

Easy Rider

By William Wolf

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Jack Nicholson, Dennis Hopper, Peter Fonda, drugs, hippies, the open road, protests, long-hair, nonconformity, backlash. "Easy Rider" picked up the beat of the 1960s at the end of that turbulent decade. It also fueled a developing urge to make personal films that could be done on budgets low enough to deal with subjects of little or no interest to conventional Hollywood.

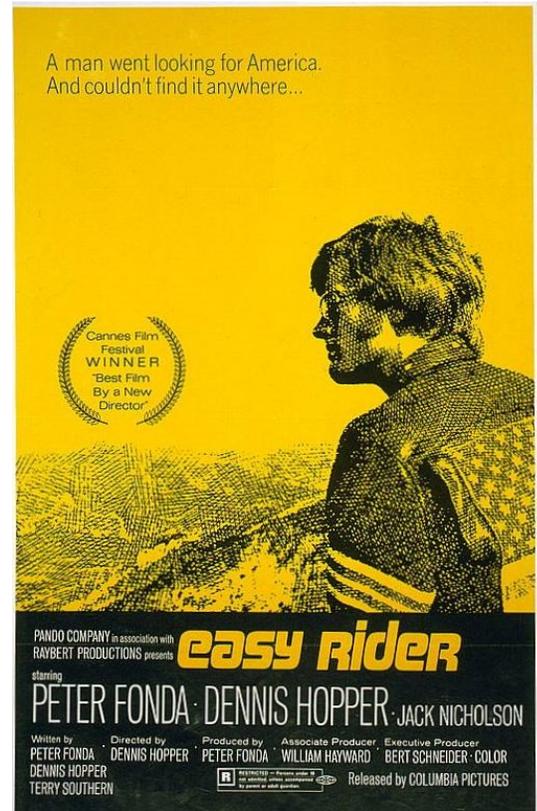
The French New Wave already had its influence and now it was the turn of American filmmakers. True, a major Hollywood company, Columbia, released "Easy Rider," but the deal was struck only after the independent venture had been completed. Independent filmmakers in succeeding decades owe a debt to "Easy Rider" as one of several 1960s films that inspired others to work out of the mainstream.

The film was the brainchild of Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda, who brought their idea to Bert Schneider and Bob Rafelson, whose Raybert Productions coproduced the film with the Pando Company. The budget was a mere \$400,000. With Hopper, Fonda and Jack Nicholson in the cast, the film had potential. But would they finish it? Some would-be backers had their doubts.

Hopper directed, Fonda produced, and both Hopper and Fonda collaborated on the screenplay after a draft had been written by Terry Southern. By the standards of the time, the low-budget film was a meaningful financial as well as critical success, grossing nearly \$20 million, according to the trade publication "Variety." At least for a while producers looked for directors to make them "another 'Easy Rider'." The awards were numerous. The Cannes Film Festival cited it as best film by a new director. Nicholson was named best supporting actor by both the National Society of Film Critics and the New York Film Critics Circle, and the National Society also gave a special award to Dennis Hopper.

Looking back on the film today is like entering a time warp. Were Nicholson, Hopper and Fonda ever *that* young? Although he had ample experience, Nicholson had yet to have a breakthrough. As George, the doomed lawyer who befriends two drug-dealing, freedom-loving bike riders, he gave a performance that became

the turning point in his career. Peter Fonda as Wyatt and Dennis Hopper as Billy, with their long hair recalling the trappings of free expression



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that characterized the era, embodied the period's drug culture. Those were no fake joints they smoked on-screen.

The journey of the trio characterizes the clash between such liberated souls and a society that looks askance at nonconformists. In ironic symbolism Wyatt's motorbike is decorated with the stars and stripes, with a safety helmet to match. Wyatt also has an American flag replicated on the back of his leather jacket. At the outset Wyatt and Billy make a drug buy in Mexico. They are seen carefully sniffing coke to make sure it's the real stuff, as does "The Connection" (Phil Spector) to whom they sell some of it at an airport.

Both men are decent guys, not intending to harm anyone and just wanting to enjoy roaming the country. Billy is pretty well stoned most of the time. The man in charge at a second-rate motel, taking in their long-haired biker look, refuses to open the door. A hitchhiker to whom they give a lift leads them to a commune, where more of the film's spirit — and that of the sixties — comes into play. Relaxed living, friendly women, yet not without male jealousy.

As they continue their trip, playfully riding uninvited behind a school band in a parade gets them busted in

New Mexico. In jail they meet George, who hasn't done anything. He comes from a prominent family, is a lawyer, and is sleeping off a drunk. George acquaints them with the facts of life prevalent in that part of the country.

