

# Cameron Crowe

## The In Focus Interview

Cameron Crowe is one nice guy. At 44, the writer-director behind "Vanilla Sky" – surely the most anticipated Paramount release of 2001 – still emanates boyish charm and the openhearted, unaffected affability that comes through in his work.

Crowe began his career at age 15 as a writer for the rock magazine *Creem*. At 16 he went on the road with Led Zeppelin, covering the band's tour for *Rolling Stone*, an experience he loosely chronicles in "Almost Famous," set in 1973.

"Journalism is good prep [for a career in filmmaking]," says Crowe. "It's about talking to people. You get a sense of the rhythms of the way people speak, and it gives you a love of real life, what real life sounds like."

In 1979, at the age of 22, Crowe was already an established journalist when he published his first book, "Fast Times At Ridgemont High," which became a best seller. He adapted the book into a screenplay and the ensuing 1982 hit film, directed by Amy Heckerling, launched the careers of, among others, Sean Penn, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Forrest Whitaker, Nicolas Cage and Eric Stoltz.

Crowe's first two movies as writer-director, 1989's "Say Anything ..." and 1992's "Singles," were well-received by critics but failed to generate much of a stir at the box office. It was his 1996 blockbuster "Jerry Maguire," starring Tom Cruise and Renée Zellweger, that elevated Crowe to industry power player and earned him a best-director nomina-

tion from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

- 2000's "Almost Famous" earned Crowe still more critical accolades. He walked away with an Oscar earlier this year for his semi-autobiographical screenplay for that film, and also received a best director nomination from the Director's Guild of America.

The Dec. 14 release "Vanilla Sky" is, in Crowe's words, a "thrill ride from the heart" that explores the nature of romance, sex, love, comedy, suspicion and dreams. It also represents the first time he's adapted someone else's work; "Vanilla" is based on Spanish filmmaker Alejandro Amenabar's 1997 romantic thriller, "Open Your Eyes (Abre Los Ojos)."

Although under a great deal of stress – at this writing "Vanilla Sky" is scheduled to premiere in a matter of days – and fighting a nasty flu bug, Crowe, nice as ever, spent some time with *In Focus* to talk about movies, music and ... his mom.

**You're one of only two directors that Tom Cruise has chosen to work with twice. Why do you think that is?**

There's a secret club where Tony Scott ["Top Gun," "Days of Thunder"] and I get together and celebrate our status. [Laughs.] That's a good question. I think, basically, Tom and I had a really good time making "Jerry Maguire." He mentioned afterward that we should look for something else to do together and we've been doing that ever since.

**Why did you choose "Vanilla Sky"? It's been described as both a romantic comedy and a thriller. That's an unusual genre mix.**

It is a bit of a genre buster, if for no other reason than that the original story was so unique and modern that it gave us freedom to do anything. I mean, why stick in a genre if you have a story that allows you to do different things? So the beginning of the movie is a little bit like a romantic comedy that slowly starts to turn into an emotional roller-coaster ride, and it's just fun. Usually movies that take a ride like that end up being gimmicky and this is – hopefully, hopefully, hopefully [laughs] – it's really character- and performance-oriented. It's a thrill ride from the heart, which I've never been able to do. As a kid I used to love Ray Bradbury stories and "The Twilight Zone," and I also loved Billy Wilder's stuff and Truffaut's. For some bizarre reason, we were able to use elements of all those different types of movies and feelings in "Vanilla Sky."

**"Jerry Maguire" wasn't totally a romantic comedy because it was kind of sad in a way.**

Thanks for noticing that. Not everybody did because in the end, yes, they're walking off into the sunset.

**But they're not the typical perfect movie couple walking off into the sunset.**

Yeah, he's not fully in love with Renée's character yet, but you hope he will be. He still loves the kid. Rod Tidwell [Cuba Gooding Jr.'s character] could get injured the next day and he'd lose every-

by Deborah Baxtrom

thing. There's five seconds when the sun is shining and that's where the movie ends.

**Which is like real life. "Almost Famous" is similar in that you feel good at the end, but there's a lot of sadness in that film. Also, in "Almost Famous" you dealt with the issue of what's illusion and what's reality. In "Vanilla Sky" you seem to take that mix of reality and illusion even further.**

You know, I hadn't even thought about that until you just mentioned it. It's true, though, that "Almost Famous" is about myth versus reality and adapting to the reality. Mostly it's like what you said, real life every day takes you on a roller-coaster ride. My parents used to take me to European movies, as well as Mike Nichols movies, and I grew up loving the sweet and sour, and the happy-sad feeling in music, singer/songwriters that get real personal. I like being a fly on the wall and studying what real life does. Real life takes you on a journey every day, of sadness, happiness and, hopefully, when your head hits the pillow at the end of the day you feel like you've lived your life. That's what I love in movies, when you get transported to a place where you see the dignity in taking that ride.

