

Two-Lane Blacktop

By Sam Adams

"The B List: The National Society of Film Critics on the Low-Budget Beauties, Genre-Bending Mavericks, and Cult Classics We Love"

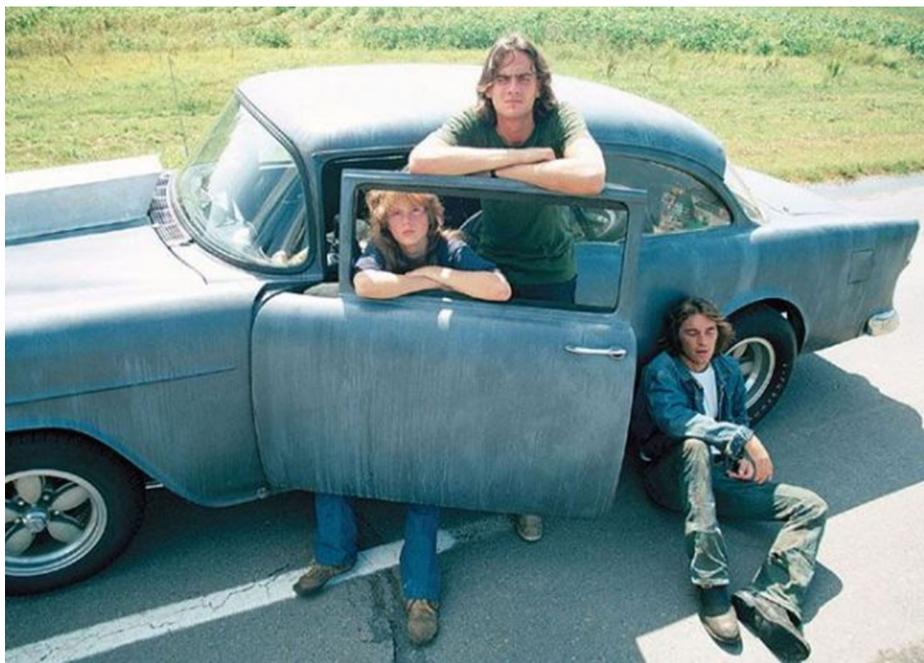
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Racing flat-out on the road to nowhere, the scrawny speed demons of "Two-Lane Blacktop" are caught between a past they've never known and a future they'll never see. The Driver (James Taylor) and the Mechanic (Dennis Wilson) act the part of rebels from a '50s exploitation movie, but their sallow skin and sunken eyes reveal the gnawing uncertainty of a disillusioned age, a longing for a sense of purpose that exists only in the seconds between starting flag and finish line.

Universal, which handed director Monte Hellman nine hundred thousand dollars to make his first (and, as it turned out, only) studio movie, must have hoped for a youth-culture paean in the "Easy Rider" mode. Although neither of the movie's leads had acted before, both were stars in their own right" Wilson was the Beach Boys' drummer and Taylor was a budding soft-rock superstar. (His then girlfriend Joni Mitchell, was often spotted on the set.) Two months before the movie's release, *Esquire* proclaimed "Two Lane Blacktop" the movie of the year," publishing Rudy Wurlitzer's script in full.

But instead of a carefree ode to easy riding and fast living, Hellman's movie was more like a European art film, with brooding silences and long stretches of empty road. The protagonists are sullen, uncommunicative loners, hardly suited for the role of counterculture icons. And for a car-race movie, it's notably short on tire-burning bravado; the few head-to-head contests are over in seconds, sometime dispensed within a single shot. This was evidently not what the studio had signed on for. The movie of the year was dumped into theaters on a holiday weekend with no advance advertising and quickly vanished into myth.

The germ of Wurlitzer's script (take from a discarded draft by "Gunsmoke" actor Will Corry) is a cross-country race between the Driver's '55 Chevy and a late-model Pontiac G.T.O., drive by a garrulous dandy (Warren



Laurie Bird, James Taylor and Dennis Wilson strike a pose with another of the film's stars: the Chevy. Courtesy Library of Congress

Oates), whose slick patter spills out in bewildering chunks. (the credits call him "G.T.O." although the characters never address each other by name.) The route (Arizona to DC) is set, the stakes (pink slips) agreed upon, and the cars peel out, intending to drive straight through.

