

The Easy Rider Road Trip

The end of the road.

By Keith Phipps

Day 1

This summer, I drove out of San Diego and into the desert on a journey from Southern California, through long stretches of Arizona and New Mexico, and on to New Orleans. I'd decided to work my way along the path of *Easy Rider*, a road movie full of searching, shot-on-location images. Those images offer a vision of America at the end of the 1960s, when the country was still unsettled by the upheaval of the previous years and unsure where the years ahead would lead. The America of *Easy Rider* is one of unspoiled landscapes, utopian aspirations, deep-rooted prejudice, and senseless violence. I'd always felt removed from that America—*Easy Rider* was shot before I was born, mostly in parts of the country I'd never visited. I wondered what remained of that world 40 years later, and what I could learn about the movie—and about America, then and now—by retracing the steps of its heroes.

Released on July 14, 1969, between the Stonewall riots and the Apollo 11 moon landing, *Easy Rider* became an unexpected success and, like Woodstock, a touchstone for a generation. Not my generation, though. Before seeing it, I'd imagined *Easy Rider* as one of those you-had-to-be-there '60s clichés that so irritated those of us who came of age in the '80s—something to be slipped into that-was-then montages between footage of Vietnam and the '68 Democratic Convention.

Film enthusiasts my age had warned me to expect a film with long, often dull, experimental patches and stoner vagaries. When I finally got around to watching *Easy Rider*, I discovered those warnings weren't entirely unfounded. But I also discovered a more complex and



<http://www.slate.com/toolbar.aspx?action=print&id=2233176>

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

The Easy Rider Road Trip

sour movie than the one I'd imagined. More an elegy for a generation that never got where it wanted to go than a celebration of that generation's superiority, it pits hopefulness against resignation and sets the battle on a lovingly photographed stretch of the United States. *Easy Rider* hit theaters with a memorable tag line: "A man who went looking for America. And couldn't find it anywhere." Star, producer, and co-writer Peter Fonda hated that line, and rightly so. It's really the story of two men—Wyatt and Billy, played by Fonda and co-writer and director Dennis Hopper—who went looking for America and found it everywhere. They just didn't find a place for themselves.

What sent them looking in the first place? The film parcels out little back story: There's a drug deal conducted so nervously it's clear Wyatt and Billy aren't full-time dealers, a hope of getting to New Orleans in time for Mardi Gras, and some vague plans to "retire" in Florida. In his British Film Institute monograph on *Easy Rider*, critic Lee Hill refers to cut footage that would have established Wyatt and Billy as stunt riders from the carnival circuit, motivated by a desire to escape a world dominated by crooked promoters. In the final version, their stunt work is mentioned only in passing.

Fonda pared Wyatt's dialogue down to as

few lines as he thought necessary. Hopper, on the other hand, turns Billy into a hypervocal coil of hippie neuroses, always afraid he and Wyatt will miss the party or get ripped off. The film keeps circling back to the tension between Wyatt's fragile idealism and Billy's materialism. Wyatt tries on the philosophies of those he meets, rejecting each of them in pursuit of some better life down the road. Billy also wants to keep moving, inspired by dreams of Mardi Gras and living large off of drug money. The friction between the men drives the film more than the desire to reach a clear destination, and it grows more pronounced with each stop along the way.

Their first stop, and mine, is Ballarat, Calif. After selling two packages of high-grade cocaine obtained in Mexico to a character billed only as "Connection" (played by an already-creepy Phil

Advertisement



Save Money this Fall
with **FREE**
SAMPLES

Sign up to receive
FREE Samples of
Name Brand Products

FreeSampleValues.com

QualityHealth™

The Easy Rider Road Trip

Spector), Wyatt and Billy roll their stack of cash into a plastic tube and place it in Wyatt's gas tank for safe keeping. Wyatt pauses a moment to toss aside his watch, then the pair heads east as the credits start. "I'm hip about time," Wyatt will say later, as if talking about a habit he's trying to quit.

They couldn't have picked a more remote place to begin their journey. Located on the edge of Death Valley, Ballarat started out as a mining town in 1897. It died when the mines dried up 20 years later. By the time *Easy Rider* filmed there, its adobe-style buildings had largely crumbled into dust. The situation hasn't improved much since then.

Apart from a handful of trailers and some decrepit buildings, there's almost nothing to be found in Ballarat. Its sole resident, Rock Novack, runs the general store, which serves 4x4 enthusiasts. The store consists of little more than a cooler filled with Cokes and Bud. "This is downtown," Novack says by way of a greeting. He's accompanied by his dog, a friendly, perpetually panting mutt named Potlicker. Potlicker's "around 5," which is about how long Rock has been living in Ballarat.

