

L.A. Studio Musicians of the '60s Profiled in New Documentary

Session players behind Frank Sinatra, the Beach Boys, Phil Spector's 'Wall of Sound' featured in Denny Tedesco film

BY LINDA RAPKA, OVERTURE MANAGING EDITOR

You may not know their names, but there's no mistaking their music.

The soundtrack of the late 1950s and 1960s was largely recorded by a group of Los Angeles studio musicians known as the Wrecking Crew. The Beach Boys, Frank and Nancy Sinatra, Sonny and Cher, Jan & Dean, Elvis Presley, the Monkees, Gary Lewis and the Playboys, the Mamas & the Papas, Simon and Garfunkel, the Tijuana Brass, Ricky Nelson, Johnny Rivers, and even Alvin and the Chipmunks are but a small few of the hundreds of popular artists for whom the Crew recorded, though more often than not were left uncredited on the album sleeve.

Typically knocking out several tracks in a single three-hour session, the musicians—who also comprised Phil Spector's famed Wall of Sound—played on anything from rock tunes to TV and film scores to jazz arrangements and even cartoon soundtracks, able to churn out any style of music with unmatched skill. Hopping from studio to studio, the musicians during their heyday sometimes played up to four dates per day.

Denny Tedesco, son of one of the most recorded guitarist in history, late Wrecking Crew member Tommy Tedesco, tells the surprisingly little-known tale of this group of musicians who recorded the unmistakable soundtrack of the '60s in his documentary, "The Wrecking Crew." He speaks about his labor of love and the film's upcoming L.A. premiere.

How did these musicians come to be known as "The Wrecking Crew"?

It's become something of folklore almost. The legend goes they were called the Wrecking Crew 'cause the older guys, the traditional studio guys from the '40s and '50s, weren't taking the rock dates 'cause it was beneath them, so they said these guys were gonna wreck the business.

The Wrecking Crew is an unparalleled phenomenon in recording history. How did this one group of musicians come to play so many different sessions together?

When they're breaking in the early '50s and early '60s, rock 'n' roll was still in its infancy, as were recording techniques. You didn't have ProTools, DVs, CD players, computers to help you learn how to play music or even record music. In those days you had to be in all one room together as a band, together 'til the end, everybody flawless.



Denny Tedesco with his father, guitarist Tommy Tedesco.

What inspired you to make the film?

I started the documentary when I knew my father was going to pass away, in 1995, when he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. I knew he didn't have much time and I figured we've probably lost a lot of these musicians—Ray Pohlman was gone, Steve Douglas was gone. I felt if I don't record this, nobody's going to. There were so many stories I used to hear, the laughter from all these musicians. It was always fun listening to these guys. So I decided I'd put together a roundtable discussion to start things off, and in 1996 brought together Carol Kaye, Hal Blaine, my father and Plas Johnson. I was influenced by "Broadway Danny Rose," the Woody Allen movie where they sit around that coffee shop and just talk about Danny Rose. It was like you were a voyeur to this conversation, and that's what I wanted this to be. Unfortunately my father passed away before he saw anything cut.

When was the main period of recording for the Crew?

It was a time period from the late '50s early '60s to almost the late '60s, where things started turning in a different direction. Group albums became popular at that time, so now you didn't want so many studio musicians on some of these albums. The highlight year for record dates was probably 1967 or '68 in that area. There were 400 dates, contracts that we could find. If you take weekends and holidays off, you must be doing three or four dates a day.

How did you get the rights to the music?

The record companies have been amazing. Warner Bros. was one of the companies I first met, and they said, "We're not gonna mess with you. It's not a documentary about a chicken coop. It's about our business and these people. We want this to be out there." This isn't like a kiss-and-tell book, this is a positive look at something that is not always so positive.

How did you line up the other interviews?

One of the first star talents to come on board was Cher. She was 16 when she worked with these guys as a backup singer for Phil Spector's groups. She knew them as the older guys—they were all in their late 20s and 30s, and she was just a kid. Then Dick Clark gave me an interview. Then I got Julius Wechter and Lew McCreary. Julius was a great percussion player and Lew was a great trombonist. That was a rush in time because I knew Julius was sick. I didn't know Lou was sick. They both passed away about six months later.

If someone has a favorite song from the '60s, chances are good they'll hear it in this film.