**And "Vanilla Sky" represents one of those rides?**

This is a very different ride. It has elements that were new to Tom and me, and to Cameron Diaz, and even to Penélope [Cruz], who was in the original [Amenabar film].

**What was new?**

Well, I'd never dealt with death. I've written dying or death scenes into almost every script and they're, like, the first to go. Somebody always takes me for a walk and says, "Buddy, as your friend I gotta tell you, I loved what you wrote until the scene where the guy died." That's when I usually have to begrudgingly admit, [spoken in the voice of a scolded schoolboy] "Yeah, I know, I really didn't need to put a funeral in there." [Laughs.] But this death scene actually has a purpose in the story. So there's that, and there's the whole mind-bending thing. Usually mind-bending stories traffic in super-genre waters. I like the idea that you can be mind-bending emotionally and ... it sounds like a lot of gobbledygook to talk

about it, but actually it's about a love affair, an intense love affair that Tom Cruise's character undergoes. The whole movie is constructed so that as deep as you want to go with it, hopefully, it will meet you there. That's the way that I wanted it to be. I loved the whole "Paul is dead" thing. Is Paul dead? Look for clues, like in the Beatles album. I wanted that experience to happen with this movie so that, as a moviegoer, if you wanted to go out and get coffee with a friend afterwards and get into the layers of the story in a fun way, you could. We didn't want to do it in a pretentious way. It's more like a fun puzzle.

**You've done a good job of keeping the story a secret. There's a certain amount of mystery surrounding this project.**

Well, we made the movie with a minimum of hoopla, which is great. We were lucky enough to have actors that a lot of people knew and it's kind of amazing that last winter, in a time when so much was going on and everyone was rushing to beat the strike, we just quietly made this movie for six weeks in New York and a couple months back here, with big names doing a really personal movie, and not a lot of people were aware that we were even doing it.

**Speaking of New York, the city is a big character in the film, isn't it?**

Yes.

**Will recent events impact the movie in any way?**

No, just that the character of New York in the movie is somebody that ... it feels

like someone you know who's gone through a trauma recently. It's a portrait of New York that is loving and "neighborhood-ish." We didn't change a shot or rush to wipe the World Trade Center out [from the New York City skyline in the film]. New York was really good to us on the shoot. We emptied out Time Square on a Sunday morning to get the shot that opens the movie.

**The crane shot?**

Yeah. It's like "Oh my God, oh my God!" For me it's usually a camera that creeps in a little bit and then creeps out. [Laughs.] Instead, this is a sort of exotic crane shot that keys off of Tom's face. It's the first time I had such a big move [in a film]. I tried to move in "Singles" and a big move that ties everyone together, and we did that 27 times, but the cinematographer finally just said, "Mmm, no. Another movie, not this one." [Laughs.]

**Is the shot cool?**

It's really cool. It's really cool. I'm really proud of it. They said at the time, "Hey, you're never gonna see Time Square empty like this again." The sad, melancholy thing was, you turned on the TV after Sept. 11 and there was the shot. The Square was empty again.

**Wow, yeah. Let's move on to happier things. Was it just as much fun working with Tom Cruise the second time around?**

Yeah. He's an incredibly generous guy to work with, but it was a completely different experience. The whole process of

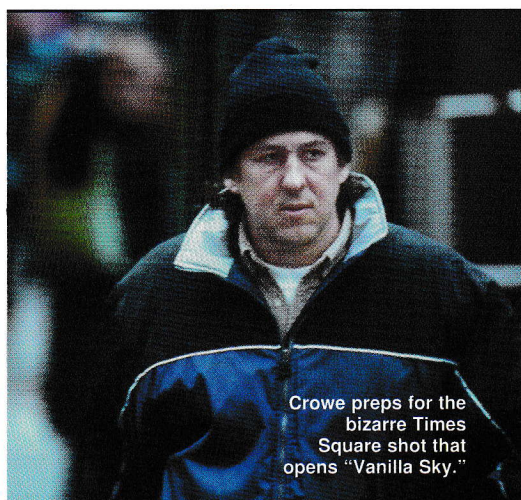


Writer-director Cameron Crowe confers with Tom Cruise on the set of "Vanilla Sky."

writing the script and negotiating the difficult path of actually getting something made is really about two things. One is playing around with the scenes and trying it different ways with actors you really like, and the second is to get into a dark room and put music on it. So that was extremely fun, just like with "Jerry Maguire," but the story's so different that we used different muscles on this one. I like to explore scenes and try things a lot of different ways. And he's such a great guy, all he wants to do is make his director happy. The big joke was, we'd have done a bunch of takes and we'd know we had something great, and I'd say, "You got another one in you?" And he'd say, "I have a thousand more in me." I'll tell you, you get a cold shot in the face after you work with Tom and then you go on to do something else. You're working with somebody and you say, "Got another one in you?" And they're like, "No!" [Laughs.]