Rock pointed out a dilapidated pickup that he said used to belong to Charlie Manson, who used a pair of abandoned Death Valley ranches not far from

Ballarat as his headquarters for a while. I have no reason not to believe him, and it seems strangely appropriate that the paths of *Easy Rider*—the quintessential end-of-the-'60s movie—and the Manson murders—one of a string of symbolically end-of-the-'60s events—would cross. As the Manson family rolled into Laurel Canyon in August 1969, the film was still playing to packed houses shocked by its violent finale.

In Ballarat, Wyatt and Billy are just happy to be on their way. By their reckoning, whatever life they once led is now firmly in their rearview mirrors. What's ahead remains a mystery. I briefly consider making my own symbolic gesture, but what would fit the occasion? I could smash my GPS. Toss my BlackBerry. But who'd I be kidding? As I stood in the 120 degree heat, eager to get back into the comfort of my rented PT Cruiser—a far cry from Wyatt and Billy's

Advertisement



Advertisement

don't delay
get proven, proactive
identity theft
protection
CALL NOW
1-888-896-1878
LifeLock
#1 In Identity Theft Protection™

The Easy Rider Road Trip

choppers—I felt more acutely than ever that I'd been on a different path than these characters for years. I had a home to return to and a life to resume once I reached New Orleans. But standing in the ruins of Ballarat, I also began to understand how the thrill of the open road could be something other than an advertising cliché. For one week I'd do my best to stay true to *Easy Rider's* spirit of exploration. I knew the movie's itinerary, but I didn't know where it would take me.

From:

Posted Tuesday, Nov. 17, 2009, at 9:42 AM ET

Day 2

From Ballarat, *Easy Rider* cuts to its heroes riding across the Colorado River and into Needles, Calif. I don't have the luxury of editing. I drive through Death Valley; stop at Zabriskie Point, site of the dusty orgy in Antonioni's eponymous film; and spend the night at the Amargosa Hotel in Death Valley Junction, which doubled as the nightmarish Lost Highway Hotel in David Lynch's *Lost Highway*—two reminders that movies have left traces on even the most remote parts of America.

The next day, I don't make it much farther than the end of *Easy Rider's*

opening credits. I don't really mind. There's a reason why this sequence has become so famous. When people talk about the freedom of the open road, the long, easy stretch of I-40 and what remains of Route 66 from Needles to Flagstaff, Ariz., is what they have in mind. The credit sequence finds Billy and Wyatt wearing expressions that suggest they've found exactly what they hoped for on the road, all cued to Steppenwolf's "Born To Be Wild," a classic rock staple that, these days, is hard to hear thanks to decades of overexposure on classic rock radio and bad covers and in its second life as an ironic signifier in films like *One Crazy Summer* and *Dr. Doolittle 2*.

And let's be honest: It's not that great of a song in the first place. It's the visuals that made this sequence iconic. The changing tones and colors of the landscapes Wyatt and Billy ride through

Advertisement



Advertisement

don't delay
get proven, proactive
identity theft
protection
CALL NOW
1-888-896-1878
LifeLock
#1 In Identity Theft Protection™

The Easy Rider Road Trip

often say more than *Easy Rider's* spare plot and cryptic dialogue. Hopper lets some scenes play out to the length of an entire song. Paired with the long shots of rolling vistas, the scenes become immersive and dreamlike, even to those not under the influence of the illicit substances favored by the film's characters.

Those scenes wouldn't have had such power were it not for the work of cinematographer Laszlo Kovacs. A Hungarian émigré, Kovacs fled to America with lifelong friend and fellow cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond after smuggling footage they shot of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution into Austria. They stayed in the states, bringing an outsider's perspective to an astonishing run of classic American films.

Kovacs, who died in 2007, would later add *Five Easy Pieces*, *Paper Moon*, and *Shampoo* to his résumé. But at the time of *Easy Rider*, he had worked on only one accomplished film—Peter Bogdanovich's remarkable debut, *Targets*—and a lot of quickie exploitation films. Some of those films now provide fascinating insight into their times. Richard Rush's dark-side-of-the-counterculture movie *Psych-Out* presents the high-'60s Haight-Ashbury scene with an immediacy not tinged by the paisley nostalgia of later years. And two movies Kovacs worked on

for Rush—*The Savage Seven* and *Hells Angels on Wheels*, the latter starring Jack Nicholson—found him trying out the bikers-against-a-landscape-imagery form he'd perfect in *Easy Rider*.

