowe
©: DreamWorks LLC, Columbia Pictures Industries Inc.
Production Company: Vinyl Films
Presented by: DreamWorks SKG, Columbia Pictures Corporation
Producers: Cameron Crowe, Ian Bryce
Co-producer: Lisa Stewart
Associate Producers: Martin P. Ewing, Steven P. Saeta, Jerry Ziesmer, Scott M. Martin
Executive for Vinyl Films: Kristen O’Neill
Production Managers: Martin P. Ewing, Steven P. Saeta
Production Co-ordinator: Noelle Chapin-Green
Production Controller: Jim Turner
Production Accountant: Stevie Lazo
Supervising Location Manager: Jim McCabe
Location Managers: Kristan Wagner, David Thornsberry, Jay Traynor
1st Assistant Director: Jerry Ziesmer
Script Supervisor: Ana Maria Quintana
Casting: Gail Levin
Written by: Cameron Crowe
Director of Photography: John Toll
2nd Unit Director of Photography (Additional Photography): Charles Minsky
Camera Operators: Mike Thomas, Chris Haarhoff
Still Photographer: Neal Preston
Visual Effects Supervisor: Ed Jones
Special Visual effects by: Manex Visual Effects LLC
Additional Digital Effects by: Pacific Title Digital
Special Effects (Supervisor): John Frazier
Editors: Joe Hutshing, Saar Klein
Associate Editor: Mark Livolsi
Art Directors: Clay A. Griffith, Clayton R. Hartley, Virginia Randolph-Weaver
Property Master: David H. Allen
Costume Designer: Betsy Heimann
Costume Supervisor: Michael Dennison
Make-up (Department Head): Lois Burwell
Make-up (Key Artist): Michael Germain
Hair (Department Head): Kathryn Blondell
Titles/Opticals: Pacific Title
Colour Timer: David Orr
Music Score: Nancy Wilson
Original Songs Written by: Cameron Crowe, Nancy Wilson, Ann Wilson
Stillwater is (Russell Hammond): Billy Crudup
Stillwater is (Jeff Bebe): Jason Lee
Stillwater is (Ed Vallencourt): John Fedevich
Stillwater is (Larry Fellows): Mark Kozelek
Stillwater Vocals Performed by: Marti Fredericksen
Additional Musicians: Peter Frampton, Mike McCready, Jon Bayless, Ben Smith, Gordon Kennedy
Music Supervisor: Danny Bramson
Executive in Charge of Music: Todd Homme
Original Songs Produced by: Nancy Wilson
‘Hour of Need’ Co-produced by: Peter Frampton
‘You Had to Be There’ Co-produced by: Peter Frampton
Music Editor: Carlton Kaller
Guitar Coach: Danny Jacob
Production Sound Mixer: Jeff Wexler
Sound Recordists: Tim Gomillion, Dennis Rogers
Boom Operator: Don Coufal
Supervising Sound Editor: Mike Wilhoit
Sound Effects Editors: Tony Lamberti, Dino Dimuro, Scott Wolf, Jon Title
Technical Consultants: Peter Frampton, Kelly Curtis
Researcher: Lori Ashcraft
Special Thanks to: Lawrence Kasdan

Cast

Billy Crudup *(Russell Hammond)*
Frances McDormand *(Elaine Miller)*
Kate Hudson *(Penny Lane)*
Jason Lee *(Jeff Bebe)*
Patrick Fugit *(William Miller)*
Anna Paquin *(Polexia Aphrodisia)*
Fairuza Balk *(Sapphire)*
Noah Taylor *(Dick Roswell)*
ZooeY Deschanel *(Anita Miller)*
Jimmy Fallon *(Dennis Hope)*
Bijou Phillips *(Estrella Starr)*
Philip Seymour Hoffman *(Lester Bangs)*
John Fedevich *(Ed Vallencourt)*
Michael Angarano *(young William Miller)*
Mark Kozelek *(Larry Fellows)*
Olivia Rosewood *(Beth from Denver)*
Liz Stauber *(Leslie)*
Alice Marie Crowe *(Mrs Deegan)*
J.J. Cohen *(Scully, roadie)*
Gary Douglas Kohn *(Gregg, roadie)*
Ray Porter *(Mick, roadie)*
Mark Pellington *(Freddy)*
Eion Bailey *(Jann Wenner)*
Terry Chen *(Ben Fong-Torres)*
Rainn Wilson *(David Felton)*
Erin Foley *(Alison the fact checker)*
Jesse Caron *(Darryl)*
Charles Walker *(principal)*
Jay Baruchel *(Vic Munoz)*
Pauley Perrette *(Alice Wisdom)*
Peter Frampton *(Reg)*
Zack Ward *(The Legendary Red Dog)*
Mitch Hedberg *(Eagles road manager)*
Devin Corey *(The Who road manager)*
Pete Drodge *(Hyatt singer)*
Elaine Summers *(Hyatt singer)*
Eric Stonestreet *(Sheldon the desk clerk)*
Marc Maron *(angry promoter)*
Shane Willard *(ticket scalper)*
Chris McElprang *(Aaron Amedori)*
John Patrick Amedori *(himself)*
Kate Peckham *(quiet girl)*
Julia Schuler *(waving girl)*
Brian Vaughan *(real Topeka kid)*
Anthony Martelli *(poolside provocateur)*
Zach Clairville *(acid kid)*
Ian Ridgeway, Isaac Curtiss, Chris Lennon Davis *(Topeka partiers)*
Scott N. Stevens *(co-pilot)*
Kevin Sussman *(Lenny)*
Reathel Bean *(Warwick Hotel clerk)*
Tom Riis Farrell *(Plaza doctor)*
Laura Bastianelli *(nurse)*
Samuel Aaron Roberson, Brian Andreasen, Jared Hren, Mary Dragicevich, Aura Barr *(high school band)*
Daniel Wilson *(journalism teacher)*
William Barillaro *(bus driver)*
Holly Maples *(flight attendant)*
Matt Griesser *(PSA co-pilot)*
Susan Yeagley *(have a nice day stewardess)*
Nicole Spector *(hippie girl at airport)*
Patrick Irmen *(wanna get high guy)*
Nick Swardson *(insane Bowie fan)*
Cindy Weber, Kris Weber, Kaitlyn Weber, Kimberly Weber, Kristin Weber *(shocked elevator family)*
Samer Sourakli *(moustache boy)*
Michelle Moretti *(Swingo’s desk clerk)*
Ana Maria Quintana, Lisa Buchignani *(Arizona housekeepers)*

USA 2000
123 mins

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