

# Easy rider

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



The late sixties were a strange time for America. The assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, along with the election of Nixon caused feelings of unease within society. The American death toll in Vietnam was dramatically increasing which was spurning more and more anti war protests and civil rights demonstrations, often resulting in violence and rioting. '

To many people all over world, the Establishment, or the path of the straight and narrow, was looking sinister and the protest movement the counter-culture was a promise of liberation and renewal'(http://www. ilmsite. org/easy. html, Putman). American society was split and people were searching for there own identity as well as their country's ideal of " The American dream". Easy Rider was released during this period and much of the audience identified with the overbearing themes of anti-establishment and the search for true freedom, or at least the illusion of it. The film, far from being a " feel good" movie symbolised or even marked the collapse of the idealistic 60's.

Up until now these themes and the counter culture as a whole had not been represented on celluloid or at least not with the level of realism that Easy Rider displays. It was a film that was very much socially and politically relevant of the times and was a huge cult success among youth audiences, partly because they could identify with the two protagonists 'quest for freedom in a conformist, frigidly corrupt, America' (http://www. filmsite. org/easy. html. Putman). Symbolism through out the film enhances this ideology.

It could be argued that the end scene, when Fonda's character is killed and his bike, the Captain America, explodes, that it is a metaphor for the death of America itself and is a blatant representation of the burning of the American Flag, seeing as the motorcycles gasoline tank is painted with the stars and stripes. The title of the film 'Easy Rider' is slang terminology for a person or people who live off the immoral earnings of prostitutes. At the opening of the film the two lead characters make a drug deal to fund their imminent road trip and hide the money in the bikes gas tank.

This could suggest that the protagonists are "Easy Riders", not just because they are laid back, cool and ride choppers, but also because they too live off the immoral earnings of a corrupt country. A kind of, if you can't beat them join them philosophy. Even Fonda, the producer of Easy Rider states in the documentary Born to be wild: The Story of Easy Rider (Jones, 1994), that the "scene where the drug money is being stashed in the bikes stars and stripes tank, is directly referring to how "America is being fucked by dirty, corrupt cash, and how liberty has become a whore and we're all out for an easy ride.

The film was never intended for a mainstream audience, with the decline of cinema due to the increase of television it was only ever intended to be distributed to "Drive ins" mainly populated by the youth market, but understandably because the film was realised during a time of such social upheaval and the content addressed many of the issues of the time, it obtained a much wider audience than anybody could have possibly imagined.

Hopper made his screen debut in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Ray, 1955), but as a filmmaker emerged from the Roger Corman exploitation cinema of the mid 60's and was Second Unit Director on *The Trip* (Corman, 1967). *The Trip* starred Fonda in the lead role. Corman showed no interest in filming essential psychedelic "acid trip scenes" for the picture, more than likely due to budgetary constraints, so Hopper and Fonda decided to go out in the desert and film it themselves, in their own time.

Regardless of whether or not the scenes made it to the final cut, it was this rewarding experience that inspired the two young collaborators to make a movie together, "a motorcycle movie, but a different one", as Hopper would later pitch it. Fonda had previously starred in another biker exploitation flick, *The Wild Angels* (Corman, 1966) and Hopper in *The Glory Stompers* (Lanza, 1968), so the two hopefuls already had an established audience in this genre.

*The Wild Angels* in particular had given Fonda an iconic status among teens as a "hip, drug taking, biker by the name of Heavenly blues". With this in mind Hopper approached American International Pictures (producers for many of Corman's pictures) to finance the project. Unfortunately AIP wouldn't allow Hopper, who was still relatively unknown to direct. Hopper wouldn't settle for a mere leading starring role, he wanted to be the driving force behind the project, the director and what later emerged, the auteur of the piece.

The film was eventually backed by B. B. S, owned by Bob Rafelson, Bert Schneider and Steve Blauner, who were also producing another independent,

surrealistic film *Head* (Rafelson, 1968), starring the popular teen band The Monkees, Rafelson initially gave Hopper \$40, 000 to go down and shoot the Mardi gras and cemetery sequence, something which was done in a very "guerrilla filmmaking" type of way. The scenes were shot on 16mm (not an acceptable studio format), heavily improvised acting and little or no shooting schedule. Hopper had even confused the dates of the Mardi gras carnival, not allowing enough time to get a professional crew in place.

The footage was cleverly spliced together to make it seem as if the characters were participating in the carnival, although in reality there is only one or two shots where this is the case. The style of the footage was enough to impress B. B. S into handing over the remainder of the film's budget, although rumour has it maverick script writer Terry Southern, writer of *Dr Strangelove* (Kubrick, 1964) was brought on board at this point to give the project an air of respectability and professionalism, although he, himself, wavered his normal fee, believing the story to be genuinely ground breaking.

