

Response to *Almost Famous*

In 2001, Cameron Crowe won an Academy Award for Best Screenplay for *Almost Famous*. In writing this semi-autobiographical screenplay, Crowe used both his lived experiences and his imagination to create an entertaining comedy that possesses humor; pathos; and a complex, meaningful form.

Response Prompt: What do you think is the importance of _____ in *Almost Famous*?

How does this element of the story contribute to or illuminate the movie's humor, pathos, form, impact, and meaning?

- **Choose any element of the movie to discuss.**
- **Then write an intelligent response of at least 500 words in which you discuss specific, significant details from the film to illustrate your ideas.**

1. A Key Line of Dialogue

Choose any line of dialogue from the movie, and explain how this line is central to the impact, meaning, & artistic unity of the film. (Examine the list of quotations found in Part 2 of this document. You may use any of these quotations OR any other quotation from the film that you think is important.)

Why does this line appear in the movie? Does this line connect to any important motif in the movie; does this line illuminate or reference any other key scenes and characters?

2. "I hurt the flower."

Why is this specific line (and the scene in which it appears) in the movie? Does this line connect to any important motif in the movie; does this line illuminate or reference any other key scenes and characters in the movie?

3. Being "Cool"

"One day, you'll be cool." —Anita Miller to William

"I know. It sounds great. But these people are not your friends. You know, these are people who want you to write sanctimonious stories about the genius of rock stars, and they will ruin rock and roll and strangle everything we love about it. Right? And then it just becomes an industry of . . . cool."

—Lester Bangs to William

"Just make us look cool." —Russell Hammond to William

What exactly does it mean to be "cool," and how does this concept play a significant role in the film and illuminate the story's meaning?

4. A Key Scene or Image

Choose any scene or image from the movie, and explain how this scene or image is central to the impact, meaning, & artistic unity of the film.

Why does this scene or image appear in the movie? Does this scene or image connect to any important motif in the movie; does this scene or image illuminate or reference any *other* key scenes and characters in the movie?

5. A Pair or a Trio

Almost Famous is filled with many **twos and threes**—pairs, parallels, and polar opposites; as well as trios. Choose an interesting, significant pair or trio in the movie, and discuss its importance.

6. Using and Being Used

In what ways is *Almost Famous* a film about how human beings use other people and are used by other people? Discuss how this concept applies to specific characters and relationships portrayed in the film. In contrast, are there any relationships or characters in the film to whom this concept does not apply? How does this issue illuminate the movie and its moral concerns for us?

7. Elaine Miller & Lester Bangs

In what ways are Elaine Miller and Lester Bangs foil characters? What do they have in common, and what is different about them? (Of course, be sure to address each character's relationship with William.)

8. William Miller and Penny Lane

In what ways are William Miller and Penny Lane foil characters? What do they have in common, and what is different about them? (Of course, be sure to address each character's relationship with William.)

9. William's Moral Ambiguity

Discuss the moral ambiguity of William Miller's role as both fan/friend of the band and journalist working for *Rolling Stone* magazine. In what ways are his loyalties either clear and simple or ambiguous and complex?

10. Honesty, Truth, and Lies

"This is a house of lies!" –Anita Miller

How does the theme of truth—and the discrepancy between reality versus appearance or perception—play a central role in *Almost Famous*? Who in the film is deceived, and who is not? Who does the deceiving? Which characters in the film are what they seem, and which are not what they seem? Who in the film is particularly truthful or honest, and who is particularly deceptive or dishonest? Are any characters completely truthful and honest, or is everyone in the film, in some way, not who they appear to be, and less than totally honest? Which deception and dishonesty is intentional and problematic, and which is acceptable, understandable, even inevitable?

11. The Love of Music

These are the last lines of dialogue in the film:

William: So Russell, what do you love about music?

Russell: To begin with, everything.

In what ways is *Almost Famous* a story about music and about the pure love of music—as well as being a story about other perhaps less "pure" (or even "corrupt") aspects of life and human nature that contrast with the pure love of music.

