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Leader of the 'Crew' Tommy Tedesco and fellow musicians gave credibility to rock

by Jeff Miers - NEWS POP MUSIC CRITIC

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I grew up reading *Guitar Player* magazine. It was my bible, and probably as responsible as anything else for the simultaneous development of my mutual loves: music and writing.

It was *Guitar Player* that introduced me to Tommy Tedesco, the Niagara Falls native who penned an instructional column for the publication. Tedesco didn't look like the other players I was listening to and attempting to model myself after at the time. He didn't look like a rock star. He played one of those big hollow-body guitars, the sort I naively considered to be "old people's instruments" in those days. But his writing revealed a sense of humor, a voice of considerable wisdom and a genuine love for the instrument through which he made his living.

It would be several years before I really figured out just how important Tedesco was to the music that I loved. He is, it turns out, the most recorded guitarist in history, having played on hundreds and hundreds of albums, songs, television themes and film soundtracks. He's also emblematic of what we now have little choice but to consider a dying breed: the studio musician capable of bringing much more to a recording session than what is merely printed on the page. Tedesco succumbed to cancer in 1997, at age 67. Now, his son Denny has completed a documentary that is more than a tribute to his father. It's a paean to "The **Wrecking Crew**," that group of roughly 20 musicians, including Tedesco, that ruled the roost in Los Angeles during the golden age of pop and then still-emergent rock 'n' roll.

The News' Jeff Simon reviewed the younger Tedesco's documentary in Wednesday's edition of *The News*, praising it as both heartfelt and eye-opening. It is, indeed. But it also serves as a bit of a wake-up call. The members of the **Wrecking Crew** -- among them guitarists Glen Campbell, Barney Kessell and Al Casey; sax men Steve Douglas, Jay Migliori and Jim Horn; keyboardists Leon Russell, Mac Rebennack (Dr. John), Mike Melvoin, Don Randi and Larry Knechtel; bassists Carol Kaye, Joe Osborn, Max Bennett, Chuck Berghofer and Ray Pohlman; and drummers Hal Blaine and Earl Palmer -- were the first group of serious musicians to bring consummate skill, virtuosic abilities and bountiful enthusiasm to the world of pop and rock.

Most serious musicians at the time -- and for "serious," read "jazz or classical" -- looked down their noses at rock. It was too primitive for them, too harmonically unsophisticated, too obvious. These musicians took the money to play on rock and pop dates, certainly, but if it wasn't on the chart in front of them, they didn't play it. They'd cash their checks,

then make fun of the music they'd just performed -- in some instances, rightly so, in more instances, not.

Tedesco and Co. didn't lord it over the people they were recording for and with. Instead, they got into it, bringing their abundant talent to bear on what were admittedly simple, but often transcendent pieces of pop music. The **Wrecking Crew** did what so many studio musicians before and after failed to do: They engaged their imaginations in whatever project was at hand, they "produced" their own parts, as drummer Hal Blaine notes during the documentary, and they ultimately contributed greatly to the end product. Of course, rock aficionados know that it's indeed the Crew responsible for so much of the sonic and harmonic intricacy of the Beach Boys' "Pet Sounds" album, one of the most ambitious recordings in pop history. In that particular instance, the band was led by composer Brian Wilson, who knew what he wanted nine times out of 10. It's unanimously conceded by the players involved during the film that Wilson displayed signs of true musical genius. He heard all of the parts in this "pocket symphony" simultaneously, an impressive ability when one considers just how many instruments contributed to the lush, intricate harmonic melange of "Pet Sounds."

Bassist Carol Kaye -- the only woman on the Crew, and one of the finest, most imaginative bassists to emerge from the '60s -- left an indelible mark on Wilson's masterpiece, and did so with unflagging enthusiasm. Her percussive, muted bass sound is among one of the most easily identifiable tones in pop history.

Prior to "Pet Sounds," the Crew had already helped Phil Spector achieve his infamous "wall of sound," left a sonic thumbprint on everything from "Be My Little Baby" to "River Deep Mountain High," and moved with ease between sessions for Frank Sinatra and the Monkees.

Yes, these cats got paid. Yes, they were studio musicians who showed up for a recording session just like nonmusicians show up at the office or the factory in the morning. But by giving so freely of themselves, the **Wrecking Crew** members helped pop move from mindless teenybopper fare into the world of high art, jazz- and classical-snobs be damned. And they did this, not for fame or glory, but for the sheer joy of creativity.

For that, we all owe a great debt of gratitude.

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