Many people regard *Easy Rider* as the first real American independent film, released by a major studio, I wouldn't whole-heartily agree with this, as *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn 1967) was released two years earlier by Warner. What in fact is possibly true is that *Easy Rider* was the first independent film to achieve international box office success. Made for as little as \$360, 000, it grossed over \$50 million, worldwide in the year of its release and inspired other independent filmmakers of that time, such as Scorsese, Coppola and Bogdanovitch.

Hopper (Director, Writer) and Fonda (Producer, Writer) were nominated in the 1969 Oscars for best screenplay. The film also earned Nicholson a nomination for Best Supporting Actor and helped catapult his career to stardom. Not only was the film a success, but that success was recognised by the Hollywood studio bosses and the Academy. Easy Rider was a pivotal movie in bridging the gap between Independent filmmaking and the ridged codes and conventions, in terms of narrative, genre and content of the studio mainstream system.

The Pop Cultural, mini-revolutionary film was also a reflection of the "New Hollywood" and the first blockbuster hit from a new wave of Hollywood directors that would break with a number of Hollywood conventions. It had little background or historical development of characters, a lack of typical heroes, uneven pacing, jump cuts and flash forward transitions between scenes, an improvisational style and mood of acting and dialogue. ' ([http://www. filmsite. org/easy. tml](http://www.filmsite.org/easy.tml), Dirks).

This style of filmmaking was similar to European art house cinema of the time especially the French new wave movement and directors such as Goddard and Truffaut, whom of which Hopper was an avid fan. It is evident throughout Easy Rider that some of these influences have filtered through. Easy Riders narrative was deliberately loose the story was told in fits and starts, with sometimes overly extended scenes where nothing much seems to happen.

This was particularly apparent in the scenes around the camp fire, where Hoppers character had a tendency to ramble, sometimes inaudibly and it

seemed like an eternity before any other character replied. When you expected the camera to cut and move on it didn't, it stayed with the protagonists capturing a personal moment or conversation. It had at times a documentary feel to the film, especially the 16mm footage, which cut with more conventional, panoramic 35mm film, remained in the picture.

Some critics argued that 'what the cameras were shooting was actually reality, posed as a movie' ([http://www. dailynebraskan. com/vnews/display. v/ART/2004/02/18/4032f1ec3fb39](http://www.dailynebraskan.com/vnews/display.v/ART/2004/02/18/4032f1ec3fb39), Jeffers, 2004) and that these were the experiences and beliefs of Hopper and Fonda both on and off camera. If this were the case it would have explained the films aura of authenticity, making not only the characters but the themes and way of life represented even more believable and important. Easy Rider may have pitched itself as a biker film, but it lends itself to elements of the western genre more than anything else.

The names of the two anti heroes, Wyatt and Billy are derived from the " Wild West" legends of Wyatt Earp and Billy the Kid. They consider themselves social outlaws on a search for a " New World", free of bureaucracy and corruption. They are clear cut modern cowboys riding motor cycles instead of horses and using their philosophy and pacifist values, instead of guns to fight for what they truly believe in. To replace the hard liquor and saloons portrayed in a classic western, the two urban cowboys smoke marijuana and rest at hippy communes along their journey.

The Western genre is toyed with and played almost in reverse. 'The western's conventional east-to-west trajectory with its promises of freedom

and opportunity and its quest for frontier fortune is reversed as Easy Riders protagonists "score" their money at the beginning of the film only to lose it in the end' (Klinger, 1997, p183) A lot of the genres iconography is still present, such as Billy's buckskin, hippie attire and the scene where Wyatt fixes his motorcycle wheel along side a farmer shoeing his horse.

It makes a point of letting the audience know that the motorcycles are not symbols of juvenile delinquencies, as how previous films represented youths and bikes, but their motorcycles highlight their freedom and ability to move on when ever they see fit. The two protagonist travel from west to east, almost a journey back in time through Americas cultural history to rediscover the old values which once made the country great. . The film created a hybrid genre of the Western fused with the road movie.

This style of story telling and genre was fresh and original at the time, 'It was the first major movie to be so adamant and unapologetic about its use of drugs. ' ([http://www.dvdmoviecentral.com/ReviewsText/easy\\_rider.htm](http://www.dvdmoviecentral.com/ReviewsText/easy_rider.htm), Jacobson. ) It didn't ask the audience to give any sort of moral judgement and the lead characters didn't suffer any adverse consequences due to their drug use/abuse. 'The film didn't just expose drug use it promoted it, treating it as a soothing Indian peace pipe formal and loving. '

The scene by the campfire where Fonda's character explains to Nicholson, that marijuana isn't addictive and it gives you a whole different outlook on the day if you smoke it in the morning, is very courageous for its time, it goes against popular establishment opinion on drugs. Seeing how Nicholson's character, George Hanson is an alcoholic it also asks the



question, what is the difference between the two? Other than that alcohol is a legal, socially acceptable form of drug use.

