

SHINE BRIGHT LIKE A DIAMOND

# The Stunning Visuals of 'Song Sung Blue' Pay Tribute to Two Dreamers — In Front of and Behind the Camera

Cinematographer Amy Vincent talks about reuniting with "Hustle and Flow" and "Footloose" director Craig Brewer to find a visual language for the real-life lovers played by Kate Hudson and Hugh Jackman.

BY JIM HEMPHILL 

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'Song Sung Blue' ©Focus Features/Courtesy Everett Collection

Writer/director **Craig Brewer** and cinematographer **Amy Vincent** first worked together 20 years ago on "Hustle and Flow," the movie that launched Brewer's career and won two awards at **Sundance**, including one for Vincent's cinematography. For Vincent, it was a key formative moment in her evolution as a director of photography.

“We started together very early in our careers, and we learned together,” Vincent told IndieWire. “We were both learning about life, and collaboration, and filmmaking. And I think foundationally, when you grow up with somebody, you end up having shared tastes in many things. Then, when you go away and work outside the partnership, you come back with more gold.”

This Christmas, Vincent comes back to work with Brewer for the first time since 2011’s “Footloose” on **“Song Sung Blue,”** an exuberant musical about two musicians in love (played by Hugh Jackman and Kate Hudson) who attempt to fulfill their dreams by forming a Neil Diamond cover band together. The movie is vintage Brewer, an intelligent audience-pleaser filled with heart and style and unabashed but fully earned sentiment and humor.

It’s also the most visually dazzling **film** Vincent and Brewer have made to date, a thoughtfully designed balance between naturalism and theatricality in which the lighting and lensing serve as the perfect cinematic corollary to the characters’ optimism and striving in the face of brutal reality. “We started out with this incredible source material,” Vincent said, referring to Greg Kohs’ 2009 documentary about the real-life couple on whom “Song Sung Blue” is based. “It was an extraordinary reference.”

The documentary gave Vincent a baseline of reality on which to build, but it quickly became clear that a gritty vérité style was not going to be appropriate for the film. “You cast movie stars like Hugh and Kate and there becomes an essential need to embellish just because of those movie star faces,” she said. “There was a danger of those movie star faces and a more raw documentary reference being in conflict with each other.”



*‘Song Sung Blue’ ©Universal/Courtesy Everett Collection*

Working in close collaboration with production designer Clay Griffith, Vincent kept a tight control over the color palette and set decoration to give the movie a precise design that wouldn't compromise the truth of the characters and their circumstances. "There's a lot of work that goes into the creation of chaos and cluttered living spaces," Vincent said. Shooting in real environments — the movie favored actual locations over sets — added to the sense of authenticity, as did certain choices Vincent and Brewer made about the camera that went against the cinematographer's ingrained sense of classicism.

"We had a lot of tiny, manual, human zooms in the movie," Vincent said. "In the wedding scene, for example, there are these little push-ins on Hugh and Kate. They're manually operated, and it just makes you feel like there's a human being in the room as opposed to a more clinical, mechanical approach." Whereas earlier in her career Vincent stuck to a more rigorously disciplined approach, she credits the trust that has built between her and Brewer with allowing her to "incorporate tools that I might have avoided before."

Where Vincent was able to go back to her classical roots was in the lighting, which has a luminous shimmer reminiscent of the kinds of Hollywood musicals that represent the kinds of lives to which the heroes of "Song Sung Blue" aspire. The film's early 1990s setting gave Vincent what she called "an extraordinary excuse" to work with the kind of tungsten and incandescent lighting that has fallen out of fashion in the age of LED fixtures.

"My gaffer would say I use more hot lights than anybody he's worked with in a long time," Vincent said, adding that using fixtures that were from the period was not only aesthetically appropriate but a practical necessity, since for many of the concert sequences the lights were actually visible in the shots. "It allowed me to embrace the Kelvin scale of colors, which I find so pleasing. There's nothing more beautiful to me than the natural colors from 2200 degrees Kelvin all the way up to the deep blues in the 10,000s."



'Song Sung Blue' ©Focus Features/Courtesy Everett Collection

Vincent incorporated those colors into a grand finale concert sequence that serves as one of the movie's most rousing set pieces, thanks largely to the slightly exaggerated, saturated palette, and the cinematographer was able to be particularly precise, thanks to the fact that the lights were also incorporated into the production design. "Being able to photograph the lights is such a privilege, because you can put the light exactly where it needs to be."

Vincent worked with theatrical lighting designer Christina See, whose experience working with bands like Pearl Jam in the 1990s added to the overall sense of authenticity. "The theatrical part of the movie was treated like a real concert," Vincent said, noting that she and Brewer looked at footage from Neil Diamond concerts as well as the 1984 Prince vehicle "Purple Rain" — another movie that, like "Song Sung Blue," utilized gel-covered PAR can stage lights to stunning effect — for inspiration. "Partly because we had to load in and out of the Ritz Theatre in Elizabeth, New Jersey, according to their production schedule."

Vincent felt that the climactic concert represented the convergence of everyone on the movie's talent, from the actors to the crew. "It was a triumphant collaboration all the way around," Vincent said. "I remember Hugh and Kate being there in their civilian clothes for the tech rehearsal, and I overheard Hugh say to Kate, 'Can you believe we get to do this for a living?' I think that was the feeling all the way around, which speaks to the work environment Craig creates."