12. A Significant Nuance (i.e., An Apparently Superficial Detail That Actually Carries Great Meaning)

There are many elements and details in *Almost Famous* that might have been included merely for their entertainment value, but that on closer inspection, seem directly connected to the inner structure of the story and the motifs woven throughout it. **What is at least one such element—a detail that on the surface may seem unimportant, but that is actually essential to the larger impact and meaning of the story? Why is this detail important?**

See the next page for useful quotations from the movie.

Almost Famous – Key Quotations

Elaine Miller: Atticus Finch, oh that makes me feel so good.

William Miller: I like him.

Elaine Miller: Why?

William Miller: Well, he's honest, he stands up for the right things, and he's a good father.

Anita Miller: First it was butter then it was sugar and white flour, bacon, eggs, bologna, rock 'n roll, motorcycles. Then! It was celebrating Christmas on a day in September when you knew it wouldn't be commercialized! What else are you gonna ban!?

Elaine Miller: Honey, you want to rebel against knowledge; I'm trying to give you the Cliff Notes on how to live life in this world.

Anita Miller: We're like nobody else I know!

Elaine Miller: I am a college professor. Why can't I teach my own kids? Use me!

Anita Miller: Darryl says that you use knowledge to keep me down. He says I'm a "Yes" person and you are trying to raise us in a "No" environment.

Elaine Miller: Well, clearly "No" is a word Darryl doesn't hear much.

Anita Miller: I can't live here! I hate you! Even William hates you!

Young William: I don't hate her.

Anita Miller: You do hate her! You don't even know the truth.

Elaine Miller: Sweetheart, don't be a drama queen.

Anita Miller: Feck you!

Elaine Miller: Hey!

Anita Miller: This is a house of lies!

Elaine Miller: Well there it is, your sister used the "F" word.

William Miller: I think she said "feck."

Elaine Miller: What's the difference?

William Miller: The letter "u."

Anita Miller: You've robbed him of an adolescence.

Elaine Miller: Adolescence is a marketing tool.

Anita Miller: [to William] Honey, I know you were expecting puberty, but you're just going to have to shine it on for a little while.

Elaine Miller: Who needs a crowd? Who puts such a high premium on being typical? [to William] You're unique. Take those extra years and do what you want. Go to Europe for a year. Take a look around. See what you like. Follow your dream. You'll still be the youngest lawyer in the country. Your dad was so proud of you. He knew you were a predominantly accelerated child.

Anita Miller: What about me?

Elaine Miller: You are rebellious and ungrateful of my love.

Anita Miller: This song explains why I'm leaving home to become a stewardess.

Elaine Miller: We can't talk? We have to listen to rock music?

Anita Miller: [last words to Young William before leaving home] One day, you'll be cool.

Lester Bangs: Jim Morrison? He's a drunken buffoon posing as a poet. Ah, give me the Guess Who. Come on, they've got the courage to be drunken buffoons, which makes them poetic.

Lester Bangs: So, you're the kid who's been sending me those articles from your school newspaper.

William Miller: Yeah. Yeah. I've been doing some stuff for a local underground paper, too.

Lester Bangs: What, are you like the star of your school?

William Miller: They hate me.

Lester Bangs: You'll meet them all again on their long journey to the middle.

Lester Bangs: You like Lou Reed?

William Miller: The early stuff. In his new stuff he's trying to be Bowie. He should just be himself.

Lester Bangs: You take drugs?

William Miller: No.

Lester Bangs: Smart kid. I used to do speed. Like twenty-five pages of dribble just to fuckin' write. [*lengthy beat*] I can't just stand here all day talking to my many fans.

Lester Bangs: You know 'cause once you go to L.A., you're gonna have friends like crazy, but they're gonna be fake friends. You know, they're gonna try to corrupt you. You know, and you've got an honest face, and they're gonna tell you everything. But you cannot make friends with the rock stars.

William Miller: Okay.

