

A most excellent interview: The team behind Bill and Ted Face the Music



Enlarge / Alex Winter and Keanu Reeves reprise their iconic roles in *Bill and Ted Face the Music*.

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Time travel becomes a family affair in *Bill and Ted Face the Music*, the long-awaited third film in the popular *Bill and Ted* comedy franchise (Amazon Video, Apple TV, Google Play, Vudu). Fans won't be disappointed: the film is most excellent, capturing that same breezy, chaotic, let's-just-have-fun-with-

this madcap magic of its predecessors. That's due to a winning script by co-creators Ed Solomon and Chris Matheson and the skillful direction of Dean Parisot of *Galaxy Quest* fame.

"We were trying to pay some homage to the original two [films] while making it feel like it was contemporary," Parisot told Ars about how he approached bringing the *Bill and Ted* franchise into the 21st century. "The sense of humor might be a little drier and more absurd, but that's about it."

(Some spoilers below.)

In the original *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989), Bill (Alex Winter) and Ted (Keanu Reeves) are high school students in danger of flunking history. If that happens, Ted's father will ship him off to a military academy, thus breaking up their band, Wyld Stallyns. But the band is destined to usher in a future utopia, which is now threatened. With the help of a time machine in the form of a phone booth—provided by Rufus (played by the late George Carlin), a messenger from the year 2688—the pair travels through history, meeting Socrates, Billy the Kid, Sigmund Freud, Beethoven, Genghis Khan, Joan of Arc, and Abraham Lincoln, among others.

In the sequel, *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey* (1991), the boys must defeat their evil robot doubles from the future to preserve the utopian society based on their ideals. Among the highlights: Bill and Ted must play a game (Battleship, Clue, and Twister) against Death (William Sadler) in order to escape from hell and return to Earth to win the Battle of the Bands. The Grim Reaper turns out to be a hell of a bass player, joining Wyld Stallyns until a falling-out over his fondness for 40-minute bass solos.

Bill and Ted Face the Music revisits the BFFs as middle-aged men, still living in San Dimas, California. They have music-loving daughters—Wilhelmina/Billie "Little Bill" Logan (Brigitte Lundy-Paine) and Theodora/Thea "Little Ted" Preston

(Samara Weaving)—and frustrated wives, Princess Joanna (Jayma Mays) and Princess Elizabeth (Erinn Hayes), who insist on couples counseling. Per the official premise:

The stakes are higher than ever for the time-traveling exploits of William “Bill” S. Preston Esq. and Theodore “Ted” Logan. Yet to fulfill their rock and roll destiny, the now middle aged best friends set out on a new adventure when a visitor from the future warns them that only their song can save life as we know it. Along the way, they will be helped by their daughters, a new batch of historical figures, and a few music legends to seek the song that will set their world right and bring harmony in the universe.

“You still have Bill and Ted, but they’re now middle-aged. They’re not teenagers, but you retain the essential qualities of them—this good-hearted ludicrous optimism,” said Parisot. “They’ve been best friends for years. They think alike, they act alike, they never doubt their friendship for a second. If those qualities came through, then you would have a Bill and Ted movie.”

Bill and Ted’s mid-life crisis

- Ted Logan (Keanu Reeves) and Bill Preston (Alex Winter) are still besties after all these years.
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- Princess Joanna (Jayma Mays) and Princess Elizabeth (Erinn Hayes) seek marital counseling.
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- Bill and Ted’s daughters, Thea (Samara Weaving) and Billie (Brigitte Lundy-Paine) share their love of music.
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- Kristen Schaal plays Kelly, a messenger from the future.
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- Back in their trusty old phone booth.

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- Kid Cudi (playing himself) joins the ladies on their mission to assemble the greatest band in history.

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- The band is coming along nicely with the addition of Louis Armstrong (Jeremiah Craft) and Jimi Hendrix (DazMann Still).

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Writers Ed Solomon and Chris Matheson, who created the characters all those years ago, had long wanted to revisit Bill and Ted. They came up with the plot and basic structure for *Face the Music*, but then faced the daunting task of trying to write characters they hadn't inhabited for decades. Matheson admitted he wasn't sure it would work. "Are they going to make sense to us?" he recalls wondering. In the end, "I wouldn't say it was effortless, but it was like riding a bike," he told Ars. "They somehow still live on, and they do make sense to us."

One thing that helped during the writing, according to Solomon, was not re-watching the first two movies in preparation. "I'm glad in retrospect that we didn't, because we would have been trying to copy them too much," he told Ars. "We just said, where would these characters be now? Let's just feel them that way and write from that place. So the movie has its own sensibility, and I'm proud of that."

Longtime fans might be surprised to find that Bill and Ted have daughters in *Face the Music*. At the end of *Bogus Journey*, we see Bill and Ted playing live with their infant children, "Little Bill" and "Little Ted," strapped to their backs. The assumption was always that the duo had fathered sons, but when Matheson and Solomon were writing *Face the Music*, they quickly realized that wasn't going to work. If the sons were ignorant, they were too much like their dads, and if they were cool, it wasn't funny. "It just felt like no matter what path we took with them having sons, it felt unfresh," said Solomon. "As

soon as we made them girls, it opened up the whole movie, allowing us to break some patterns that we had created inadvertently.”

