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[SIFF '08 Reviews: Swingtime, or How Van Morrison saved The Last Waltz, and The Wrecking Crew created the hits you love](#)

by Chris Estey



While not an official part of the special [Face The Music](#) series included in the [Seattle International Film Festival](#) this year — it is instead in the sterling line-up for the United Artists tribute and ran before the official showings start this week — Seattle music fans came to be enthralled by the screening of [The Last Waltz](#) on May 13.

Filmed on Thanksgiving Day in 1976, at The Band's supposed retirement party, the documentary is a combination history and celebration of The Band, the Canadian group that recorded some of the best North American-themed music ever, and was the backing band for Bob Dylan in his millennially-important late 60s-early 70s firebrand period. *The Last Waltz* is considered one of the most important and beautiful rock documentaries ever made. How could it not be, it was made by the cinematic champion Martin Scorsese just before he directed the evolutionary-stylistic *Raging Bull*, so it oozed class and mad skills from everyone. The Band by themselves are a joy to watch, being effortless craftsman of folk-rock-soul-everything grooves, as deeply entrenched in Appalachia summers as they are hung-over in Nova Scotia winters. More than this, and the usual selling point, is that the film featured the poetic royalty of the previous decade or so of the rock scene guest starring as vocalists for over two-thirds of the performances. The songs by Neil Young, Emmylou Harris, The Staples, and Dr. John are enough for me to have bought the DVD.

But you know what? I find it largely resistible. It seems like a party for the cool kids, who are much more talented than you are and can afford a whole lot more of the cocaine than you can to fuel those gifts.

However, there is one performance that has withstood the test of time completely: Van Morrison coming out and just slaughtering the entire humongous Winterland venue where the event was held with a scalding performance of "Caravan," his signature tune off of his *Moondance* album. That album itself was considered a bit of a sell-out in its day, compared with the masterpiece 'Astral Weeks' that came before, but in that one song he truly rocked your gypsy soul — which is what he does here, right near the end of *The Last Waltz*, and with his short hair and end-of-song drunken kicks and most of all flippant growls, it feels like punk's just about to happen — which it was, when the Sex Pistols played Winterland as their last show in America just a short time later.

I recommend picking up the new DVD *Van Morrison: Under Review 1964-1974* (MVD) to find out how this Celtic soul man took the dangers of a decaying Belfast and made it all swing. It will set you up for why his performance in *The Last Waltz* is far from the self-aggrandizing perfection of most of the rest of the performers; how he was willing to die and reborn in his music again and again in all those classic albums so that he never sounded "classic." Stuffed with great footage and critical debate by friends and biographers, this is one of the best in the Under Review series — which I was ecstatic to discover right after being turned into human soup by seeing Morrison redeem *The Last Waltz*.



Speaking of swinging, and back to the terrific *Face The Music* part of the SIFF program this year, one of my very favorite films in the series is [The Wrecking Crew](#). Meet some behind-the-scene geniuses who could instantly lay down great tracks for everyone from Frank Sinatra to The Byrds.

Really nicely directed by Denny Tedesco, loving son of late WC guitarist Tommy Tedesco, *The Wrecking Crew* is in fact already one of my very favorite rock documentaries. You may have never heard of Carol Kaye, Hal Blaine, Joe Osborn, or Earl Palmer, but trust me, you love their music as much as the big names in The Band's cherished kiss-off. They were the Los Angeles-based session players for everything from Sonny & Cher's "The Beat Goes On" to pretty much anything The Association ever recorded to being the actual players on the Beach Boy's adored *Pet Sounds*. And on and on and on. Kaye herself, an insanely brilliant bass player and pretty much the only gal in a pack of guys who were used to getting up at 7 AM and recording for Decca, Capitol, and doing jingles before heading to record for Brian Wilson at midnight, is a whole story in herself (she actually lives in the Seattle area, which isn't mentioned in the movie). Her incredibly nimble playing is displayed, as is the focused wisdom of jazz great Earl Palmer, who adeptly bashed his way through thousands of garage rock songs you love without ever getting credit — well, none of them got any credit in public (sleeve notes, etc.). That's not how things were done. They were pros and knew that; and besides, guys like David Crosby were a little pissed that they weren't allow to play on their own records. That would soon change, however.

There are tragedies; remarkably-intuitive drummer-arranger Blaine's costly divorces that led him from mansions and yachts to working as a security guard in Arizona within just a couple years with the decline of a need for session players, for one. But there are the triumphs too, most of which have to do with people like Cher and Dick Clark giving this group — which no one knows the exact number of, from the core half dozen interviewed here to about thirty making the studio rounds back in the day — just about all the props for Phil Spector's and many others' manic pop thrilling millions. I know there's sexier things to gravitate to during the Festival, but you will be the sharpest kid on your block if you don't miss *The Wrecking Crew* when it plays later this month, and you will know some very startling secrets about the music so many love.

Screening Times:

Harvard Exit	Friday May 23, 2008	Buy tickets
	9:30 PM	
	Monday May 26, 2008	Buy tickets
	4:00 PM	

Trailer:

Check out other movies in the [Face the Music series](#) and look to the [KEXP Blog](#) for more reviews.

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