Unable to afford a camera car, Kovacs used boards to mount Arriflex's liberatingly lightweight 35-millimeter camera to a '68 Impala. Some of the handmade roughness of this approach remains visible in the film, as do many instances of lens flare, "mistakes" that Kovacs and Hopper left in the film and that lend it a beautiful, sun-drenched quality. Partly by design, partly by low-budget necessity, *Easy Rider* helped create a new way of looking at the American landscape. Hopper found uses for the ragged edges Hollywood films usually sanded off. The style was so imitated by films that followed that it's become hard to appreciate how radical it looked at the time. Today, even Pixar

Advertisement



The Easy Rider Road Trip

features occasionally throw in lens flare, never mind that there's no light to cause it, or even a lens to flare.

The road from Needles to Kingman to Flagstaff offers a straight line and a slow ascent, a gentle pull upward from desert depths to verdant hills and cooler temperatures. But for Wyatt and Billy, the feeling of escape doesn't last beyond "Born To Be Wild"'s last chords. Pulling into a motel called the Pine Breeze Inn, they're turned away by the biker-hating owner, who switches on the "No Vacancy" sign when he sees them approach. The movie has barely started and the good times have already begun to fade.

The Pine Breeze Inn still stands on the outskirts of Flagstaff, just down the road from a large Harley-Davidson dealership in Bellemont. The inn's closed now; its office sits abandoned in front of an RV park on a dead-end stretch of road. But it seems I'm not the first student of *Easy Rider* to visit this place. Someone's hung an *Easy Rider* poster on the front door, and a peek through the window reveals a second image of Hopper and Fonda, chopping down the highway in the poster that became a dorm-room staple in the years after the film's release. Wyatt and Billy couldn't get a room at this place. Now they've taken up permanent residence.

Day 3

Wyatt and Billy's next stop is Monument Valley, a stunning pocket of sandstone formations situated where Utah meets Arizona. Its history with the movies stretches back far beyond *Easy Rider*. The location of choice for director John Ford, its five square miles have defined what decades of moviegoers think of when they imagine the American West.

The film lingers in Monument Valley. It's hard not to. The imposing mesas, towering spires, and sandy paths inspire thoughts of the films that have been set there. Some of them, like *My Darling Clementine* and *Fort Apache*, starred Peter Fonda's father, Henry. It's tempting to view the arrival of the younger Fonda—sporting shaggier hair than any character his father ever played—as a rebuke directed at the elder Fonda's heroic legacy. But the truth is a little more complicated.

Advertisement



Send flowers
for any occasion

Bouquets \$19.99
from 19^{+s/h}

ProFlowers[®]
Order ONLY at
proflowers.com/happy
or call 1-877-888-0688

The Easy Rider Road Trip

Ford's favorite leading man was John Wayne. Over the years, Wayne went from being the white-hatted hero of *Stagecoach* to the tortured obsessive of *The Searchers*, but his characters rarely changed much within a movie—Ford played to Wayne's ability to deliver extraordinary performances within a limited range. Fonda's characters, on the other hand, were frequently changed by events in Ford's films. *The Grapes of Wrath*'s Tom Joad goes from loner to messiah; the gangly, inarticulate idealist of *Young Mr. Lincoln* becomes an able politician.

Fonda often played the hero in Monument Valley, but he wore the mantle uneasily. In *Fort Apache*, he's barely a hero at all, guided by bigotry and unable to adapt his rigid military code to the realities of the American frontier. As Wyatt Earp in *My Darling Clementine*—the hero whose name Peter Fonda's character would borrow in *Easy Rider*—he's a legendary marshall trying to start a new life as a cattleman who gets sidetracked by the crime and incivility of Tombstone. He wears a look of barely disguised disappointment as he realizes the world is not ready for him to hang up his badge. Fonda always conveyed depths of conflict below his taciturn exterior. (Released the same year as *Easy Rider*, Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*, filmed in part in Monument

Valley, pushed Fonda's gift for playing tormented souls in a new direction, casting him as a sadistic villain with an easy smile.)

On-screen, Peter Fonda is very much his father's son, and his work in *Easy Rider* plays like a continuation of the family's understated craft. He doesn't say much, but he doesn't have to. He has his father's gnomic manner, suggesting he's never quite finished thinking through the situation at hand. He proceeds with an outer confidence that doesn't quite square with what's going on inside his head. He claims doubt as a birthright.