It's probably one of the biggest soundtracks in movies because there are so many songs. When putting it together I would meet with people—I won't mention names—but someone came up with the idea that since there were so many songs, we should get "sound-alikes." I said, are you kidding?! The whole point is about the sound. These people were the sound! The other thing people would say was, "Well could you narrow

it down to 20 songs?" I said no. You don't have the music, you don't have the doc, 'cause it's really about the quantity of music this group of people in Los Angeles at the time did. They went from Sinatra to the Chipmunks, from Zappa to the Beach Boys—it was all over the place. They didn't have technically "a sound." They could play with anybody.

How did the musicians feel about being largely uncredited on the several hit records they played on?

These guys didn't complain. They weren't whiners. They enjoyed what they did. They got paid for what they did. My father used to tell his students, "You pick up the guitar because you love to play guitar. You don't start because you want to make a living of it. If you get paid for it, it's a bonus. If you make a living at it, you're in a small minority—congratulations."

With documentaries like "Standing in the Shadows of Motown," it seems like there's a strong public interest in what goes on behind the scenes.

I was thrilled that it came out, but I was more thrilled that it was successful, because it's basically the same kind of behind-the-scenes story. Mine's a different slant on it, but it does show that the public is interested and wants to know. There is a curtain, and us as humans it's natural that we want to learn something new.

What was it like to be growing up, hearing all these songs on the radio and knowing that was your dad playing on most of them?

Most of the time I never knew it was my dad on the radio. These guys were doing three to four dates a day, they didn't even know they were on some of these songs! There's certain songs, like the Beach Boys where you know Hal was playing all the time, but my father wouldn't know. You figure these guys did two, three, four dates a day for a while, and sometimes the groups weren't there, it was just laying down the tracks. Don't forget, there were hundreds of hits, but there were thousands of bombs.

I didn't realize the impact he and his friends were making. I don't think they had an idea of the impact of what was going to happen 40, 50 years later, the fact that people are still listening to these songs. When you go 50 years before them in 1960, you're talking 1910. Were they listening to songs from 1910? It never happened.

How was it trying to find a balance telling your father's story and the story of the Wrecking Crew as a whole?

It was a big problem. When I started the film, I was never going to focus on my father, and I surely wasn't going to be part of this. It was about this group of musicians. A friend of mine looked at our first 30-minute cut a few years ago and said, "It's a History Channel documentary." That killed me. But he was right. The way I made that transition was by going, Here's a story about my father and his extended family, the Wrecking Crew. Because you can't have one and not the other.

It's about having the story and not just the facts, which is what you did with this film.

I think unconsciously I was trying not to let go. I didn't want Dad to leave and this was my way of holding on.

The film took 12 years to complete.

If I'd finished this in two years, five years or eight years, even 10, it would not have been as good because not just what I got later, but understanding the story more.

The film has been a success at festival screenings earlier this year.

We started at South by Southwest (SXSW) and it coincided with the music festival. Then we were invited to Nashville as the closing film. That was an honor in itself, but then we sold out two screens before the festival even opened, the first time in the history of the festival. We had the greatest time. All these Nashville greats like guitarist Brett Mason as well as transplants like drummer Ed Green, and bassist Bob Babbitt from the Funk Brothers, were there. As well as another guitar hero of mine, Peter Frampton. They were so enthusiastic and supportive, it was amazing. Some of the musicians were saying, "I've gotta have my kids see this." And that's a thrill.

Don Randi, who's been very supportive, came out to play after the festival with Al Kooper, Mike Deasy, Lyle Ritz and Al Delory. They played some of the hits that they recorded on, and the audience went nuts! There were probably about 700 people in the room.

What I've noticed about the film is the fact it's working on two levels. Musicians understand it from the inside. They understand what it takes to be a musician, and you've got the music lovers, who are blown away—"Wow, that's what happened!"

Where was the very first public screening?

There was an event at the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame and they asked if we'd come down with Hal Blaine, so we showed a 30 minute teaser. It was a packed audience of 150 people, and they gave us a standing ovation. It was a great feeling of love in the room. The MC started asking Hal questions, and Hal started crying. I thought he was joking, but I looked behind his sunglasses and saw tears. Hal said, "When I saw all my friends up there, it brought back a lot of memories to me." Which is a sweet, beautiful comment. So I felt, OK, if I made Hal happy and if I could make these musicians happy by telling the truth, then I've done my job. They were honest with me, so I wanted to be sure I was honest to them with this story.

It was quite the labor of love.

I used to hate that term. But it's true. I had to finance it myself. It might have taken 12 years to actually make it, but it took a lifetime to understand it.

The Los Angeles premiere of "The Wrecking Crew" will take place during Grand Performances at a free outdoor screening at California Plaza in downtown L.A. Saturday, June 28 at 8 p.m. For more information about the documentary and the musicians, visit www.wreckingcrew.tv.