

What have you got?

Art Johnston

1969

SAN FRANCISCO—"Naked Angels" is the best movie I've ever seen. I've seen "2001" four times, and I thought that was better than "Wild Angels" which I saw only 3 times.

A new genre of films is being born from the low-count B-movie trade: Motorcycle flicks. They are destined to become as classic as Westerns—only Westerns were legends and dealt with the projected past. Motorcycle flicks define our future, and our future is one of gangland violence, measured in horsepower cubic centimeters and steel tonnage. Get ready.

When I was a kid in the lower West Side of Detroit, Marlon Brando—in his role as the "Wild One"—was my hero. Brando, on his raunchy limey Bonny.

Our neighborhood, down the street from the American Motors plant, was dominated by the Highwaymen. They were the only rebels around, and they were our conception of Men. They were bad. Like Brando, they rode Triumphs and wore black leather jackets with their names painted on their vests. To this day my best buddy still wears his leathers with his name painted across his vest. Jimmy probably hasn't read a newspaper since 1952, but he goes to B movies.

By the late fifties, everything had died in Detroit. Nobody rode bikes much anymore. You no longer had to worry about getting sliced up with razor blades if you messed with a biker's girl. The Knights of the Road joined the AMA and had children.

Even the Stiletos—a notorious Mexican-American street gang—broke up. Juvenile delinquency seemed to give out to Gidget-Pat Boone consciousness.

In 1966 there were only a handful of "California choppers" in FoMoCo city, one of 'em being mine. But in the six months after Roger Corman's classic, "Wild Angels," was released, the Outlaws came to town from Chi. And they grew. They rode Harleys like Fonda and like the Angels. Pretty soon all the bad motherfuckers out of the grease pits of Rouge were riding Harleys.

And they had all that overtime bread to pour into polished chrome, custom steel tubing, and Wild Bill's 32 coat lacquered metal-flecked deep-toned hand-rubbed paint jobs.

By 1968 a horde of outlaw gangs were going strong, armed this time with guns instead of blades. People got killed. When I was back in Detroit two weeks ago, the motorcycle gangs (like everybody else now in motown) were wired to the bone. Clubs were being decimated in bloody shoot-outs.

The point I have been leading up to is that the lifestyles of most American youth are defined by B movies, the only Total Media. Marlon Brando screamin' up the Highway through all those screen credits had an impact on me like nothin' till I saw Gene Vincent at Walled Lake Casino.

"Wild Angels" was shown at second rate neighborhood movie houses. (But the film eventually won first prize at the Venice Film Festival. It was the first movie I ever reviewed, and I think I was the only reviewer in the USA to take it seriously).

Corman, who financially backed “Naked Angels,” insisted over the objections of 24-year-old director David Dawdy that it be released as a B movie. The ad for the movie, laid over a raunchy pussy’s bare ass, reads: “They ravaged their prey with a quarter ton of hot steel between their legs!”

The movie trip is so powerful (...cowering in the seat of our ’49 Olds at the Mission Drive n, zonked on Panama Red, the choppers roared off the screen and down our throats...) even the actors are sucked into it.

“Wild One” has dominated Brando’s personality since he made it. A rebel and a human to this day, he has met with and supports the Black Panthers 100%.

Peter Fonda (“Blues” in “Wild Angels”) has been getting into some weird shit himself. And his new bike flick, “Easy Rider,” yet to be released, just won a prize at Cannes. It is about a dealer who rides his chopper to the Mardi Gras. It is painted like the American flag.

“Naked Angels” was made by a dude who used to be managing editor of the L.A. *Free Press*, and it was made for you and all the other badass tough kids across the country. Relate to this: this film will tell you more about what is going to be happening in America than reading the “red book” everyday will. Why? Because this film is about us, and for us.

It’s about brothers who don’t just bullshit and sign petitions and write programs. They do what they say. They get together, git down, and take the Power over their own lives.

That’s what this movie is all about—a wolf pack of madmen fighting to the line for Total Freedom.

“What are you rebelling against?”

“What have you got?”

—Brando in “Wild One”

“What do you want?”

“We want to be free from the Man!”

—Blues (Fonda) in “Wild Angels”

At the end of “Wild One” Brando makes it, without his gang and without his chick. Too far out: riding down that asphalt alone, kicking into third in the bitter wind.

At the end of “Wild Angels” Fonda is alone at the grave of his best brother, with his old lady and the gang splitting. The heat is coming down, and we hear sirens.

And it doesn’t matter what your trip is, when you get into it heavy enough the message is the same, whether it be Motorcycles, Mao, Mescaline, or Mother-fucking. And that message is Total Freedom from the Management of the Plant! Can you dig that?

There is only one basic Motorcycle story, just as there is only one love story. But in “Naked Angels” it is told in more depth than before.

The story, as always, is about a heavy Scorpio dude who is into his trip so deep that in the end he is estranged even from his woman and the brotherhood. This is the tragic situation—a man destroyed by his own DRIVE.

At the end of “Naked Angels,” Mother (I don’t remember his name but he looked more like a staff member of the L.A. Freep than a Harley lone rider) rides off over the desert into the sunset, leaving his gang and his chick (he turned her out) with the mutilated bodies of his avenged enemies.

What makes it especially sad is that bike people develop this unique bond of blood: the same dirty brand of 40 weight oil runs through each of your brothers’ veins.

Intellectuals and Middle Class people base their loyalties on ideas (like their friends are cats they met in the Young Democrats, and the Society for This and That). But poorer people base their loyalties on their love for each other. Ideas are irrelevant, which is true anyway. Remember that.

The tragic hero of “Naked Angels” is a fanatic who is swayed into madness by a full moon in Scorpio over the desert. The sequence that follows is the most genuinely psychedelic experience I have ever seen on the screen. Oh, wow.

The film gets into the dynamics of brotherhood, and probes the ego conflicts that arise and have to be dealt with in such a situation.

There’s a lesson here too. At one point, as the gang rumbles across the desert, and Mother leaves behind a fallen brother, you can hear the barely audible comment over the din of exploding cylinders: “He can’t relate to the people back here!”

America is becoming a gangland, you know, and to survive and be free, you're going to have to get yourself together with a tight brotherhood who can deal with all the types of shit put down in "Naked Angels." See this flick. It was made for you.

Power to the people.

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