This type of provocative representation of soft drugs appealed to the rebellious mindset of youth culture at the time and although not a blatant advertisement to go out and get "stoned" the content had an intelligent honesty about it. There is another reason why the film succeeded in so many areas. Where at the time mainstream, Hollywood was producing easily digestible forgettable films, which neatly "tied up" all the loose ends of the narrative, Easy Rider raised as many questions about its content as it answered.

It gave the audience food for thought and made them reassess their own beliefs on repression and national identity. Certain threads of narrative were left open to the viewer. Fonda's line toward the end of the film "We blew it" is still, even today the cause for debate over its meaning. Also the ending, which is regarded as highly unconventional, does pose the question, can true freedom only really be achieved in death. The character of Wyatt believed so, as it was clear at this moment, he chose suicide over continuing to try to exist in such prejudiced, hypocritical societies he had encountered on his journey.

The character of Billy doesn't share the self awareness that Wyatt does and his death was a result of the prejudices of the bigoted narrow mindedness mentality of America's Deep South, at the time. Although he wasn't black, he was different and as Nicholson's Monologue earlier in the film explained, anybody who challenged the ideals of the governing culture and expressed

their own freedom of speech was dangerous, radical and to be feared. 'The film was considered a spectacular document of its times that effectively represented the hippie ethos as well as the serious rifts between counter and dominant cultures' (Klinger, 1997. 179).

The hippie "way of life" was depicted and explored thorough out the film. The hitchhiking stranger that Wyatt and Billy encountered on the way played out the role of a preacher. When asked which city he came from, he simply replied "just a city, there all the same". The impression given from the statement was that the political and social discourse, which our protagonists were fleeing from, was the same everywhere, "infecting" the whole of America's infrastructure, no matter where they went.

The Hitchhiker offers them salvation within the confines of a rural hippie commune, which on the surface seems the answer to their dreams, a self contained, self sufficient utopian community, free from repression and dictatorship. The commune scene gives the audience a vision of the other extreme, but again intelligently explores whether or not a true democracy is possible, where everybody is equal, is possible at all.

While Wyatt is accepted and impressed by the simplistic community, Billy is taunted and ridiculed because of his dress and erratic behaviour. We can therefore see a higher achy developing among the residents. While Wyatt is content staying at the commune, Billy is eager to move on; illustrating that one mans illusion of freedom is different to another's. Another key element which was very inventive at the time was the use of popular music within the film.

Artists which represented the counter culture, such as Steppenwolf (Born to be Wild) and The Byrds (Wasn't born to follow) not only accompanied the visuals but cleverly echoed and enforced the narrative and state of mind of the two antiheroes 'This utilization of rock and roll, the most popular form of expression for the youth culture in the late 60's, was a double rarity. Easy Rider not only uses rock successfully, it also treats the youth drop out thing successfully. You can't have one without the other. '

The various rock anthems were also used to give rhythm and pace, during the stunningly shot scenes of Wyatt and Billy riding cross country, from town to town across the American landscape. These scenes almost interrupted the narrative of the film and accompanied by the soundtrack, played like a music video to a pre MTV generation. 'The combinations of road montage and musical passage act as interludes between narrative actions, 'these devices cue the audience that it is time to watch and take pleasure in the spectacle' (Klinger, 1997, p189).

The sequences are "eye candy" to watch and show us glimpses of a beautiful country untouched and untainted by civilization. 'The film juxtaposed "America the beautiful" with "Amerika the ugly" and highlighted the vast discrepancy between the visual beauty of the movie..... and the ugliness of the climate of life in the late 60's' (Klinger, 1997, p181) The overriding success of Easy Rider was mainly down to the fact that it made a lot of money for all involved. Fonda, reputedly made more money off the back of this film, than his father, Henry Fonda did throughout his entire Hollywood career.

The Inventive filming techniques, narrative structure and direction, combined with the fact that it captured the zeitgeist of the times, made Easy Rider an instant classic. More importantly major Hollywood studios become aware of the youth culture as an audience and tried to duplicate Easy Riders successes, not only in terms of form and content, but also in the practical realities of filmmaking such as investing more in smaller budget independent projects and giving more creative control to the Director.

More experimental styles of story telling overshadowed traditional codes and conventions from the mainstream. From the ashes of Easy Riders influential style, more widely recognised Independent films grew, such as MASH (Altman, 1970), Mean Streets (Scorsese, 1973) and Chinatown (Polanski, 1974). 'The period between 1969 and 1979 has now become what is known as " The golden age of American Cinema" and there is no doubt that Easy Rider was a key player in establishing this chapter in the history of American independent film.