

Can Cameron Crowe still rock it?

After a seven-year hiatus from cinema, the *Almost Famous* director is back in the spotlight with new comedy-drama *We Bought a Zoo*. Rob Garratt asks whether the rock'n'roll mastermind can still strike a chord with his fans



Matt Damon and Scarlett Johansson
in Crowe's new flick

Cameron Crowe has a claim to being the most rock'n'roll director in Hollywood – although you might not know it. The 54-year-old is best known for directing teary unions between perfect Hollywood couples: Orlando Bloom and Kirsten Dunst in *Elizabethtown* (2005), and Tom Cruise and Renée Zellweger in Oscar-winning mega-smash *Jerry Maguire* (1997). But delve a little deeper and Crowe's roots as a former *Rolling Stone* contributing editor become clear.

He's the most rock'n'roll director in literal terms, at least. During his decade as one of America's top music scribes he conducted long, probing interviews with rock aristocracy including Neil Young and Joni Mitchell, and toured the US backstage with Led Zeppelin and The Allman Brothers Band – experiences he delved into with his heavily-autographical (and perhaps best) movie *Almost Famous* in 2000.

Yet to keen observers, Crowe's rock roots were exposed long before that. His first minor hit, *Singles* (1992), was (another) rom-com set in the heart of Seattle's grunge scene. It even featured a cameo from three members of Pearl Jam. Crowe subsequently made a beeline for more popcorn-friendly territory – his protagonists grew up with him into sports agents and shoe designers. But recent years have

seen Crowe return to his rock roots. He hasn't made a cinematic feature since *Elizabethtown* seven years ago, instead busying himself last year with excellent music biopics of Elton John (*The Union*) and the anniversary celebration *Pearl Jam Twenty*.



Which makes *We Bought a Zoo*, starring heavyweights Matt Damon and Scarlett Johansson, something to look forward to. On paper; all the ingredients are there. The script is the meatiest thing he's tackled in years (aside from neatly rushing over any 'personal difficulties' in the Pearl Jam biopic), and easily as challenging as psychological thriller *Vanilla Sky* in 2001. That was a brave remake of

contemporary Spanish movie *Abre Los Ojos*, which put the original film's star, Penélope Cruz, alongside a Tom Cruise surprisingly willing to appear ugly and deformed for most of the film (it's also, reportedly, where the duo's now-defunct three-year relationship began to bloom).

We Bought a Zoo is based on the memoirs of Benjamin Mae, a former columnist of British broadsheet *The Guardian*, who spent Dhs4 million buying Dartmoor Zoological Park

bands (the soundtrack went on to be a classic introduction to the genre). *Jerry Maguire* used '70s rock reference points – The Rolling Stones, Neil Young, The Who – to paint a picture of a washed-up man behind the times. *Elizabethtown* was lent a vintage road-trip feel courtesy of a carefully culled collection of contemporary alt-country (think Ryan Adams). And the soundtrack to *Almost Famous* was a patchwork of hazily-remembered, rose-tinted Americana from Crowe's youth: Elton John, Cat Stevens and Simon & Garfunkel were wheeled out without feeling remotely hackneyed. Crowe and his wife Nancy Wilson, the former guitarist in rock band Heart, even penned some make-believe hits for fictional on-screen band Stillwater.

Yet perhaps most effective soundtrack of all was *Vanilla Sky*, which used tunes by cult Icelandic soundscapers Sigur Rós to create the unnerving, dreamlike mood at the heart of the film's premise about artificial life after death. It's this sound-theme, if you will, that Crowe is revisiting in *...Zoo*, which has been given a fresh album-length score by Sigur Rós lead singer Jónsi. Judging by the form of the band's recent concert film, *Inni* (screened at last year's Dubai Film Festival), the score is likely to be an aching cycle of sustained drones and epic, dreamy sound collages.

On this evidence, all the elements are in place to ensure *We Bought a Zoo* is a hit. The plot is both novel

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in the UK and reopening it to the public a year later. His book was not a happy tale. As well as the high-jinx of tigers breaking loose, the money ran out, family tensions rose with his two children, and his wife suffered a potentially fatal brain tumour.

Regardless of the subject matter, the best thing about any Crowe film is invariably the soundtrack, each one a masterclass in a particular genre and cultural milieu that helps to serve the consistent mood of his movies. *Singles* was sown together with its on-the-pulse collection of made-it and about-to-make-it Seattle grunge

and sparked by real life, much like career-high *Almost Famous*. And it's certainly not just another rom-com. Elsewhere, despite our reservations about meathead Matt Damon, we know he's putting the effort in and seems to have upped his game since graduating from two films under Clint Eastwood's direction: *Invictus* (2009) and *Hereafter* (2010). And even if the plot itself fails to get the crowds going, at least we know the soundtrack will be good. *We Bought a Zoo* is in UAE cinemas from Thursday March 1. Read our review on the opposite page.