

Easy Rider (1969)

Easy Rider is simply a buddy film, a story that celebrates liberation, rock and roll, drugs and the freedom of the road. This film is all about individuality and the two main characters couldn't be any more different. Captain America is a laid back, remote and calm man who enjoys the simple beauties of life. When having dinner with a Mexican rancher he says to him, "*It's not every man who can live off the land, you know. You can be proud.*" Billy is a much more tense, impulsive and high tempered character, and in many ways he probably wouldn't survive the road without his friend Captain America. The both of them decide to go on a cross country trip from Louisiana to Santa Fe; but not before making some quick cash from a drug dealer at an L.A. airport, (the drug dealer is ironically played by Phil Spector the famous rock producer) and stashing their money in a one of their motorcycle gas tanks. There is slight symbolism when Captain American throws down his wristwatch before the two head off on their journey which shows how these two are trying to flee and break free from conservative society. I found it interesting that they sell cocaine to receive the road money but during the trip the two of them prefer to smoke marijuana instead.

The making of *Easy Rider* became legendary when Peter Fonda and friend Dennis Hopper came up with an idea to create a movie that was a like a modern day western. Fonda

offered Hopper to direct the picture but he had several problems finding financing until he was introduced to one of the executives of BBS Production which was an independent company at the time. And yet Hopper still was financially limited and because Hopper didn't have money for an original score, he decided to use several rock and roll songs instead. The film executives when viewing the outtakes loved the idea and it eventually became one of the first of many movies in which a movie would be scored by hit songs like The Byrds, The Band and Steppenwolf. (*Easy Rider*, DVD Commentary. Dir. Dennis Hopper).

What makes this road picture much different from many others like *Badlands*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Gun Crazy* and *You Only Live Once* is its absence in a main female character. There are women the two characters encounter and even sleep with during their travels, like for instance the women at a commune full of hippies struggling to grow crops in a much difficult climate. There are even the two prostitutes they pick up at a brothel and take to Mardi Gras, in which all four of them ingest LCD. And yet these women never become potential love interests for the male leads within the storyline because the two men realize that they do not belong on their travels and in the story itself. *Easy Rider* is a machoistic dream where the male is liberated from authority, the law and women; in which they are free to do what they want and when they want with no one telling them what to do. For whatever reason men love their cars and motorcycles. Men always have had a profound love and respect for their automobiles and means of transportation and I believe everyone has heard the quote that 'some men love their cars more than their women.'

The main themes of *Easy Rider* reflect the time in which the film was made where liberated individuals try and stand up against the conservative establishment of what is accepted

in society but are bullied by townspeople and the law. This wasn't the first film that started the rebellious male youth and their personal love for their means of transportation. Nicolas Ray's *Rebel without a Cause* (in which Hopper had a small role) with James Dean showed how men used the strength of their masculinity by the power of the cars that they drove. A closer comparison is *The Wild One* starring the legendary Marlon Brando in which he plays the leader of a vicious biker gang. And yet when viewing *The Wild One* today it's themes now seem somewhat dated, but *Easy Rider* still feels fresh and timeless.

I believe that *Easy Rider* wouldn't be the classic it is today if it wasn't for the introduction of the character of George Hanson played by Jack Nicholson. Nicholson's energetic performance gives this film a jolt of new fresh energy. George meets Captain America and Billy when the two get locked up for driving without a permit. George is an alcoholic lawyer who has good relationships with the cops and talks them into releasing the two men. He is nothing like Captain America and Billy in which he never smoked pot, (there is a humorous scene where he does smoke a joint of theirs for the first time) but prefers his booze and loves to tell his theories on aliens walking among us on our planet. Nicholson's sardonic performance in *Easy Rider* created such a huge sensation that when he decides to go along for the ride there's a scene with him wearing a football helmet on the back of George's motorcycle which became iconic. (*Easy Rider*, DVD Commentary. Dir. Dennis Hopper). At a time in Nicholson's life in which he was planning to quit his failing acting career, his good friend Dennis Hopper offered him the supporting role in *Easy Rider*; which by luck came about when actor Rip Torn who was originally cast in the role left the production. Nicholson's performance as George gave him his first of many Oscar Nominations and after his lead performance in *Five Easy Pieces*; a legend was born. (*Easy Rider: Shaking the Cage*. Dir. Charles Kiselyak. 1999)

In some ways his character George is the heart of *Easy Rider* and during one of their campfire nights out in the woods, the idealistic speech he gives the men sum up what the film is saying. *"You know, this used to be a hell of a good country."* When Billy tells him how he thinks people are scared of them George says, *"There not scared of you, their scared of what you represent. What you represent is freedom. Talking about it and being it are two different things. I mean it's real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace. They gonna talk to you and talk to you about individual freedom but when they see a free individual it's gonna scare em."* In one of the most abrupt and tragic scenes of the film the three of them are attacked and beaten by a bunch of rednecks who have seen them earlier at a corner café and who were probably furious when watching them sexually excite and stir their young female girls. George is killed in the horrific attack and so Captain America and Billy take George's body and wrap it up with his belongings. They then continue on their journey to New Orleans and go to the brothel that George originally wanted to visit.

When arriving in Mardi Gras they meet two prostitutes and they decide to go into the parade and head to the cemetery while all four of them ingest LSD. The Mardi Gras and the psychedelic cemetery scene were very experimentally shot, with many shots in 16mm camera, surreal like sound effects, Catholic imagery, documentary footage and quick cuts and edits. The scene in which Fonda is found uncontrollably crying near the statue of the Madonna; was something he was told to do by Hopper. Hopper told him when doing that scene to think of his mother who had committed suicide when he was 10 years old and to ask her questions on why she had left him and how much he hated her. (Easy Rider: Shaking the Cage. Dir. Charles Kiselyak.1999).

The tragic conclusion of the film was common in most road films in those days in which the people who embrace individual freedoms in a conservative society usually find themselves punished; like in *Bonnie and Clyde*. The night before the death of Captain America and Billy, the two finally reach their destination and Captain American says to Billy, "*We blew it, man.*" His quote can be read as a foreshadowing of their upcoming fates but I read it as him believing that the both of them went to look for the American dream and during their journey lost sight of it. The death of Billy after being shot and killed by hillbillies on the road and the fiery explosion of Captain America and his motorcycle is still shocking to this day. And yet it had to end no other way to show that these men's search for individual freedom and liberation in a violent and closed minded society ends in not only their death but in the death of the American dream.