“Nobody had ever seen themselves portrayed in a movie. At every love-in across the country people were smoking grass and dropping LSD, while audiences were still watching Doris Day and Rock Hudson!”
   -Dennis Hopper

“So the doobs and the Heinie kicked right in and I fell into the photograph and thought, that’s it! I know what to do for my next sex, motorcycle and drugs movie!”
   -Peter Fonda

Three major events in the summer of 1969 changed America; the Woodstock music festival, the Manson family murders, and *Easy Rider*. Woodstock captured the feeling of free love, drugs and music the youth culture espoused at the time. The Manson murders were a stark reminder of the dangerous level societal tensions had reached, and what could happen when they boil over. *Easy Rider* is the generation's expression of these two disparate realities colliding. The movie creates a dichotomy of freedom and violence and rides the jagged line between them. As Pauline Kael put it, the viewer of “*Easy Rider* may still be caught by something edgy and ominous in it – the acceptance of the constant danger of sudden violence.”

Motorcycle movies had become popular and ‘cool’ in the mid 1950s with *The Wild One* and remained so for a few years before petering out. The genre had resurfaced in 1966 with *The Wild Angels*, also starring Peter Fonda and *Hells Angels on Wheels*, starring Jack Nicholson. Fonda and Dennis Hopper were in the party scene of young Hollywood and were growing tired of the formulaic ‘motorcycle pictures’ that were being rehashed. They wanted to make something new, tentatively called *The Loners* that would be a motorcycle picture to speak to the truth and capture the younger generation. With money garnered from Columbia Studios by telling a few lies, they set about making their film. Production included several messianic tirades from first-time director Dennis Hopper,

surreptitious recordings, loaded guns, crew walkouts, and at least one knife fight, which caused actor Rip Torn to leave the production.\textsuperscript{4} Peter Fonda said of Hopper’s frightening presence on set, “I was defenseless against him. He could jump out at me anyplace, get me with a bottle or a knife.”\textsuperscript{5} This frenzied and dysfunctional production led to Hopper’s supposed masterpiece, at over three hours long, and largely without musical accompaniment. Everyone involved (with the exception of Hopper) knew it was a disaster, and the producer gave Hopper and his girlfriend tickets to Taos, so they could re-edit the movie in secrecy. Cutting the movie down to an hour and a half, the editor started putting music from his own record collection into the film, to keep from being bored by endless silent shots of highway. When Hopper returned, he was livid and thought they had “made a TV show”\textsuperscript{6} out of his film. He eventually accepted it, and they kept the music.

The filming, chaotic as it was, had managed to produce something new and different from the films of the time. Keeping the raw-edit music made this the first non-musical movie to use popular music in place of a score. Believing fully in commitment, Hopper had stressed the use of real marijuana in the shooting of the movie, which was also a first. The film, having been cut down so much from its original form, had a sparse, free quality in which the “heroes are suspended in an invisible story, like falcons on an invisible current of air. You can't see it, but it holds them up.”\textsuperscript{7} The bad LSD trip scene in Mardi Gras (which includes stylistic overexposure that actually came as a result of one of the film canisters being knocked over prematurely during one of Hopper’s fits) became the industry standard for ‘trippy’ drug scenes with its quick cuts, disturbing imagery and non-chronological time passage. The movie included many of the countercultural icons of the time – drugs, communes, men with long hair, and most importantly, the idea that freedom exists if you make it.

Hopper and Fonda had created not only a new kind of road movie, but also a new myth of the

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid, 71.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid, 72.
\textsuperscript{7} Roger Ebert, ”Easy Rider, review,” \textit{The Chicago Sun Times}, September 28, 1969.
west that “embodied the ideal of rugged individualism untainted by restrictive laws or prissy social conventions.”

In the film, Peter Fonda plays Wyatt (Earp?), known as Captain America for the American flags on his helmet, jacket and gas tank. He is quiet and serious. He respects simple living and yearns to 'find America.' Throughout the movie he tells farmers they should be proud of the lives they have made for themselves, and assures the city-raised communards that they'll make it. He sees the American notion of freedom in the myth of The West, as only arrogant city-folk can. Dennis Hopper plays Billy (the Kid?), the paranoid drugged-out hippy, “who tries to look like a dime store portrait of Buffalo Bill" decked out in fringe and a wide brimmed hat, ironically as stereotypical as he is true-to-life. Billy does not trust people, and people don't trust him. He is less worried about the greater implications of the meaning of their journey than he is about the money shrouded within the American flag (of Wyatt’s gas tank and heavy-handed metaphor). Jack Nicholson rounds out the three with George, who has been called “the film's only character, in the Hollywood sense.” George is a normal, realistic person. He has faults, being an alcoholic, but also has a job and the same strivings for freedom that Wyatt and Billy claim. He is the 'American' that the ego and id of Wyatt and Billy, respectively, can fight over for influence. Being that he represents the ‘non-free’ person, imprisoned within us all, it is not surprising that George is the first one to die when the allure of the free, rugged West meets the embarrassment of the racist, intolerant South.