As a Monument Valley sunset plays out in real time, *Easy Rider* pauses to let viewers consider the moment's layers. Wyatt and Billy—a pair of modern-day cowboys, if only in name—visit the heart of the West. Or, at least, the movie version of the West. Seeing it in person, I

Advertisement



Save Money this Fall
with **FREE**
SAMPLES

Sign up to receive
FREE Samples of
Name Brand Products

FreeSampleValues.com

QualityHealth™

The Easy Rider Road Trip

kept doing double takes. Here was a vista unlike anything I'd ever seen—except I *had* seen it, many times, in postcards, picture books, and films as varied as *Forrest Gump*, *National Lampoon's Vacation*, and Ford's Westerns. This was the frontier, untamed America, the place where the civilizing force of Wyatt Earp met the lawlessness of the Clanton boys—even if it had only played that part in movies.

From:

Posted Wednesday, Nov. 18, 2009, at 11:16 AM ET

Day 4

Easy Rider's next stop brings the story to a commune inspired by the New Buffalo settlement outside of Taos, N.M. Here movie geography and real-world locations split. Unable to get permission to film at New Buffalo, the film re-created it in the mountains of Malibu, Calif. I decide to visit Taos anyway. The town served as a Hopper hangout for years, and to commemorate *Easy Rider's* 40th anniversary, the Harwood Museum of Art is hosting an exhibit called *Hopper at Harwood*, featuring Hopper's art and photography.

The drive to Taos—where crags give way to plains, then mountains—doesn't disappoint. The town does. Its center

remains, as it has since its time as a Spanish colonial town, Taos Plaza. Now catering almost entirely to tourists, it gives the impression of a face that's been lifted too many times. The long-lived La Fonda Hotel shares space with T-shirt shops and Mexican restaurants where no dish is deemed complete until the phrase "smothered in" has been added to its description. If it weren't for the many art galleries carrying on—or, at the very least, living off—Taos' tradition as an artists' colony, it could pass for virtually any other resort town.

The land north of here became dotted with communes in the late '60s, none more famous than New Buffalo. As Wyatt, Billy, and a hitchhiker they've picked up arrive at the film's New Buffalo, they find a place bursting with life, maybe too much of it. Billy, in one of his few unreservedly joyful moments, starts playing with some kids as Wyatt takes in

Advertisement

Save Money this Fall
with **FREE**
SAMPLES

Sign up to receive
FREE Samples of
Name Brand Products

FreeSampleValues.com

QualityHealth™

The Easy Rider Road Trip

the scene. The sequence that follows explores commune life, and it squares well with the firsthand accounts found in Iris Keltz's *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie*, from one communitarian's obsession with the *I Ching* to an unspoken divide between those doing work and those just sitting around. Keltz first stayed at New Buffalo in 1968, around the time *Easy Rider* was shooting. She found a small group of people dedicated to living communally. But when she returned in 1969, she discovered a scene changed by too many casual drop-ins. It was the year communes first began to attract mainstream attention and, consequently, casual scenesters. No doubt helped by *Easy Rider*, 1969 became for communes what 1978 would be for discos.

The commune sequence is the film's weakest stretch, overlong and filled with experiments that don't really work, like a 360-degree shot of a communal dinner table that makes its point long before it completes its circle. (There's also way too much time dedicated to a hippie mime troupe.) But the commune section also features a scene that serves as *Easy Rider*'s turning point. Taken to the fields not far from the main camp, Wyatt and Billy see college-age kids, in outfits not intended for rural living, dropping seeds into barren earth. "They're city kids," the hitchhiker tells them, "But they're going to stay here till it's harvested. That's the

whole point."

"They ain't gonna make it," Billy concludes instantly. "They ain't gonna grow anything here." Wyatt has another idea. "They're gonna make it. Dig, man. They're gonna make it," he says with a smile and a nod. Faced with '60s idealism in its rawest form—kids who have done their best to drop out of society and remake it as something simpler and better—Billy responds with skepticism, while Wyatt recognizes fellow dreamers when he sees them. One sees barren earth and is happy to be headed toward Florida before the winter sets in. The other looks tempted to stay and enjoy the fruits of their commitment and belief. The shots that follow, of young men and women doing farm work and sharing a pipe, don't really support one view or the other.

In reality, though, they didn't make it.

Advertisement



Advertisement

don't delay
get proven, proactive
identity theft
protection
CALL NOW
1-888-896-1878
LifeLock
#1 In Identity Theft Protection™

The Easy Rider Road Trip

Not in the long run, anyway. Keltz's book alternates between rosy nostalgia and memories of infighting, struggles with other communes (some of which subscribed to more violent ideologies), troubles with Taos natives, hoarding, food stamp scams, druggy hangers-on, trendy gurus, and eventual disintegration. One late-period resident owner sums up the '80s as a time of "wine, heroin and shotguns." By the mid-'90s, New Buffalo had been converted into a bed and breakfast. Now it's gone.

