

Tom, Thanks for That Thing You Do!

April 15, 2020

THAT THING YOU DO! (1996)

Directed by Tom Hanks

Written by Tom Hanks

Starring Tom Everett Scott, Liv Tyler, & Tom Hanks as Mr. White

When I was twelve, I clung to a MusicStop flyer for months. I think it was MusicStop, before they were bought-out by the national distributor. I remember the flyer was one of the meaty ones, with hefty, glossy paper and a sophisticated staple-binding. All the pages dedicated to mixing consoles, synthesizers, brass, and woodwinds might as well have been the requisite cologne and tobacco ads of every other magazine. All that mattered to me were the electric guitars; the Chuck Berry-lookin' one of perfect crimson symmetry, the sunburst Epiphone which was the least expensive, the Gibson SG with blood-red devil horns. I knew what they cost to rent or purchase and I had exactly no plan for how to make one of them mine. Maybe my flunking from soccer at six and piano at eight was what gave my mother pause, and maybe that was reasonable, but I still remember her saying, "You just want to be a rock star, you'd have to want to work." This is true, but I knew I couldn't let it deter me. When I was fourteen, she took a chance on my willingness to work and bought me an acoustic starter kit and ten lessons at the Conservatory. I went there for three years, and stopped when I'd accrued enough autonomy to continue learning alone. In my late teens, I'd drag guitars around to school and friends' houses. I was one of those, never great at it, never terrible. It's neither my passion nor my burden, it's just comfortably been a thing about me for the latter half of my twenty-eight years. I still go in and out of it.

The last guitar I bought was courtesy of a whim I nursed for less than a day. It was a vintage 1963 Silvertone Danelectro with a single lipstick pick-up and a glittery black finish. It's what they call *parlor-sized* and it sings like a bird. It's apparently one of those makes that cost nickels in their day, but it's held up as a well-crafted machine. Still, you almost never see them played by pros. I once used our mutual Silvertone playership to break the ice in an interview with Serena Ryder. They're not precious or historically significant, but there's some character to them, and they *did* make a charming cameo in 1996's *That Thing You Do*, written and directed by debut film auteur Tom Hanks. In the movie about a band of teenage pop-rockers in the 60's, the Silvertone is played by Lenny (Steve Zahn), and he wears it like Archie, and it fits like flower-print vinyl upholstery. Lenny's only a peripheral side-foil and, for a good portion of the film, the band itself is the lead character. But the most developed member, the ultimate hero, is Guy Patterson (Tom Everett Scott), jazz-percussion enthusiast and perfect, bouncy encapsulation of Young TH Energy. The only person he reminds me of more is the kid who played Josh Baskin in *Big*. The likeness is uncanny, and I have to imagine it's how he got the part. Tom must have seen something he recognized in Tom.

Setting the scene for this period piece was not solely on one set of shoulders (though TH served as a jack of many trades). Perhaps the most important element, for selling the era, is the effective crafting of the song - the Oneders-turned-Wonders' one hit, *That Thing You Do*. This job was left to Adam Schlesinger, who was not only a master of pop craftsmanship, more specifically, he could emulate any essential sonic quality. When he wrote Stacy's Mom, he was attempting the sound like The Cars; when he wrote for Crazy Ex-Girlfriend, it was a contemporary Broadway style he chased; when he wrote *That Thing You Do*, the goal was to call up the past, and recreate the bubbly, harmonic, commercial ditties of the 1960's - and he nailed it. This month, Schlesinger died from complications due to COVID19, and the world of art is smaller without him in it. As TH Tweeted, "There would be no Playtone without [him]."

Playtone is the fictional record label to which The Oneders are signed, and paired with obligatory sleazy band-flick manager, Mr. White, played by the writer-director. He's not outwardly villainous so much as symbolic of the villainy of corporate structure and artifice. Having worked just *outside* the music business, I suspect some version of Mr. White exists in real life, though the independence of artists, thankfully, has grown more commonplace. In my experience, these reps are friendly-if-sleepy plaid-dads with Stella Artois and Prime Times in the hatchback. Sometimes they make you check your phones, and insist on Instagram veto-power. Sometimes they'd clearly rather be anywhere else. Usually they're just folks at work.

Cast honourable mentions include Charlize Theron, Giovanni Ribisi, Peter Scolari, Rita Wilson, Chris Isaak, Kevin Pollack, Clint Howard, Paul Feig, Bryan Cranston, Bill Cobbs, and Colin Hanks. This can either speak to the magic TH could always conjure, or the luck that's always tailed him. But there is essentially nothing wrong with this movie; no casting imperfect, no exchange untrue, no visual any less than engrossing. It's sweet but not trite, light but not frivolous, celebratory but not negligent. More than ever, we have so much for which to thank Tom. In grade twelve, my friend Duncan and I liked a band called The Weakerthans. I learned their song One Great City on guitar and I remember being excited for him to hear it. But somewhere in the following summer, I stopped being someone who dragged guitars to friends' houses. But I clung to those lyrics and muscle memories like a ragged MusicStop flyer for the next ten years, and last summer, at the after-party of Duncan's wedding, I played it for him. Not half bad, if I'm honest. I'm no Oneder, but I'm not a one-hit wonder either. And I'm no Tom Hanks or Adam Schlesinger, but I think I conjured the magic of calling up the past.

Thx!