**Actors actually say that to you?**  
Sure.

**'One of the things I wanted to do was make a comment about how all of us build our lives and our first loves out of pop culture. It's more ingrained than we even know. You develop a type early on in your life that might or might not be based on somebody you worshiped as a kid from afar on a TV show or something.'**



Crowe preps for the bizarre Times Square shot that opens "Vanilla Sky."

**You played music on the set of "Vanilla Sky," as you did on the sets of "Jerry Maguire" and "Almost Famous." How do you select this music? Does it come to you as you're writing, and what purpose does it serve?**

It serves every aspect, whether it's a piece of music that makes you want to do the movie to begin with, or it influences a scene – you hear it in your head when you're writing it and you know you need that music. Or it's music that you know will just create a feeling on the set. Sometimes it's all the same song. There's a guy who's the associate producer on the movies, Scott Martin, and he's a music freak ... and, a guy named Andy Fisher ... Andy is an absolute music freak too. The three of us amass a ton of music, then Scott stands there with a boom box and plays stuff during scenes, before scenes, to create a mood on the set. Sometimes, like on "Vanilla Sky," the music ends up being the same music used in the movie. You try all this different stuff and you find that the music creates a character for the movie. I've done that ever since "Jerry Maguire" and it's really fun. It's a blast.

**I'll bet the actors love it.**

They pretty much all dig it and respond to it. It really helped Billy Crudup and Kate Hudson [in "Almost Famous"] for sure. Tom loved it. Tom would say, "Maestro," and Scott would start playing something. Sometimes I'd argue with Scott. I'd say, "That's such a bummer, man. Take that off." [Laughs.] Then we'd argue over what music to play and an actor would be standing there in the middle of the take, like, "Guys, guys, guys! I'm acting here. Excuse me, performance?"

**Sounds like a party.**

It can be, but mostly it actually helps it not to be a party. It puts people in a mood to go to some deeper place sometimes.

**Music obviously helps you to create emotional realism, which seems to be important in your films.**

Yeah, I've always loved movies like "Carnal Knowledge," or any number of movies that are stories that ache because they're so raw. "Vanilla Sky" is interesting because Cameron Diaz's character is in a raw emotional state for most of the movie.

**It's almost painful to watch her because of what she's going through.**

It is painful. I thought I had seen her do stuff like this, but I guess I just saw the roots of it because she hadn't fully done a "Carnal Knowledge" sort of part, like Ann-Margaret's part, where someone is achingly raw. You know, she got on a plane from Italy where she was doing the Martin Scorsese movie ["Gangs of New York"] and she had never done two films at once before. With a minimum amount of rehearsal because she was busy, she came in and had to do all these complex, aching scenes in a car, being towed around New York City during the day, in traffic – with Tom Cruise. You know, you just look at her and say, "I'm really sorry I'm putting you through this. Maybe I can help you blot out the world." I thought maybe she needed to do this work in a private place, but she was like, "No, no. Let's go. Let's do it." She was amazing. I would crave to work with her again where she was in every scene.

**She's certainly playing a character we've never seen her play before.**

Well, [her character] has a point, you know? She has a point. Doing a movie about the early '70s ["Almost Famous"], I remember living through the period the first time, and there were a lot of women around, young women who really celebrated the fact that they were having this casual, no-strings-attached sex. At the time you see this and think, wow, what a post-hippie fairy tale. It's amazing that that exists. And then to have made a movie 26 years later about that period, it's so funny how many of the women from that time came out of the woodwork, writing to the Website or calling me up to reminisce about that time. The amazing, shocking, cold water in the face of it was – it was never that casual, even then. They were in love. Giving themselves to these guys was always a big deal. And, no, they never forgot it, even if they were stoned at the time. It was so amazing that it just had me thinking a lot about how the thing that passes between people when they get close or have sex never disappears. Not really. It's true. It's true. It's true. And it shouldn't. It *should* be a sacred thing. It can be fun or it can be frivolous, but it should never be worthless and empty. That's her [Cameron Diaz's character's] point. She goes down making that point, which makes her a hero to me.