Falling in love with the place after visiting it to prepare for *Easy Rider*, Hopper became an off-and-on resident for years. After the failure of *The Last Movie*, his 1971 directorial follow-up to *Easy Rider*, it would be more on than off. Over the last couple of decades, Hopper has become a go-to psycho in projects from the reputable (*Speed*, 24) to the ridiculous (*Super Mario Bros.*, *Waterworld*)—interrupted once in a while with memorable turns in movies like *True Romance* and *Elegy*. This steady stream of work has made his tumultuous relationship with Hollywood easy to forget. Hopper became an acolyte of James Dean and a believer in his intense approach to performance after co-starring with Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Giant*. He took to method-acting immersion but found film work

scarce after a confrontation with director Henry Hathaway on the set of the 1958 film *From Hell to Texas*. (The director put Hopper through take after take in a battle of wills that ultimately left Hopper unofficially blacklisted for much of the decade to come.)

Easy Rider revived his career, but he had a hard time finding a place in the auteur-friendly Hollywood the film helped create. By the time *Easy Rider* was released, he had become, by all accounts, a difficult character. Flashes of megalomania and self-destructive excess evident during *Easy Rider*'s creation became a lifestyle. Peter Biskind's lurid yet essential New Hollywood history *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* describes the alarming number of chemicals swimming through Hopper's bloodstream in the '70s. Cleaned up by 1986, he got a second chance after strong work in *Blue Velvet*, *Hoosiers*, and *River's Edge* (to say

Advertisement



Save Money this Fall
with **FREE**
SAMPLES

Sign up to receive
FREE Samples of
Name Brand Products

FreeSampleValues.com

QualityHealth™

The Easy Rider Road Trip

nothing of the honestly underrated *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*), films that found him playing men damaged by the years and in danger of letting their obsessions destroy the world around them. He knew the part well.

The Harwood exhibit reveals a photographer with a keen eye and an artist with a studied, if not particularly exciting, command of collage and trompe l'oeil techniques. The wildness of his early career has evidently been exorcised. Despite remaining a fine actor, particularly when kept away from stock wild-eyed lunatic parts, Hopper has attracted more attention for his embrace of conservative politics than for his acting in the last few years. Wildness has disappeared from Taos, too, or at least the Taos I encounter. The pair of panhandling kids I see as I leave downtown look out of place. There's no room for them here and no home for them in the hills, either—the seeds never took root.

From:

Posted Thursday, Nov. 19, 2009, at 9:29 AM ET

Day 5

After spending the night in Santa Fe, I get up early and head to Las Vegas, N.M. It's here that Wyatt and Billy run afoul of

the law, arrested for "parading without a permit" after they ride their bikes through a small-town celebration straight out of a Jaycees brochure. Las Vegas is in the middle of a sleepy morning as I pull up, but I'm in for a shock. Parking my car just off the town square, I look up and read the marquee:

DOUBLE FEATURE: EASY RIDER & DUEL

I'm excited about seeing *Easy Rider* on the big screen, having only watched it on DVD. I slip into the nearby Popular Dry Goods, note an ad from a company boasting that its clothes were featured in *No Country for Old Men*, then excitedly ask whether the theater is still open and whether it's really playing *Easy Rider*.

"It's still open," a man named Dennis replies, "but if you buy a ticket for *Easy Rider* you're going to end up seeing *G-Force*." Turns out the marquee's been

Advertisement



don't delay
get proven, proactive
identity theft
protection
CALL NOW
1-888-896-1878
LifeLock
#1 In Identity Theft Protection™

The Easy Rider Road Trip

changed because there's a movie filming in town, the Greg Mottola-directed *Paul*, in which Simon Pegg and Nick Frost play comic-book geeks road-tripping across America. My quest to discover how 40 years have altered a movie version of America has stumbled on a pocket of America altered for a movie.

Hollywood gets out here a lot. Tom Mix shot some Westerns here. The Communists invaded it in *Red Dawn*. Billy Bob Thornton's been here a couple of times, once when he directed an adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* and again when he starred in *The Astronaut Farmer*. It makes a fine stand-in for McCarthy's border country; the Coen Brothers were here for *No Country for Old Men*. But it's also a fine stand-in for small-town America, which I'm guessing is why *Paul* is using it. Later, I'll try to enter a cool-looking comic-book shop only to be told it's also part of a set.