Lester Bangs: If you're gonna be a true journalist—you know, a rock journalist—first, you'll never get paid much. But you will get free records from the record company. [*Looks at William*] Nothin' about you that is controversial, man. God, it's gonna get ugly, man. They're gonna buy you drinks, you're gonna meet girls, they're gonna try to fly you places for free, offer you drugs. I know. It sounds great. But these people are not your friends. You know, these are people who want you to write sanctimonious stories about the genius of rock stars, and they will ruin rock and roll and strangle everything we love about it. Right? And then it just becomes an industry of . . . cool.

Lester Bangs: Hey, you have to make your reputation on being honest and . . . you know, unmerciful.

William Miller: [*taking notes*] Honest. Unmerciful.

Lester Bangs: And if you get into a jam, you can call me. [*beat*] I stay up late.

Elaine Miller: Look at this—an entire generation of Cinderellas, and there's no slipper coming.

William Miller: [*on meeting Stillwater*] Russell. Jeff. Ed. Larry. I really love your band. I think the song "Fever Dog" is a big step forward for you guys. And you guys producing it yourselves, instead of Glyn Johns, that was the right thing to do. And Russell, Russell, the guitar sound... is incendiary. Incendiary. Way to go. [*He turns to leave. The band members regard one another for a moment*]

Russell Hammond: Well, hey man, don't stop there!

Jeff Bebe: Yeah, come back here! I'm incendiary, too, man!

Jeff Bebe: Some people have a hard time explaining rock 'n' roll. I don't think anyone can really explain rock 'n' roll. Maybe Pete Townshend, but that's okay. Rock 'n' roll is a lifestyle and a way of thinking . . . and it's not about money and popularity. Although, some money would be nice. But it's a voice that says, "Here I am . . . and fuck you if you can't understand me." And one of these people is gonna save the world. And that means that rock 'n' roll can save the world . . . all of us together. And the chicks are great. But what it all comes down to is that thing. The indefinable thing when people catch something from your music.

Penny Lane: How old are you?

William Miller: Eighteen.

Penny Lane: Me too! How old are we really?

William Miller: Seventeen.

Penny Lane: Me too!

William Miller: Actually, I'm sixteen.

Penny Lane: Me too. Isn't it funny? The truth just sounds different.

William Miller: I'm fifteen. What's your real name?

Penny Lane: I'll never tell.

Penny Lane: Call me if you need a rescue; we live in the same city.

William Miller: I think I live in a different world.

Penny Lane: Speaking of the world, I've made a decision. I'm gonna live in Morocco for one year. I need a new crowd. Do you wanna come?

William Miller: Yes! Yeah. Yeah.

Penny Lane: Are you sure?

William Miller: Ask me again.

Penny Lane: Do you wanna come?

William Miller: Yes! Yes.

Penny Lane: I always tell the girls: “Never take it seriously; if you never take it seriously, you never get hurt; if you never get hurt, you always have fun; and if you ever get lonely, you just go to the record store and visit your friends.”

William Miller: So, you and Russell—

Penny Lane: No. Russell has a girlfriend, and I can’t even say her name.

Penny Lane: It’s all happening, and I’ve got you as protection.

Polexia Aphrodisia: [*to William watching Penny Lane*] Act One, in which she pretends she doesn't care about him.

Polexia Aphrodisia: [*sees Russell strumming his guitar and staring at Penny*] Act Two, in which he pretends he doesn't care about her, but he goes right for her.

Polexia Aphrodisia: [*Russell goes to Penny*] Act Three, in which it all plays out the way she planned it. She'll eat him alive.

William Miller: We’ve gotta stop them.

Polexia Aphrodisia: Stop them? You were her excuse for coming here.

Lester Bangs: Stillwater?! Beware, beware of *Rolling Stone* magazine because they will change your story, they’ll rewrite it, you know, turn it into swill.

William Miller: But besides that. What would be wrong with it?

Lester Bangs: You’ve got starry eyes, my friend. Uh, look, uh, do the story. Who cares, you know, it’ll be good for you. Remember this: don’t do it to make friends with people who are going to use you to, ah, further the big business desire to glorify worthless rock stars like Stillwater. You know, don’t let those swill merchants rewrite you.

Jeff Bebe: I’m worried, man.

Russell Hammond: No, you can trust him. He’s a fan.

