

Interview with Denny Tedesco, director of *The Wrecking Crew*

“Everybody loves this music around the world”

By Joanne Laurier
5 December 2015

On November 14 we posted a review of *The Wrecking Crew*, directed by Denny Tedesco, a fascinating and entertaining look at the musicians who underpinned so much of 1960s’ popular music.

This group of Los Angeles-based musicians played on hundreds, if not thousands, of records and backed dozens of the most popular figures of the time, including 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.

Director Tedesco, as he explains below, was inspired to set about creating a documentary record of the musicians and their histories when his father, legendary guitarist Tommy Tedesco, became ill with life-threatening cancer in the mid-1990s.

David Walsh and I recently spoke with Denny Tedesco by telephone. This is an edited version of the conversation.

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Joanne Laurier: We enjoyed the film a great deal. It’s an important chronicle of that moment in musical history. Since most of the interviews were done in 1996 or so, could you explain what delayed completion of the documentary?

Denny Tedesco: I always wanted to tell the story of these musicians. In 1995-1996, my dad was diagnosed with terminal cancer. And I thought, I’d better jump on this, because if I don’t do it, it will be the biggest regret of my life. So I put this roundtable together—the four musicians at the roundtable [Tommy Tedesco, bass guitarist Carol Kaye, drummer Hal Blaine and saxophonist Plas Johnson].

Interestingly, I never actually saw my father play with these guys. I never went to the studios. Anyway, they’re all sitting around talking. I based the film on Woody Allen’s *Broadway Danny Rose*. I call it the quartet without instruments. That was the start of it.

Then basically I tried to shop a 14-minute trailer around—a teaser. Everybody kept saying, “This is great, but you’re never going to get it made because the record companies will never make it affordable for you. And also because music docs don’t make that much money. Whatever you’ll have to spend, you’ll never get back.”

I did all the things you’re not supposed to do—maxed out on credit cards, refinanced the house. I just kept going and my wife said we’d made the most expensive home movie ever and we had nothing to show for it. I didn’t have a cut. All I had was a bunch of interviews with Brian Wilson, all these people. I had to go back and refinance, and I finally made the film in 2008. I barnstormed the whole country from 2010 to 2013: I would show it at churches, theaters. I basically got donations, and we raised the money.

Everybody thought it was about me against the big companies, the truth was ... hey, was it going to sell? I was very lucky that things worked the way they did in a lot of ways because if the film had been released in 2008, it would not have had the legs it does now. I have 75,000 people on my Facebook page. It’s all about marketing, and I realized this music was everywhere. People talk about the British invasion, this music was the only “American invasion” we can actually agree on. Everybody loves this music around the world.

David Walsh: It is the music of a generation, and not only in the US.

Denny Tedesco: When I first began to cut, a friend of mine said, “Why are you cutting this, it’s a major music documentary? You have a part in this that no other director or editor has. You’ve got to put yourself into this.” I originally did not want to be part of this. I simply wanted to be “the director.” But once I had the perspective on my dad and his extended family, the “Wrecking Crew,” it made my life much easier. A much easier way to tell the story because now people could relate to the music, to the father-son relationship, and so forth.

JL: The documentary is a combination of several things. It’s a labor of love, for one thing, including a tribute to your mother. It provides a sense of what her life was like, what life with your father was like. It’s a very personal film, which makes it unusual as a documentary.

Denny Tedesco: The question I had for these guys was what happens when you’re at the top of the world—and then suddenly you’re not. My father was fortunate—[composers] John Williams, Jerry Goldsmith, he was their guy. But at the end, when he was age 62 and had a stroke, he had not been working that much. He’d come home and say, hey, any calls? That was a standing joke for us.

He would say, it’s not about staying at the top, it’s about taking the ramp down as slowly as possible. We all want to be relevant no matter what age we are. Other players who worked with my dad did not do so well. When I asked Plas Johnson how this affected his personal life, he said, “Let’s just say I’m a better grandfather than father.”

DW: Do you think your father’s background helped ground him in terms of handling those ups and downs? We wanted to ask about his background, because he grew up during the Depression in the Niagara Falls-Buffalo, New York area.

Denny Tedesco: Very much so. He was a poor kid from Niagara Falls. I recently asked my mom, how long was it after you were married that you moved from Niagara Falls to Hollywood? I assumed it was years. No, it was three weeks. He did not want to be there. They packed their bags, they sold the furniture that they still owed money on, and they drove across the country, not knowing what was going to

happen on the other end. There was no music in Niagara Falls in 1953, just the occasional wedding, the occasional party.

DW: Did he ever speak about growing up in the 1930s and 40s?

