

Nothing to kick about

Almost Famous, written and directed by Cameron Crowe

David Walsh
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In *Almost Famous*, writer-director Cameron Crowe seems, on balance, to be patting himself on the back and letting us know that he is rather pleased with the way his life turned out. I have no reason to wish Crowe ill, but I think enduring art is made of more substantial stuff.

The creator of *Singles* and *Jerry Maguire*, Crowe here tells the story of William Miller, a 15-year-old from San Diego, who gets thrust into the popular music world in 1973 as a fledgling journalist for *Rolling Stone* magazine. He has the opportunity to tour with a promising band, Stillwater, and experience a good many things—girls, the drug culture, the periphery of fame and the pettiness and banality of everyday life in the music business—that individuals his age rarely encounter. His somewhat eccentric, but warmhearted mother tries to keep a watchful eye on him, with varying degrees of success.

His mentor, rock and roll journalist Lester Bangs (a real figure), offers a jaundiced look at the increasingly commercialized music industry. Once drawn into the band's inner circle, William has the choice of telling the truth about what he sees in a magazine article or maintaining the friendship of the band members. According to the film's production notes, in the end, he "learns a lifechanging lesson about the importance of family—the ones we inherit, and the ones we create."

Crowe had an experience similar to that of his protagonist. He began writing for *Rolling Stone* at 16 and eventually became an associate editor. "While still in his teens, the young writer and avid music fan profiled many of the era's most influential artists," report the film's press agents.

To a certain extent your response to this film depends, in the first place, on your attitude to the American popular music scene of the early 1970s and

whether or not you share Crowe's enthusiasms. The film's own attitude is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, the quasi-radical Bangs declares, from the sidelines, that "It's over": rock and roll music has entered into decline, has lost its soul and is in the process of being taken over by large commercial interests. On the other, the actual imagery of *Almost Famous* is organized in such a way as to suggest this was largely a Golden Age.

In any event, however, it is entirely possible for a filmmaker to create a remarkable work about a milieu that in and of itself may even leave a given spectator relatively cold. The great Hollywood directors of another era did this all the time. Given genre, often banal material to work with they found ways of expressing universal and compelling themes.

Crowe, with potentially promising material and presumably certain remarkable experiences to draw from, has created a work most striking for its generic and bland feel. Virtually no element of the film jumps out at you. The band's live performances generate very little spark. Billy Crudup, a fine performer, plays Stillwater's lead guitarist and its one potential superstar, but he can't pump real life into a role that is essentially one of those paint-by-the-numbers jobs. All in all, this is one the safest, most generalized portrayals of life imaginable. Rock and roll may have not been everything it was cracked up to be, but it couldn't have been *this* predictable. Has Crowe sanitized his account as a means of adapting to what he takes to be a more reactionary cultural atmosphere, or does he simply lack the ability to translate memory into vivid images? It hardly matters. Only Frances McDormand, a wonderful actor, as William's mother, and Fairuza Balk, as one of the "band aids," make strong impressions.

Art ought to make something of the fleeting moment,

ought to direct our attention to what otherwise would pass by without any notice. The procedure here works the other way around. Crowe directs our attention in general to the most obvious phenomena, everything we already know or think we know about popular music: the temptations that fame or near fame inevitably produces; the tension that arises when one band member seems to be gathering most of the public and critical attention; the abuse and exploitation of female hangers-on; that combination of selfishness and selflessness, egoism and commitment exhibited by so many celebrated performers. The worst thing is, I'm not certain that I learned anything from this film about rock and roll in the 1970s, and it was directed by someone who presumably has first-hand information.

It's difficult to separate that failing from the very process the film hints at, but shies away from treating head-on: the commodification and trivialization of rock and roll music. It's probably a good idea to steer clear from idealizing the music of the late 1960s—not that much of it stands up today, and there is some question as to how much of the energy that went into popular music and its cult-like celebration represented a means for a relatively lazy generation to divert itself from more pressing matters, including cultural ones—nonetheless, there was a certain electricity in the air. Literally. The moment before the first note struck in the darkness at a concert could be an exciting one. And there were performers, perhaps less than complete musically or as human beings, who embodied at least in part the spirit of the time.

But to write the phrase “the spirit of the time” is precisely to identify the ingredient that is entirely absent in *Almost Famous*—any reference to the social upheavals of the previous decade that gave popular music much of the bite and energy that it had. The film is set in the summer of 1973. Granted that the crest of the wave of protest and revolt had passed, the time (the eruption of Watergate, for instance) was hardly free from turmoil. The film manages to convey the impression that nothing but normalcy and contentment reigned. Well, this is Cameron Crowe's view of the world, and it obviously reflects his thinking accurately. His mind was apparently focused on one thing at the time: getting close to the musicians and pursuing a career in journalism. He succeeded, and in America there is no arguing with success. Or is there?

The character of Lester Bangs is incidental to the drama. He gives William a steady stream of advice, although it's not clear that it has any noticeable effect on the outcome of events. The real figure was a journalist who wrote for *Rolling Stone*, *Creem* and other publications, and died of an apparently accidental overdose of painkillers in 1982. Bangs belonged to the fraternity of anti-establishment writers who emerged with the music scene of the late 1960s. They wrote highly personal, informal and tendentious prose. I suppose the ideal was to write thousands of words, a sort of Kerouac-like stream of semi-consciousness, in a motel in Los Angeles over a weekend while under the influence of some illegal substance. I'm not sure any of it amounts to very much. In general, it strikes the reader today as much ado about relatively little.

At any rate, this breed more or less died out with the transformation of the music industry into a multibillion-dollar enterprise. Journalist Ira Robbins, in a *Salon* review of a biography of Bangs, notes that the critic “and his kind were marginalized and then ostracized by the explosion of music journalism they engendered. As Bangs discovered at the increasingly ‘professional’ *Rolling Stone*, freewheeling first-person hysteria was fine until people started to take rock criticism seriously as a business. Once mainstream media got into the act, the self-invented extremists got pushed off the stage.

“What was once garret zealotry—practiced by idealists driven to spew, destroy and proselytize—is now well-paid product-shilling, adult-dream celebrity worship written by well-funded content providers, pushed by powerful flacks and neutered by timid editors.”

The fate of Bangs was the “road not taken” as far as Crowe is concerned. Too canny and calculating to allow himself to be “pushed off the stage” in that manner, Crowe, if his fictionalized portrait is anything to go by, was on his way to becoming establishment at an early stage. *Almost Famous* is another stage in the evolution of the director's distinct brand of nonconformist conformism.



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