“We wanted them to be different than Bill and Ted but to have the qualities of Bill and Ted,” said Parisot. “Brigitte and Samara created their characters by watching Alex and Keanu play Bill and Ted, but they worked hard to create unique characters.” While the daughters also love music, their knowledge of music is encyclopedic. “They know the roots of the music that the musicians they meet with don’t even know,” said Solomon.

“There’s nothing more fun than writing that character who just has this deep need to be loved even though he’s a terrible villain.”

Billie and Thea are the only guests dancing enthusiastically when Bill breaks into some Tuvan throat singing at the third wedding of Bill (and later Ted’s) sexy stepmother, Missy (Amy Stoch), grooving to the sounds their dads are laying down. So naturally when they’re putting the ultimate band together, they recruit not just Kid Cudi (playing himself as an amateur theoretical physicist), Mozart (Daniel Dorr), Jimi Hendrix (DazMann Still), and Louis Armstrong (Jeremiah Craft), but also the (gender-swapped) Chinese musical legend Ling Lun (Sharon Gee), and a cave woman drummer known only as Grom (Patty Anne Miller).

The movie does bring the old band back together, so to speak. In addition to Stoch, Sadler returns as the Grim Reaper (aka the Duke of Spook, the Doc of Shock, the Man With No Tan), and Hal Landon Jr. returns as Ted’s dad. Parisot had wanted to posthumously include Carlin via archival footage enhanced with CGI, but budgetary constraints ultimately nixed that plan. Instead, a hologram of Carlin briefly appears.

While Sadler’s Grim Reaper was the standout comic relief in *Bogus Journey*, an oddly ingratiating killer robot sent from

the future named Dennis Caleb McCoy (Anthony Carrigan) is the breakout character in *Face the Music*. He started out as a plot point and ultimately took on a life of his own, bolstered by Carrigan's fantastic (occasionally ad-libbed) performance. "We needed somebody to kill everybody," said Matheson. "And then, Ed and I just love, love, love insecure villains who are doing terrible things but feel really bad about it and have no confidence."

"There's nothing more fun than writing that character who just has this deep need to be loved even though he's a terrible villain," Solomon agreed.

A song to unite the world

- Bill and Ted meet their future selves.
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- A killer robot from the future named Dennis Caleb McCoy (Anthony Carrigan) is hunting Bill and Ted.
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- Fathers and daughters (and other band members) reunite in hell.
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- Death aka the Grim Reaper (William Sadler) is still one heck of a bass player.
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- Mending a rift,
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- The band is in the zone.
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- Thea and Billie rock out to the music.
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Tonally, this is very much a Dean Parisot film; like *Galaxy Quest*, it's a comedy that embraces silliness but also plays it somewhat straight and exudes a deep love for its main characters. It's no small feat to strike that perfect balance;

for Parisot, it's in line with his personal aesthetic. "We all have a point of view on the world," he said. "I love ludicrous characters dealing with a tragic circumstance, which feels like my life. I like people who are conflicted, maybe damaged in some ways, because I think we all have that. I like to watch them work through it. I want to like all my characters because I understand them, because I understand how they got to where they are."

Audiences love these characters, too. So what is it about Bill and Ted that makes them so enduringly lovable? "The first thing is their friendship, which is never in question," said Parisot. "The second thing is their enthusiasm for trying to solve their problems. They're sort of universally like children, but those aspects of children that we love. They're naïve, they're hopeful, they're absolutely invested in doing something good. That's why the last couple of lines of the movie resonate with me: it wasn't the song so much as everybody playing it together [that saved the world]."

"I think it's very easy to see the world through dark lenses—anger, fear, anxiety, resentment, pain—and I'm very much inclined to do that," said Matheson. "These guys don't. They see the good in things, and they're not trying to be anyone else. Accessing that—which must bizarrely somehow exist within me, too—feels incredible."

"A lot of writers write characters that embody their darker selves, and they get to watch those characters do some of the darker deeds that only exist in the deeper recesses of our own minds and imaginations," Solomon concurred. With Bill and Ted, "We get to watch these characters move through the world with the kind of beneficence that I don't think we do in life as much. It's such an interesting flip. I think a lot of comedy is written from a place of cynicism, or snark, or meanness, and to write comedy that's rooted in characters that don't have a bad thing to say about anybody is refreshing."

That's one reason Solomon and Matheson struggled to get *Face the Music* made ten years ago, when the trends in American comedy were darker and more cynical. "It wasn't vulgar, or pushing the edge, or dark and cynical," said Solomon of the film. "Amazingly, we ended up at a time that seems to be a little more open to humor that isn't punching up or down. It's not punching at all. It just opens its arms a little wider."

Bill and Ted Face the Music is now playing in select theaters and is also available on demand.

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Weezer – Beginning of the End (Wyld Stallyns Edit) (Official Video) from *Bill and Ted Face the Music*.

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