Denny Tedesco: He grew up in an Italian ghetto. My dad was a hustler. He was a smart, street-wise guy. He loved his coffee, he loved his gambling. He was sharp, witty and could read the room better than anybody. I will send you a couple of audio outtakes that I just did with the great jazz and pop bass player Chuck Rainey.

My father loved helping people. Chuck Rainey was *the* great bass player in the 1970s. During a recording session, Rainey told my dad at one point, "I'm really lost." My father hit a huge chord and it was a mistake. Rainey said, "Thank god, someone else made a mistake." They went back and started it again. The second time, Rainey said he got lost in the same spot. Again, my father hits a huge chord and makes a mistake. My father then turns to Chuck and says "OK, that's it. No more." [For Rainey's extended version of the story, click here.]

There's another story about Ray Brown, one of the great jazz bass players. Brown and my father were working on a movie score, and the bass was the primary instrument. The conductor keeps saying, 'bass player this ... bass player that.' But you have to have respect and not just call someone by his instrument. Finally, my father reached out to the podium and pulled on the conductor's pant leg and said, "Where the f___ do you get off calling him 'bass player'? He's got a name." No one saw this except Rainey.

DW: I realize that this is not going to happen, but this really should be a television series about 20 hours long.

Denny Tedesco: I'll send you the DVD. It has six and a half hours of outtakes. When I finally got an editor in 2006, she said you can't put everybody in the film. I felt I needed to do these stories because no one else knows these stories. On the outtakes that are not in the film, I've got the Fifth Dimension, Bill Medley of the Righteous Brothers, Del Shannon, Petula Clark, Richard Carpenter, James Burton. There's a whole section of recording engineers. I tried to give everybody their say.

JL: What comes across in the film is how democratic the atmosphere was in general. Even today's stars that appear in the film speak as normal people—not elitists.

Denny Tedesco: I remember the first time I worked with Cher in the 1980s. I was standing next to her, I was a grip. She was very cool and calm. When she found out I was Tommy Tedesco's son, she suddenly turned 16.

And when I finally got to her agent years later to ask if she would be in the documentary, the agent said, there's no way she's going to do it, it's not her thing. But I knew I had a chance. And she did say she'd do it. I knew I had a chance, because the musicians were working with the artists and the artists were kids. Dad was 30 years old in 1960, Bill Pitman was 40. So these kids didn't have much experience and they're looking up to my dad and Hal Blaine and so forth.

JL: Brian Wilson opens the film by asserting that the studio musicians were the most important factor in the music of the period. And your film makes clear that you do not have the level of musicianship that the Wrecking Crew had without a phenomenal amount of practice and work in different genres of music.

Denny Tedesco: These musicians could take a score they'd never seen and immediately master it. My dad worked so much, he did not have to practice. In his early 20s, he practiced all the time—8 to 10 hours a day—that's why he could read music backward, upside down. He did not have formal training. He took some lessons, but the teacher

said he was the worst student he ever had. He was driven not to work in that warehouse. He hated manual labor. He was not that guy.

JL: In the movie, Jimmy Webb says this was a time in musical history that will never repeat itself. This incredible confluence and mix of musicians during that time created music that was important to our generation. It was a mix that was made possible by the civil rights movement, by significant layers of the population being able to get jobs in the postwar boom, there were new fields of opportunity opening up, working class kids for the first time with a little money in their pockets and time on their hands. Motown, country music ... various trends at the time.

Denny Tedesco: It's all of the above. Everybody fed off of each other.

JL: It was a period of optimism. Kids thought the world was opening up for them. The opposite of now.

Denny Tedesco: I think radio was the greatest thing ever because no one knew what color you were. You did not have to worry about what you looked like. You did not know if the musician was white, black or whatever. I think that kind of says a lot. It was a great melting pot. Italians, Jews, blacks, all part of this. They treated each other like musicians first.

JL: Your film implies that Brian Wilson and Phil Spector were the two greatest pop music figures of that period.

Denny Tedesco: Yes, you know what's interesting, the musicians were very honest in the interviews I did. They did not hold back. At 60 or 70 years old, they're not in the game any more, so they could be honest about what they did.

My dad was not a big fan, for example, of the Beach Boys' music—he liked them more as a singing group. He never really listened properly, because once he left a session, he never listened to it again. He never listened to the radio. But he was impressed by Brian Wilson. [See musicians talking about Brian Wilson here.]

And when Glen Campbell and Leon Russell, two very different musicians, start talking about Brian Wilson on the outtakes, they go, 'Yeah!' They say there was no one that could touch him.

The DVD version of The Wrecking Crew , which contains more than 6 hours of bon us material, is available here.

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