Jeff Bebe: But it’s *Rolling Stone*. He looks harmless but he does represent the magazine that trashed “Layla,” broke up Cream, ripped every album Led Zeppelin ever made. Don’t forget the rules, man. This little shit is the enemy. He writes what he sees. [*beat*] Although it would be cool to be on the cover.

Elaine Miller: May I speak with William, please?

Sapphire: He's still down in the bar with the band. They just got back from the radio station. Is this Maryann with the pot?... Hello?

Elaine Miller: No, this is not Maryann with the pot. This is Elaine. His mother. Could you give William a message for me, please? Tell him to call home immediately, and also tell him, I KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON.

Sapphire: All right. But I'm just going to say this, and I'm going to stand by it: you should be really proud of him. 'Cause I know men, and I'll bet you do too. And he respects women, and he likes women, and let's just pause and appreciate a man like that. You created him out of thin air, you know, you raised him right, he’s having a great time, he's doing a good job, and don't worry—he's still a virgin. And we're all looking out for him, you know? And that's more than I've ever said to my own parents, so there you go. [*beat*] This is the maid speaking, by the way.

Sheldon the Desk Clerk: Are you Mr. Miller?

William Miller: Yeah.

Sheldon the Desk Clerk: [*politely*] You have a message from Elaine, your mother. [*pause*] She's a handful.

William Miller: I know.

Sheldon the Desk Clerk: [*seriously*] She freaked me out.

Russell Hammond: Look, ah, I trust you so I’m just going to lay this right on you. Just make us look cool.

William Miller: I will quote you warmly and accurately.

Russell Hammond: Well, that’s what I’m worried about. You see some of us, have got girlfriends back home, you know? Some of us have wives. And some of the people you meet on the road are really amazing people.

[*William is transfixed by looking at Penny, who is across the courtyard and blowing kisses at Russell. Then Russell turns to William.*] Like you. But some of the stuff that happens, it’s good for a few people to know about as opposed to, say, a million people. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?

William Miller: Yeah.

Russell Hammond: You see I grew up with these guys, and I can't play all that I can play. I'm past them as musicians, but the more popular we get, the bigger their houses get, the more responsibilities, the pressure, you know, the harder it gets for me to walk out on them. What am I doing? I am telling secrets to the one guy you don't tell secrets to.

William Miller: No, no, we'll, we'll do the interview tomorrow.

Russell Hammond: Okay. So tonight it's, huh, friends. We trust you.

Jeff Bebe: I can't say any more with the writer here.

Russell Hammond: No, no, no. You can trust him, you can say whatever you want.

Jeff Bebe: I work just as hard or harder than anybody on that stage. You know what I do? I connect. I get people off. I look for the guy who isn't getting off, and I make him get off. *[to William]* Actually, *that* you can print!

Russell Hammond: From here on out, I am only interested in what is real. Real people, real feelings, that's it, that's all I'm interested in.

Russell Hammond: You, Aaron, are what it's all about. You're real. Your room is real. Your friends are real. Real, man, real. You know? Real. You're more important than all the silly machinery. Silly machinery. And you know it! In eleven years it's going to be 1984, man. Think about that!

Aaron from Topeka: Wanna see me feed a mouse to my snake?

Russell Hammond: Yes.

Russell Hammond: I am a golden god! *[The crowd cheers, with fans saying things like "You rock!" and "I love you, Russell!"]* I am a golden god! *[The crowd cheers even more loudly.]*

William Miller: Hey Russell, don't jump!

Russell Hammond: And you can tell Rolling Stone magazine that my last words were *[lengthy beat]*... I'm on drugs! *[crowd cheers]*

William Miller: Russell! Russell! I think we should work on those last words!

Russell Hammond: Okay, oh, I got it, I got it, I got it, I got it, I got it. This is better. Last words *[lengthy beat]* I dig music. *[a few weak claps and lukewarm cheers]* I'm on drugs! *[crowd cheers]*

William Miller: Just come on down and we'll go back to the hotel.

