

The Wrecking Crew: The “secret star-making machine” of 1960s pop music

By Joanne Laurier
14 November 2015

Directed by Denny Tedesco

Indispensable to the sound and success of some of the biggest music hits in the 1960s was a group of studio and session musicians centered in Los Angeles nicknamed The Wrecking Crew. Although an extraordinary collection of musical talents who backed dozens of the most famous singing stars and groups, they played anonymously on many records.

Denny Tedesco, son of the late, legendary guitarist Tommy Tedesco (“The King of L.A. Session Guitarists”), has produced and directed *The Wrecking Crew*, a documentary about the musicians and the musical scene.

Stirred into action by his father’s diagnosis of terminal cancer in 1996, Tedesco began filming Tommy speaking about his recollections, as well as those of other group members, some of whom were also nearing the end of their lives.

Production of the film began in 1996 and was not completed until 2008. With some 100 songs excerpted from artists such as the Beach Boys, the Mamas & Papas, the Byrds, Cher, the Righteous Brothers, Sam Cooke, the Ronettes, Simon and Garfunkel, Frank Sinatra, Nancy Sinatra, Leon Russell, Frank Zappa and dozens of others. Tedesco’s project was held up by the cost of licensing and other fees, amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars. A successful Kickstarter campaign in 2013 allowed the documentary to open in theaters this year.

The final result of Tedesco’s struggle and labor of love is an unpretentious, honest and illuminating (albeit slightly scattered) movie that captures the boundless energy and ingenuity of the era’s popular music.

The elite group’s impact on 1960s music is summed up by pop icon Brian Wilson, of the Beach Boys, who insists in one of the film’s initial sequences that “The Wrecking Crew was the focal point of the music. They were the ones with all the will, all the spirit and the know-how, especially for rock ‘n’ roll.” Nancy Sinatra describes

them as “unsung heroes” and composer Jimmy Webb calls them “stone-cold rock ‘n’ roll professionals,” who were a “secret star-making machine.”

Wrecking Crew bass guitar player, Carol Kaye, whom Wilson terms “the greatest bass player in the world ... ahead of her time,” explains how the musicians invented riffs that gave a unique signature to the various recordings, which many times were responsible for their enormous global appeal.

The film is a mélange of different personalities, but it focuses on Tedesco’s father, Kaye, saxophone player Plas Johnson (soloist on Henri Mancini’s “The Pink Panther Theme”) and Rock and Roll Hall of Fame drummer Hal Blaine. Tedesco had planned to include drummer Earl Palmer in that group, another Hall of Fame member, whose “list of credits read like a Who’s Who of American popular music of the last 60 years,” but he was ill.

Famed record producer Phil Spector used the musicians as one of the prime ingredients of his renowned Wall of Sound. (In Tedesco’s documentary, singer Cher remarks that Spector operated “in a different universe.”) Wilson employed them on *Pet Sounds*, the Beach Boys album that set the musical world on its ear in 1966. Not all the music, of course, was up to the level of the work produced by Wilson and Spector. Some of it was pure kitsch, but kitsch that did not take itself too seriously.

Television personality Dick Clark amusingly notes that “I had no idea that certain people didn’t play on their own records till The Monkees [dubbed the “Prefab Four,” as opposed to the Beatles of “Fab Four” fame] came along.” The Monkees’ Micky Dolenz good-naturedly observes that he thought of himself as an actor not a musician. Herb Alpert is an amiable, down-to-earth presence, as are Leon Russell and Glen Campbell. (Campbell: “The musicians were the product of the 40s, 50s and 60s. They came of age when rock ‘n’ roll came

of age.”)

In a brief comment, Amricanheritage.com points to the origins of the group of musicians: “The ascendancy of the Wrecking Crew began with the gradual demise of the studio system at the big film companies in the late 1950s, resulting in the inevitable breakup of the big studio orchestras as well. With these formal orchestras no longer in place, but with an ever-increasing need by producers to record soundtracks for television and film, a new generation of studio musicians found a growing demand for their services.

“At the same time, early rock ‘n’ roll began sweeping the country. These factors combined to create an unprecedented demand for topnotch studio players able to handle a variety of dates, from soundtracks to jingles to singles. And as the established studio players who had come up with the big orchestras prior to World War II began to retire, in stepped the future members of the Wrecking Crew, one by one, to take their places.”

However, there were other preconditions for the success of the Wrecking Crew, namely big social changes, including the mass civil rights movement and the breaking down of racial (and gender) barriers in the production and performance of popular music. More generally, the heyday of the group of musicians, 1962-68, corresponds to a period of growing radicalization and questioning of authority in America. The movie conveys the sense of a highly skilled yet more democratized, flexible and open-ended music world than the one that exists today—always within the framework and limits, of course, of a commercial recording industry.

The fluidity of The Wrecking Crew’s “structure” and the near interchangeability of its personnel are underscored in Tedesco’s documentary by the fact that none of the interviewees can put a precise number on the group’s membership at any given time. Some of the musicians were conservatory-trained, others were more or less self-taught. The Wrecking Crew musicians went from one studio and recording session to the next, performing with the rhythm and efficiency of assembly line production workers. The musicians’ union records drummer Earl Palmer, for example, playing on 450 dates in 1967 alone.

As Tedesco explains in the film’s production notes: “My dad would get a call from the answering service. ‘Are you available for such and such date?’ The leader [producer] may be Snuff Garrett, Lou Adler or whomever. The answering service would tell him what instruments would be needed and he went to work. At

that point they would just record and go onto the next gig. Many times, the artists might not even be there or maybe the artist was a newcomer that didn’t really have any hits at all.”

In a 2011 interview with musicradar.com, Tedesco explains why he was driven to make *The Wrecking Crew*. He asserts: “They were definitely chameleons. They would do a Frank Sinatra session, then go right into working with The 5th Dimension or The Mamas & The Papas or The Chipmunks—all in a single day! Or they’d do a movie score or TV commercials, and then they’d play with Brian Wilson or Phil Spector. I can’t think of many musicians who had that same level of versatility.”

The web site elaborates: “Like their Detroit counterparts, The Funk Brothers, whose intuitive instrumental talents fueled the hits of Motown, The Wrecking Crew operated in the shadows. Beyond the producers who hired them and the artists on whose recordings their playing appeared, nobody knew their names. They were faceless. If you were alive and listening to the radio during the ‘60s, you heard drummer Hal Blaine, guitarist Tommy Tedesco and bassist Carol Kaye all day long. But you never knew it.”

In this fascinating, eclectic look at this musical period, *The Wrecking Crew* brings out the essential solidarity and practicality of the group. The picture presented suggests something as well about the dominance of large-scale production methods in American life during the post-war period. A cheeky postscript closes the movie’s credits: “No musicians were harmed in the making this film and no drum machines were ever used.” One might say that the musicians to a certain extent took the place of machines.

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