In *Easy Rider*, it's here that Wyatt and Billy first encounter the small-town intolerance that will seal their fate. Their guide for this leg of the journey is a cellmate named George Hanson, a young local lawyer played by Jack Nicholson. Hanson wakes up next to them in jail, unsure where he is or how he got there. Soon the surroundings become familiar—thanks to his descent into alcoholism,

Hanson has come to know the inside of the jail quite well. He speaks proudly of his work with the ACLU and matter-of-factly about the family connections that keep his jail stints short and relatively pleasant. "They've got this here, see, scissor-happy 'Beautify America' thing going on around here," he tells Billy and Wyatt later. "They're trying to make everyone look like Yul Brynner."

Nicholson had been acting in films for more than a decade when he appeared in *Easy Rider*, but it was this film that made him a star. He'd done some memorable work for Roger Corman and starred in two notable Westerns for Monte Hellman, *The Shooting* and *Ride in the Whirlwind*. He wrote the latter, too, but even in writing his own character, he'd yet to find a role that took advantage of his talent for conveying a charming yet insistent spirit of dissent.

Advertisement



Send flowers
for any occasion

Bouquets \$19.99
from 19^{+s/h}

ProFlowers[®]
Order ONLY at
proflowers.com/happy
or call 1-877-888-0688

The Easy Rider Road Trip

As a man just barely able to restrain his disgust with mainstream society even as he works within it, Hanson is the template for memorable Nicholson roles that followed, from *Five Easy Pieces* to *Carnal Knowledge* to *Chinatown*. He's a bit more of an innocent than Nicholson heroes to come, but he shares their disdain for the world he's been handed, one with clearly marked, if rarely remarked on, limits. In Wyatt and Billy, Hanson sees an instant escape from the life he knows. He'll pay the price for that later.

Movies have long idealized small-town life. *Easy Rider* is not one of those movies. It presents the "silent majority" that swept Nixon into office the year before as a bigoted and ultimately murderous bunch. (What is still just a threat of prejudice and violence in Las Vegas becomes a terrifying reality when the film reaches the Deep South.) This no doubt played well with the movie's counterculture audience, and it's not as if a cultural divide didn't exist in America at the time. But the movie's depiction of Las Vegas and, later, the South tars a whole swath of the country with a broad brush.

Nicholson's Hanson, however, is an exception. Here's a man who's born of the same soil and speaking the same drawling language as the "Beautiful

America" set—a football star even—who's woken up to the shortcomings of the restrictive world around him. He's evidence that things can change—or would be if he weren't looking up from the bottom of a glass so often. Growing less effective by the drink, his '60s activism has gone limp in defeat.

"This used to be a hell of a country," Hanson tells his new friends after agreeing to join their trip to Mardi Gras. It's an oft-quoted line, one that makes Hanson sound more like the people he's leaving behind than the hippies he's joined. Would he really want to turn back the clock on the decade's political advances? Or has the end of that decade left him feeling hopeless? While cameras rolled on *Easy Rider*, both Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy died violently, the Vietnam War showed no signs of slowing, and domestic unrest mounted. It was enough to make anyone

Advertisement



Advertisement

don't delay
get proven, proactive
identity theft
protection
CALL NOW
1-888-896-1878
LifeLock
#1 In Identity Theft Protection™

The Easy Rider Road Trip

nostalgic for small-town comforts.

I spent much of my day in Las Vegas hanging out in a charming coffee shop where tattooed baristas served senior citizens playing board games. I left ready to pull up stakes and move there. It fit my movie-shaped ideal of what a small town was supposed to look like: the pleasant, tree-lined town square, smiling locals, a burger joint not associated with clowns or kings, a corner drug store complete with a soda fountain. The town surely has the same problems found across America, but they were nowhere to be seen during my visit. Of course, Las Vegas has an incentive to appear idyllic. If it appears otherwise, filmmakers will need to look elsewhere to find small-town imagery to idealize or subvert in their films. I ended up unsure whether I'd really seen Las Vegas at all, or just some Hollywood idea of small-town authenticity. After admiring a cowgirl painted on the side of a building announcing I'd arrived where "the Great Plains meet the mighty Rockies," I noticed it welcomed me to a town called "Calumet"—Las Vegas' name in *Red Dawn*. I could live here, but where would I really be?

From:

Posted Friday, Nov. 20, 2009, at 7:11 AM

ET

Day 6

I begin the day by flying from Albuquerque, N.M., to New Orleans. It's cheating, but only a little. Warned not to film in Texas because the state had no patience for long hair, *Easy Rider* skipped the state, so I do, too. Renting a car at the airport, I head directly to Morganza, La., a rural community up the road from Baton Rouge where Hanson, Wyatt, and Billy try, and fail, to enjoy a meal. "You name it, I'll throw rocks at it," one local tells the town sheriff as they enter the diner. The teenage girls dining there have a different reaction. Visibly attracted to the men, they follow them outside and coo over their bikes. *Easy Rider* used locals as the diner patrons and Fonda recalls giving the men a single line of motivation: "We've just raped a 13-year-old white girl outside of town."