Russell Hammond: Okay. *[Russell backs away from the edge. The crowd is disappointed, someone says, "Jump!" and others begin to chant it. Then Russell turns and leaps off the roof.]*

Dick Roswell: He only means half of what he says.

William Miller: Which half?

Russell Hammond: I hurt the flower.

[Everyone riding on the bus—except for Ed, the drummer—is singing along to "Tiny Dancer" by Elton John]

William Miller: I have to go home.

Penny Lane: You are home.

Polexia Aphrodisia: Let's deflower the kid.

William Miller: Don't you have any regular friends?

Penny Lane: Famous people are just more interesting.

William Miller: Well, I would be worried that they were using me. Not that they're using you.

Penny Lane: You know, if this were the real world. . .

Elaine Miller: It's not too late for you to become a person of substance, Russell.

Russell Hammond: *[to William]* Look, nobody's feelings are getting hurt here. She already knows that Leslie's coming to New York tomorrow. Everybody understands. This is the circus, everybody's trying not to go home. Nobody's saying goodbye. Why are you looking at me like that?

Penny Lane: Well, I know he wants me there.

William Miller: Wake up! Don't go to New York.

Penny Lane: Why are you yelling at me?

William Miller: I thought we were going to go to Morocco. There is no Morocco. There's never been a Morocco. There's not even a Penny Lane. I don't even know your real name.

Penny Lane: If I ever met a man in the real world who looked at me the way you just looked at me—

William Miller: When and where does this "real world" occur? I mean, I am really confused here. All these rules and all these sayings and nicknames.

Penny Lane: You're too sweet for rock and roll.

William Miller: Sweet? Where do you get off? Where do you get sweet? I am dark and mysterious, and pissed off! And I could be very dangerous to all of you! I am not sweet. And you should know that about me... I am the enemy!

Penny Lane: Look, you should be happy for me. You don't know what he says to me in private. Maybe it is love, as much as it can be, for somebody—

William Miller: Who sold you to Humble Pie for fifty bucks and a case of beer!? I was there! I was there!...

[Penny's face shows how deeply this realization hurts her. She begins to weep silently.] Oh God. I'm sorry.

Penny Lane: *[wipes tears from her eye and sniffs]* What kind of beer? *[laughs]*

Dennis Hope: If you think that Mick Jagger will still be doing the whole rock star thing at age fifty, well, then, you are sorely, sorely mistaken.

William Miller: "That groupie"? She was a Band-Aid! All she did was love your band. And you used her, all of you! You used her and threw her away! She almost died last night while you were with Bob Dylan. You guys, you're always talking about the fans, the fans, the fans; she was your biggest fan, and you threw her away! And if you can't see that, that's your biggest problem. And I love her! I love her!

Ed Vallencourt: Fuck it! I'm... I'm gay!

Lester Bangs: Aw, man. You made friends with them. See, friendship is the booze they feed you. 'Cause they want you to get drunk on feeling like you belong.

William Miller: Well, it was fun.

Lester Bangs: Because they make you feel cool. And hey. I met you. You are not cool.

William Miller: I know. Even when I thought I was, I knew I wasn't.

Lester Bangs: Right, because we are uncool. And while women will always be a problem for us, most of the great art in the world is about that very same problem. Good-looking people don't have any spine. Their art never lasts. They get the girls, but we're smarter.

William Miller: Yeah, I can really see that now.

Lester Bangs: Yeah, great art is about pain and guilt and longing and love disguised as sex, and sex disguised as love . . . and hey, let's face it, you got a big head start.

William Miller: I'm glad you were home.

Lester Bangs: I'm always home. I'm uncool.

William Miller: Me too!

Lester Bangs: You're doing great. The only true currency in this bankrupt world is what you share with someone else when you're uncool.

William Miller: I feel better.

Lester Bangs: My advice to you. I know you think those guys are your friends. If you wanna be a true friend to them, be honest, and unmerciful.

Jeff Bebe: We come off like amateurs. Some average band trying to come to grips with success. Jealous infighting and breaking up. We're buffoons! "Rock and roll can say the world"? "The chicks are great"? I sound like a dick!