Crowe cleared out Times Square one Sunday morning to capture Tom Cruise alone on the streets of Manhattan.

**You use a lot of pop culture symbolism in "Vanilla Sky." Why?**

Well, first let me say that I thought Amenabar's original movie was like a folk song that you could add all kinds of things to. I would never want to touch anybody's story if I didn't think it was open-ended in that way. I mean, I would feel strange about somebody doing most of what I've done. Like "Jerry Maguire," I'd feel weird if somebody remade "Jerry Maguire." But a movie like "Say Anything ..."

**That's a great movie.**

Thanks. It's sort of my favorite of all of them. That's a basic story you could do riffs on. I'm going to answer your question, I promise. The original movie, [Amenabar's] "Open Your Eyes," was so open-ended that one of the things I wanted to do was make a comment about how all of us build our lives and our first loves out of pop culture. It's more ingrained than we even know. You develop a type early on in your life that might or might not be based on some-

body you worshiped as a kid from afar on a TV show or something. I wanted to get that into the film. So there's a lot of subliminal stuff in "Vanilla Sky" about how pop culture creates who we are, beginning with the Time Square sequence, which is sort of a dream where Tom Cruise is buried under an avalanche of pop culture.

**Some filmmakers avoid pop cultural references for fear they'll date the film.**

It's true, pop culture references just for the sake of being groovy and of-the-minute are often deadly. Then Tarantino came along and gave pop culture references, like, an epic quality, in "Pulp Fiction" for example. But you've got to be careful. Sometimes doing too much pop culture referencing, or craving pop culture adulation for something ... you can get caught begging.

**You avoided that in "Almost Famous." It didn't come across as '70s corny.**

Thanks. I appreciate that. It's always so tempting because it's the easiest thing in the world to put pop culture references

in something you're writing.

**Actually, your films have contributed some pop culture references of their own, like "Show me the money," [from "Jerry Maguire"] and "I know that dude," [from "Fast Times At Ridgemont High."]**

That was Sean Penn's improv, that one. It's fun when it happens. It doesn't happen a lot. Every time I've secretly thought there was something in one of the movies that could find its way into pop culture, it never happened. So I just gave up even thinking about that pretty early on. And then, oddly enough, every once in a while something I had no idea would pop through did. You never know. Someone calls you up one night and says, "George Bush just said 'Show us the money'." And you go, "Whoa!" [Laughs.]

**Maybe "Vanilla Sky" will contribute a new pop aphorism. The film has been testing through the roof, and some people on the Internet are saying it's the best movie they've ever seen.**

Really? I'm going to have to go online and read that. [Laughs.] Yeah, we've had a couple of good test screenings, and the great thing is that people want to talk about it afterward. It's a complex puzzle to edit. We've been trying different things.

**Are you shooting additional scenes, or is that just a rumor?**

That happened, actually, things that we've always wanted. Originally there was a list of, like, 74 shots for inserts and things, and then it became much shorter. We just went in and did it. It was actually really fun because we knew exactly what we needed. It was cool to be that guy who says, "OK, I want the camera over here. We gotta do this, this and this, and we gotta see the light come moving around, and then, okay, cut, that's all I need." [Laughs.] I've never been that guy, so it was fun to do it.

**Which do you enjoy more, directing or writing?**

The other. Whatever I'm doing at the time, the other one.

**Do you think there's a central theme that runs through your movies?**

I think it's true of any director, even if they didn't write it. Your personality comes out whether you try to hide it or not. Even if you say, "I'm going to do a strict genre movie and be a colorless guy." Even if only through your desire to try to be colorless, it reflects who you are. The tough thing is to say who you

think you are, [laughs], that is, in terms of answering the question. You become self-aware. It's weird to be the person who says, "I'm about this." Basically, if there's a through-line at all it's a love of being a fly on the wall and watching the way people really behave with each other, and hopefully the humanity that comes out, for better or worse, as people reveal themselves.

**Do you still want to work with Johnny Depp? You've been quoted as saying he's someone you'd like to work with.**

Yeah, I love Johnny Depp. I'm the last person he hasn't worked with at this point. [Laughs.]

**Anybody else you'd like to work with?**

I'd like to work with Tilda Swinton again [Swinton has a small role in "Vanilla Sky"]. And I want to work with Noah Taylor again. He's great. [Taylor is in "Vanilla Sky" and "Almost Famous."]