The film was a huge blockbuster success. Everyone on both sides of the ‘generation gap’ saw it, the young because they loved it, and the elders in some last ditch effort to understand what these kids were into. Many young people saw the movie as an experience to be had more than once, so it “did a lot of repeat business while the sweet smell of pot drifted through theaters.”

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1960s, this movie spoke the truth about the isolation from and frustration with society that they felt. The tagline for the movie on the poster – *A man went looking for America. And couldn’t find it anywhere...* - blatantly advertises the search for freedom and the yearning to live a life of one’s own. The movie itself conveyed these messages largely without words, using what Pauline Kael sarcastically called “the wonderful new “visual literacy” possessed by the young.” The problem many had with the movie was that it didn’t really seem like the characters *were* looking for America. Many had a hard time seeing this trip across the country as something greater than what it really is – two guys going to New Orleans to spend their drug money at Mardi Gras. The older generation seemed to see the characters as losers and thought the fans (to further quote Kael) “accept and *prefer* the loser self-image, not wanting to believe that anything good can happen to them. They don’t make it happen; they won’t even let it happen.” The ‘old folks’ just didn’t get the movie. Along with *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Graduate*, *Easy Rider* had ushered in the New Hollywood, a cooler Hollywood that wasn’t for squares any more.

Critically the reception was mixed, evidenced by one reviewer describing it as “disturbing … difficult to praise or blame by the old rules. Its pace – languid, peyote-ish ... will be either welcome or worrisome to viewers.” Some younger reviewers loved it, gushing, “it was inevitable that a great film would come along, utilizing the motorcycle genre, the same way the great Westerns suddenly made everyone realize they were a legitimate American art form, *Easy Rider* is the picture.” On the other hand, it was not just the more conservative reviewers who panned the movie. Many feminist groups felt it furthered misogynistic stereotyping. One women’s journal maligned the fact that “women who appear on the screen for any period of time are either feeders or fuckers (of men, of course) …

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13 Ibid, 80.
commune dwellers who mutely feed and fondle our heroes … [or] prostitutes who – surprise! – take their clothes off.”

The legacy of *Easy Rider* has been far reaching in many different ways. Its effect on those involved was as mixed as its reception. Dennis Hopper’s next directorial effort, *The Last Movie*, (1971) was a critical and box office disaster. Jack Nicholson’s next endeavor, however, *Five Easy Pieces*, (1970) was a huge hit and earned Nicholson his second Oscar nomination, propelling him further into stardom. Peter Fonda would never recreate the success he experienced with *Easy Rider*. In 2009 the ill-conceived *Easy Rider 2: The Ride Back* was released straight to video. The larger effect *Easy Rider* had was that on American youth culture. The New Hollywood gave the disenfranchised and skeptical young a cinematic rallying cry. As Dennis Hopper states in his quote at the beginning of the essay, they had never seen themselves portrayed in this way. In a way, *Easy Rider* legitimized the movement in larger, more concrete and lasting terms than protests, be-ins, or concerts could. This concreteness had it negative side as well. By showing that counterculture ‘cool’ could be profitable, the movie aroused corporate interest. “[T]he studios began to raid other aspects of the counterculture, always taking care to sanitize them and neutralize their oppositional social implications.”

The cooption of the counterculture caused people to wonder “whether the new Americans are free. Are they blowing their freedom, are they, after all, not the stuff of counter-revolution, but merely a sold-out generation?” In its attempt to portray the illusive revolutionary spirit of a generation, *Easy Rider* drew a map to its secrets. It left everyone echoing Jack Nicholson’s famous line from the film: *You know, this used to be a helluva good country. I can't understand what's gone wrong with it.* Both sides of the generational rift could agree with this sentiment, but for completely different reasons.

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Work Cited