"Well, they got this here — see-uh-scissor-happy "Beautify America" thing goin' on around here. They're tryin' to make everybody look like Yul Brynner. They used-uh-rusty blades on the last two long-hairs that they brought in here and I wasn't here to protect them. You see-uh — I'm a lawyer. Done a lot of work for the ACLU."

George helps them get out of the clink before they get worked over and now two become three. George has a card that he says was given to him by the governor of Louisiana advertising "Madame Tinkertoy's House of Blue Lights," in New Orleans, reputed to be "the finest whorehouse in the South." Off they go on the next leg of their trip with George riding on the back of Wyatt's bike.

There's a funny scene when they sleep outdoors and his new companions try to teach George how to smoke grass. In retrospect, the idea of Nicholson not knowing how to use the weed and inhale properly becomes even funnier. George protests that he has enough problems with the booze. The scene exudes a feeling of camaraderie as well as humor.

George is the one with the speeches that underscore what the film is about: "This used to be a helluva good country. I can't understand what's gone wrong with it." It's not the long hair or the way they dress that upsets people, he tells Billy and Wyatt. "What you represent to them is freedom." He warns: "Course don't ever tell anybody — that they're not free, 'cause then, they're gonna get real busy killin' and maimin' to prove to you that they are."

We can predict that the trio will run into trouble en route, and indeed, they do, first at a roadside café where the long hair of Wyatt and Billy proves an irritant. They're needled by a local deputy and his cronies, extra resentful because several young girls are attracted to the travelers. Later, while they are sleeping in a swamp area, a group of men beat them brutally, killing George. The distraught survivors continue, determined to reach New Orleans. At Madame Tinkertoy's emporium, they become friendly with Karen (Karen Black) and Mary (Toni Basil), who agree to join them in the Mardi Gras, which is in full blast.

A hallucinatory sequence follows, as the women and men wander into a cemetery, pop pills, and make love.

It's a mind-blowing binge before the storm, and afterward Wyatt and Billy take to the highway once again. Two men in a passing truck taunt the outsiders and one aims a rifle at Billy, who responds by giving him the finger. Billy is gunned down. Wyatt first tries to stanch the bleeding, then rides for help. He too is shot. The camera pulls back to encompass a view of the victims and the countryside with the "Ballad of Easy Rider" providing the coda.

In effect the shooting marks an epitaph for an era. The Kennedy assassinations. The Martin Luther King, Jr. assassination. The killing of Malcolm X. The Chicago riots. The protests against the Vietnam War. The 1960s were over, but the pain, including the growing opposition to the war, would carry over into the 1970s.

"Easy Rider" is more visual than verbal. There is a feeling of spontaneity in various scenes, and the cinematography of Laszlo Kovacs and the settings add to the impression of authenticity. The scenes of the countryside through which the protagonists travel are exhilarating, offering a loving look at the beauty of the land. To get actual footage of a Mardi Gras, the event was shot in advance of the rest of the film, in fact before the script had been completed. Once the filming of the story began, the shooting was done in sequence. "Easy Rider" became the on-the-road experience of its makers who were living out their own take on the 1960s through the project.

As for the title, Fonda explained its origin in a 1969 interview in "Rolling Stone" with writer Elizabeth Campbell. "'Easy rider' is a Southern term for a whore's old man, not a pimp, but the dude who lives with a chick. Because he's got the easy ride. Well, that's what's happened to America, man. Liberty's become a whore, and we're all taking an easy ride."

The film holds up for its overall impact, although the pace lags occasionally and some of the dialogue is banal or pretentious. The music, an added "character" in the film, provides an important element in setting the right tone. The soundtrack is rich with numbers by such groups and performers as Steppenwolf, the Byrds, The Band, The Jimi Hendrix Experience, Little Eva, The Electric Flag, Bob Dylan, and Roger McGuinn, who composed and performed the title song "Ballad of Easy Rider."

Today the film is best viewed as an artifact of the period in which it was made. For those who didn't live through the 1960s, "Easy Rider" tells us much about the dynamics and attitudes of the decade and what kind of music

was popular. There's also the pleasure of seeing early Nicholson, Hopper, and Fonda, who would all go on to further important work, and we see Karen Black before her acclaimed performance in Rafelson's "Five Easy Pieces."

The film is also a nostalgic reminder of the continuing ups and downs of the independent filmmaking movement in the United States. The excitement engendered when a nonmainstream film succeeds inspires other work, but the limited opportunities leave room for only a few financial success stories. The talent often moves into the mainstream of big-budget films, and the struggle persists with newcomers trying to make their mark with

their personal visions. But there aren't many easy rides. There is, however, an "Easy Rider" as a perpetual reminder of what's possible.

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

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