**What scares you the most?**

Hmm. Good question. Probably the same thing that delights, like showing your movie for the first time in public. I called Billy Wilder once, the day before we started shooting ... I think it was "Almost Famous." I thought, for good luck it would be great to give him a call. I mean, I had his phone number...why not use it? So I called him up and he said, "How you doin'?" I said, "I'm nervous. I'm starting the movie tomorrow. Weren't you nervous the day before you started shooting?" And he said, [Crowe mimics Wilder's Austrian accent] "No,

no. I am no nervous the day I start shooting. I am nervous only when I have to film a scene that I have not yet written, and only an empty page exists and I must film this. That scares me. And also the first public preview, that scares me the most." And he's right.

**You've said that you get your mother's advice on your scripts. How does she help you?**

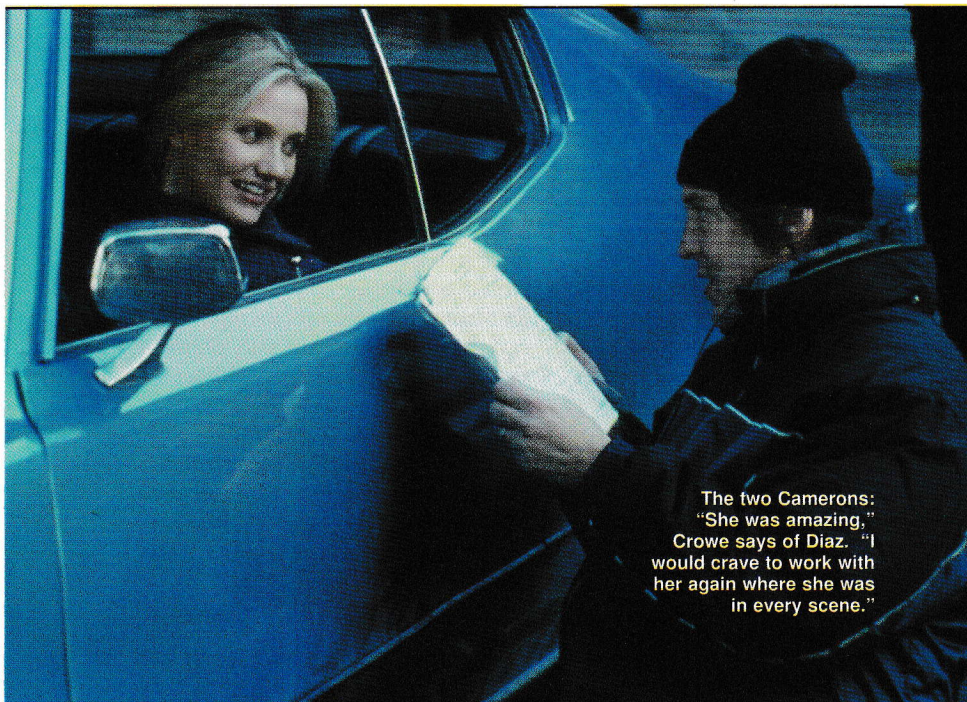
She's an amazing editor, and she really knows my sensibility, probably because she helped create it. We love all the same things in terms of what affects you in movies or people. She can be tough and really smart about how, if you're cutting yourself too much slack and not digging deep enough to do something truly from your heart, she'll bust you on it, which is great. Once I was so exhausted from something I was doing, and I had taken on this assignment to write about Pearl Jam for *Rolling Stone*. I had never written anything for David Frick before. I really like David Frick and he was the editor. I wrote a 73-page piece that was supposed to be, like, 4,000 words. [Laughter.] It was 73 pages and I couldn't cut it because I was exhausted. So I sent it to my mom. She read the whole thing and edited it. It was a peak experience in terms of how much somebody can help you by knowing who you are.

**Now that's love. Most moms wouldn't want to read a 73-page article on a rock band.**

[Laughs.] At the time she's, like, 77 and she's reading about Pearl Jam. She calls me two days later and says, "I really like Stone's quote here at the top. I think you can move that close to the lead. All this stuff where Eddie's talking about superstardom isn't worthwhile. I think it's BS. He's obviously obsessed with it or he wouldn't be talking so much about it. Don't put everyone through it. Cut it!" She knew all this stuff and she cut the piece down to 24 pages and did it all herself. That's my mom. She was in the editing room last night looking at the version of the editing [of "Vanilla Sky"] and giving me notes. It's fun. It's the way you do it with your friends, except she happens to be my mom.

**When does "Vanilla Sky" open?**

Like in about a minute. [Laughs.] Dec. 14. I hope you like it.



The two Camerons:  
"She was amazing."  
Crowe says of Diaz. "I  
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