But a series of pit stops and small-town diversions turns their breakneck dash into a roadside odyssey, a travelogue of crumbling towns and crumbled people. With each detour, the movie seems to slip backward in time, searching for a past that has vanished, or perhaps never existed. "I am romantic in the way the Camus is romantic," Hellman once said. "I feel a nostalgia for what can never be." (Ironically, "Blacktop"'s Chevy turned up in "American Graffiti," a movie of distinctly less ambivalent nostalgia.

Its asphalt milieu notwithstanding, "Blacktop" is a Western in spirit, albeit one whose course purposefully reverses the nation's progress. Manifest Destiny has run its course, but the urge to move forward lingers like the spasms of a twitching corpse. "Blacktop"'s bleak vision is prefigured by Hellman's sand-scarred Westerns "Ride in the Whirlwind" (1965) and "The Shooting" (1967), and it's honed a bloody point in Wurlitzer's script for Sam Peckinpah's "Pat Garret & Billy the Kid" (1973). But where Peckinpah's lusty loners are propelled by the imperatives of myth, Hellman's are purely compulsive. They drive because they can't stop.

Like their car, stripped of any creature comfort that might slow it down, the Driver and the Mechanic exist only in relation to the road. They rarely speak to each other, and when they do, their exchanges are terse, almost cryptic: "I think that Plymouth had a hemi"; "She don't seem like she's breathing right." Their primer-gray Chevy, its engine poking through the hood like a bizarre growth, is an eyesore next to the gleaming orange-yellow GTO, with its soft leather seats and state-of-the-art tape deck — not to mention a trunk full of whiskey and pills.

A chance to change course arrives in the form of the Girl (Laurie Bird), a mercurial hitchhiker as forceful as she is enigmatic. Unburdened by the Driver's angst or G.T.O.'s vanity, she acts on instinct, a creature of deeds, not thoughts. After she beds the Mechanic (thus securing herself a place in the Chevy's backseat), a heartsick Driver tries to lay some philosophy on her. At a rural gas station, he muses aloud on the lives of cicadas, the "freaky bugs" who live most of their lives underground, emerging just long enough to mate, breed and die. It's a bleak view of existence, wholly consistent with the movie's stark existentialism. But the Girl rejects it out of hand, the simplest way possible, by missing the point: "We've got a better life, haven't we?"

Driven relentlessly forward, "Blacktop" offers few clues to where its characters have been. The Driver and the Mechanic seem to have no past, whereas G.T.O. has too many, a series of varied and incompatible histories he unleashes on a series of dumbstruck hitchhikers. (Among them is Harry Dean Stanton, whose sexual advances are politely but firmly rebuffed. "This is competition," G.T.O. snaps. "I've got no *time*.") The closest the movie comes to externalizing their inner lives is a brief scene where the Driver overhears a middle-aged woman yelling at her henpecked date, "Every time I hit you where it hurts, you withdraw from me!" That act of elementary displace-

ment suggests that beneath his stoic exterior, the Driver nurses wounds unknown, perhaps even to him. In that respect, Taylor's inexperience works in the movie's favor. Shy and withdrawn, he rejects even the camera's intimacy. In close-up, his eyes are downcast, his face turned at an angle. He won't be ignored, but he can't bear to be seen.

The Driver rarely lets his guard down, but in a brief moment of solidarity, he tells G.T.O. that with a few modifications, his assembly-line model could be "a real street-sweeper." But as with the Girl, the Driver's attempt to reach out is misunderstood. "I go fast enough," G.T.O. responds, to which the Driver snaps, "You can never go fast enough."

The Driver's macho maxim has been a rallying cry for generations of gear-heads, but in context it sounds more like a petulant outburst, or an admission of defeat. Condemned to a life in the not-so-fast lane, the Driver and the Mechanic are literally consumed by their need for speed. As the Chevy races off in the final shot, Hellman simulates a breakdown — not the car's, but the movie's. The frame shudders and slows and finally stops, and the image dissolves in a projector-bulb supernova. Instead of riding into the sunset, the Chevy is consumed by the light, leaving nothing and no one behind.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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