Advertisement



Send flowers
for any occasion

Bouquets \$19⁹⁹
from 19^{+s/h}

ProFlowers[®]
Order ONLY at
proflowers.com/happy
or call 1-877-888-0688

The Easy Rider Road Trip

He didn't throw in that racial detail by accident. By this point in the film, race has become a persistent theme. When asked earlier by Billy and Wyatt whether he can get them out of jail, Hanson replies, "Well, I probably can if you haven't killed anybody. At least nobody white." Riding into Louisiana, the film lingers over images of rural black poverty. Looking like stereotypical rednecks, the diner patrons fill out the other side of that equation. It doesn't take much to connect the dots between the free-floating intolerance they direct at their shaggy visitors and its source, a resentment of the changing times. That they see the girls in the diner—the generation coming up—aroused by embodiments of that change sharpens their resentment to a deadly point.

There wasn't much to Morganza when *Easy Rider* filmed there, and there's less now. The cafe and the building that housed it are gone. Two buildings in the same style sit in disrepair down the street. Of course, it's not *really* Morganza we see in the film, just someplace the screenplay describes as "ext. Southern town—day." It would be easy to dismiss the sequence as a stereotype of a racist backwater if the moment didn't feel so real. And at least one member of the *Easy Rider* team knew how to conjure the troubled postwar American South: Terry Southern.

The issue of who deserves credit for *Easy Rider* has been disputed over the years. Hopper's friendship with Fonda hasn't survived, and both have played up the role of improvisation in ways that shift glory away from Southern, who shares a screenplay credit with them. It is difficult to pin down a dominant sensibility. The performances, direction, and look of the film all feed into a mood that slowly changes from celebration to elegy, but the individual episodes alternate between deadpan comedy (the opening scene of Wyatt and Billy out of their depths in drug-country Mexico) and finely drawn portraits of the era (the cultural anthropology of the New Buffalo commune). Even if no one can claim to be *Easy Rider's* author, the roots of all these moments can be traced to Southern's writing.

Southern is today best known for writing

Advertisement



Save Money this Fall
with **FREE**
SAMPLES

Sign up to receive
FREE Samples of
Name Brand Products

FreeSampleValues.com

QualityHealth™

The Easy Rider Road Trip

the screenplay for Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, which turned Peter George's joke-free Cold War novel *Two Hours to Doom* into a mad apocalyptic romp. By the time of *Easy Rider*, Southern had become an in-demand screenwriter and a counterculture icon, thanks in part to *Strangelove* and his well-received 1959 novel, *The Magic Christian*. Both mine a similar vein of black comedy, as does Southern's script for the 1965 film *The Loved One*, which takes Evelyn Waugh's Hollywood satire into darker territory.

Southern the broad satirist surfaces occasionally in *Easy Rider*. But the subtler Southern behind tightly focused short stories like "Red Dirt Marijuana" and "You're Too Hip, Baby," which emphasized the small dramas of particular times and places, can be found throughout the film. The Morganza sequence and the film's ending bring a third Southern to the fore, the unsparing observer responsible for the *Esquire* article "Twirling at Ole Miss," a pioneering piece of new journalism that found him embedded in a land rotten with fear, prejudice, and barely suppressed violence. Southern fills his stories of his native Texas with casual cruelty. Boys carry guns and use them without a second thought. Men with grudges die in knife fights that no one tries to stop. Violence happens without real reason but carries irreversible

consequences.

As *Easy Rider's* three travelers camp outside the town that rejected them, the redneck locals attack them, killing Hanson. His death feels like an inevitability, a violent outburst in an ongoing clash between an entrenched set of rigid social codes and a generation in open rebellion.

In 1969, it wasn't clear who would win the battle for the future of America, and the final stretches of *Easy Rider* present a nightmare vision of the portion of the country that had swept Nixon into the office the year before—the unyielding, disapproving mass he'd later dub the silent majority. As they plunge into the backwoods of Louisiana, Wyatt and Billy and the counterculture they represent start to look less like the coming age than like an aberration, something to be tolerated only as long as it remains

Advertisement



Save Money this Fall
with **FREE**
SAMPLES

Sign up to receive
FREE Samples of
Name Brand Products

FreeSampleValues.com

QualityHealth™

The Easy Rider Road Trip

unthreatening.