Russell Hammond: [*quietly, to himself*] You are a dick.

Jeff Bebe: I never said that.

Russell Hammond: Maybe we just don't see ourselves the way we really are.

Jeff Bebe: [*shouting toward the heavens*] Is it THAT hard to make us look cool?

Larry Fellows: Russell, this kid has you on acid screaming "I'm a golden god!" from a fan's rooftop.

Jeff Bebe: They used him to fuck us. [*to Russell*] They'll probably just put you on the cover.

Russell Hammond: Wait, I never said I'm a golden god... [*long beat*] Or did I?

Jeff Bebe: He was never a person! He was a "journalist"!

Russell Hammond: Is Penny okay?

Sapphire: The Quaaludes incident? Wasn't pretty, could have died. I always told her not to let too many guys fall in love with her... We all know what you did to him. Everybody knows, even Penny Lane. Can you believe these new girls? None of them use birth control, and they eat all the steak! They don't even know what it is to be a fan. Y'know? To truly love some silly little piece of music, or some band, so much that it hurts.

Russell Hammond: [*calling Penny Lane on the telephone*] Hello, Penny? It's Russell. Don't hang up. I can't really talk right now. I'm in a room full of people. [*beat*] Actually, I'm alone. I won't call again, I promise. But I need to see you face to face because... I'm never as good as when you're there...and I can see myself the way you look at me. And I'm sorry. If we could just get together and find some time to talk. [*long beat*] Let's say all the things we never said. Give me your address. I'm coming to you...this time.

Penny Lane: [*long beat...looking into her address book*] Got a pen?

Russell Hammond: [*knocks at the front door of the Miller home, then Elaine Miller answers the door*] I'm— I'm Russell Hammond.

Elaine Miller: So this is the famous Russell Hammond.

Russell Hammond: Um, is she home?

Elaine Miller: Who? Anita?

Russell Hammond: Where am I ?

Anita Miller: [*Anita walks into the room.*] Hello?

Russell Hammond: Hi.

Elaine Miller: You know, when we spoke, I felt that we connected.

Russell Hammond: [*looking at framed photographs on the mantle and recognizing William Miller in the photos, walking down the hall to William's room*] Oh, man.

Elaine Miller: My son is very important to me too...and I do think you owe him an apology. I appreciate you showing up.

Russell Hammond: No, no, I agree...ma'am.

Elaine Miller: [*leads Russell to William's bedroom door*] There's hope for you yet, Russell.

Russell Hammond: [*enters William's room and speaks to William, who has just woken up*] Well—So this is... where the Enemy sleeps. You know, I think we both wanted to—to be with her. And she wanted us to be together. You should give her a call. You both live in the same city.

William Miller: You really think I should?

Russell Hammond: Yeah. That girl really cares about you. Man, I never even knew her real name. Oh, I called your magazine...and told them the truth. I don't know what they're gonna do with it...but I told them every word you wrote was true.

William Miller: We are gonna do this one more time. [*Sets up his tape recorder and microphone*] So, Russell...what do you love about music?

Russell Hammond: To begin with, everything.

Almost Famous

Won Oscar 2001 – Cameron Crowe

Best Writing, Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen

Cast overview, first billed only:

<u>Billy Crudup</u>	... Russell Hammond
<u>Frances McDormand</u>	... Elaine Miller
<u>Kate Hudson</u>	... Penny Lane
<u>Jason Lee</u>	... Jeff Bebe
<u>Patrick Fugit</u>	... William Miller
<u>Zoey Deschanel</u>	... Anita Miller
<u>Michael Angarano</u>	... Young William
<u>Anna Paquin</u>	... Polexia Aphrodisia
<u>Fairuza Balk</u>	... Sapphire
<u>Noah Taylor</u>	... Dick Roswell
<u>John Fedevich</u>	... Ed Vallencourt
<u>Mark Kozelek</u>	... Larry Fellows
<u>Philip Seymour Hoffman</u>	... Lester Bangs
<u>Liz Stauber</u>	... Leslie
<u>Jimmy Fallon</u>	... Dennis Hope