Day 7

After Hanson's murder, Wyatt and Billy hit New Orleans for the celebratory dinner they'd promised each other and for the visit to Madame Tinkertoys' brothel they'd promised their fallen friend. They share Wyatt's acid with a pair of prostitutes (Karen Black and future new wave one-hit-wonder Toni Basil) before moving out into the Mardi Gras-clogged streets and then one of the city's distinctive cemeteries. For Wyatt, at least, this turns out to be the perfect setting for a bad trip. He's left sobbing as he embraces a monument in New Orleans' St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, cursing his mother for some past transgression. Egged on by Hopper, Fonda drew on memories of his own mother's suicide for the scene, and the moment has an uncomfortable rawness.

Constructed in 1789, St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 is the city's oldest existing cemetery, and is known for its aboveground crypts and elaborate shrines. The rows of crypts make it easy to get lost here and hard to see what's around the next corner. Because it sits near the Iberville Projects, the city warns tourists not to visit the cemetery alone.

Easy Rider is a road movie, and characters in road movies either die or go home. The film repeatedly shows that its

heroes have no home to call their own. The places Wyatt and Billy don't reject—the experimental community of the commune, the open frontier of Monument Valley—try either to lock them up or to destroy them. In New Orleans, they find only death, even in the midst of a celebration of excess and renewal.

The night before their murders, Wyatt and Billy have conflicting thoughts beside their campfire. Mardi Gras behind them and Florida ahead, Billy's happy at last. "We did it," he says. "We blew it," Wyatt replies, refusing to elaborate. He doesn't have to. Since Hanson's death, his mood has darkened, as if the possibility for change died with their friend. Wyatt's bad trip has also stirred memories of an older darkness. He may not expect to die the next day, but he knows they're not headed to a happy ending.

Advertisement



Advertisement

don't delay
get proven, proactive
identity theft
protection
CALL NOW
1-888-896-1878
LifeLock
#1 In Identity Theft Protection™

The Easy Rider Road Trip

Wyatt and Billy are killed by a pair of stereotypical good ol' boys in a pickup truck. One announces that he plans to scare the hippies by pointing a shotgun at them, then decides to pull the trigger, apparently annoyed when Wyatt gives him the finger. Or maybe there's no motivation at all. They get Billy first. Wyatt rushes to help his friend but is quickly cut down as well, his gas tank and the bills inside blowing up around him. The camera pulls up from the fiery wreck, then draws back further and further still, the end credits rolling against the image of a dead end mistaken for an open road.

When I drove out to Morganza the day before, I looked for the stretch of highway where Wyatt and Billy met their fates, but I couldn't find it. Maybe I didn't drive far enough. Maybe the place has changed, become unrecognizable over the years.

The movie's final scene captures a growing feeling at the time that the decade had begun to wind down to a bitter end, that the New Frontier promised at its beginning had receded beyond the horizon. The finale feels almost apocalyptically pessimistic, and the years that followed, and the films *Easy Rider* inspired, would often reinforce its conclusions. The film's success led to other philosophical road

movies in the early-'70s, films like *Two-Lane Blacktop* and *Vanishing Point*, as distinctive in their own ways as *Easy Rider* but nearly unimaginable without it. The movie's dour, inquisitive spirit found its way into other films as well, often embodied by Jack Nicholson, whose characters in films like *Five Easy Pieces* and *The Last Detail* sometimes appear to be responding to lessons learned at a Louisiana campsite.

Following their on-screen path 40 years later, I didn't find what Wyatt and Billy were looking for, either. But as I drove the long highways they traveled, I gained a greater respect for the film's point of view than I'd had before. Listening to the news of the day on the radio as I drifted from exit to exit, it wasn't hard to imagine what it was like to feel lost and alone in a country of overwhelming beauty and irreconcilable divisions. Yet I took some comfort from the movie as

Advertisement



The Easy Rider Road Trip

well. The doom *Easy Rider* predicted never quite arrived. Though some of the stops along the way have changed, the roads Billy and Wyatt traveled are still out there—waiting for anyone who chooses to see where they will take them, even if that place doesn't end up looking like home.

Keith Phipps writes about movies for and edits the A.V. Club. He's also one of the editors and authors of Inventory: 16 Films Featuring Manic Pixie Dream Girls, 10 Great Songs Nearly Ruined by Saxophone, and 100 More Obsessively Specific Pop-Culture Lists.

Advertisement



Send flowers
for any occasion

Bouquets \$19.99
from 19^{+s/h}

ProFlowers[®]
Order ONLY at
proflowers.com/happy
or call 1-877-888-0688

<http://www.slate.com/toolbar.aspx?action=print&id=2233176>

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™