

Bikers Talk about Peter Fonda

Fifth Estate Collective

Recently the staff of the *Fifth Estate*, members of the Zulus motorcycle club and people from Detroit Newsreel a movement film making group, went to a press screening of "Easy Rider."

The film is about two bikers played by Peter Fonda (Captain America) and Dennis Hopper (Billy), who produced and directed the film, riding out to Mardi Gras in Search of America on two beautiful choppers.

After selling a load of coke they scored in Mexico the film becomes a series of encounters between the travelers and various life styles: a New Mexican ranchero family, a group of city kids trying to make it in a romantic communal setting in the hills, a young alcoholic lawyer who links up with them in a small town jail cell. This commitment to throw in with them subsequently costs the attorney his life when the local crackers come down on the three as they lay sleeping by the side of the road Fonda and Hopper continue to play out their trip and in the end are cut down by the same forces that destroyed the lawyer.

What follows is a discussion of the film by Detroit Newsreel and the Zulus.

NEWSREEL: What do people think about the shots, how the film was made, the color?

ZULU: I liked the scenes when they were out on the road when they're showing the countryside and the landscape. It gives you a sense of how big everything is, of how big the world is. It gives you a sense of maybe this depth, you have to get out and among it because the world is so big. It shows them in the city, and all of a sudden boom, they're out in the country.

Z: The color and that, all the scenes and the scenery, wow, And then it started getting deeper. When it first started off, I thought, well, another biker flick. Big deal. But it wasn't. It just wasn't another biker flick.

Z: They get out in the country and they didn't see anybody, maybe a car or so, and it was beautiful. They hit the city and it sucked. Because there were people there. And people had changed the country, this beautiful thing, into this ugly city. And every time they hit a city they got fucked over.

Z: The happiest time was then they were sitting on the side of the road rapping, just sitting with themselves, rapping, talking about their plans and what they were looking forward to, things like this, and they couldn't even go to town and eat a decent meal, man.

N: One weakness with the flick is that it runs down the bikers' response to their situations, but it doesn't run down what those situations are; it doesn't talk about why out of their own lives they chose this solution. What does it tell people about their own lives, if they are not a biker? The thing I really want to get into is whether these guys, Fonda and Hopper, are two really unusual cats that are picked out as some sort of special case or whether they're about something larger than that, whether they stand for something that you can identify with or dig into, or whether it's a solitary trip that somebody can say, well, that's just two guys. See, I dig that film as an American

film that talks about what it's like right here in 1969, what it's like to have long hair and ride a bike, or be apart from the fucking society.

Z: People want to be free, and it shows in different ways. Like people tried the commune, and that one Citizen he tried to get on the back of a bike and tried to live the same way they were and tried to get a sense of this freedom for himself. And whether you're the Mexican family, whether you're on the back of a bike or in a commune or whatever you're doing, everybody feels that they want to be free, they want to be close, that they want to get away from this mass of special cases at all

N: Do they get away from it?

Z: They attempt to. Like running the coke across the border and feeding somebody else's vice. They had to buy their own freedom instead of having it come natural the way it should be. And that might be a bummer, you know.

Z: Yeah, you have a whole part of the movie where Fonda says, we didn't make it, we blew it. And Hopper doesn't dig that. He still thinks that they made it.

Z: Yeah, but you can't say that they didn't make it, really, because they were still making an effort, they were still trying, until they were cut off, they were blown away. You can't say that they ' wouldn't have made it. As long as you're trying to be free, as long as you're trying to find something, then basically you are free. You're trying to cut away from the restraints of the society by going out and doing your own thing. You are basically free.

N: Not really. That's a real political question, how do people become free in this fucking society? One way is to do your own thing and break away from the society, go form a commune in the mountains or just ride your bike around 365 days, not getting attached to anything. But the reality of America is that Mexican family—they don't have any choice about that. I see that the only way to change it is for people to understand why the society is plastic and why you can't live in it and what the source of that is. When you understand that, you try to organize people against the society, against what's causing people's lives to be miserable.

Z: It might have been trying to say that, too. What is freedom, the commune in the mountains or riding your bike? Where is the answer? They're showing all different alternatives and then at the end of the movie it's really fucked up, because they just blow them away. It just leaves all these loose ends hanging. It doesn't come out and say anything. It's a stone cop-out.

N: It would have been so much more real if the cats had been blown away by the pigs back in that town where they were, because the reality was that the commune wasn't defeated by the weather. According to the interview with Fonda in *Good Times*, they were all busted. It wasn't the weather, it wasn't any kind of accident, they were busted by the pigs. If Fonda had really wanted to say something he would have had the cats blown away by the sheriff. What happens in the film is that they get blown away by some cat who's just as fucked over as they are.

Z: But the pig's head is fucked over too and you can't blame it on the man with the badge. He's a part of society, he's there on account of society, he considers himself the GREAT PROTECTOR: "I'm doing this for the good of society," and the majority of the society backs him.

N: Lenny Bruce said a great thing about cops. Cops are like mailmen. They deliver messages.

N: But you have to figure out who's sending the messages.

N: That's why it's too easy just to focus on the man with the badge and the gun. He's caught up in that whole thing.

Z: Any time you're different from the man with the money and the power you're going to get fucked with because you're not like him. He wants everyone like him or working for him. If you're not doing that, you lose. Sooner or later they are going to get you. You got to be a drone.

Z: Well, society tells him that he should be happy and he should be fulfilled because he's got all these things. He sees [the] people don't have all these things that are supposed to make you happy, but they seem to have something that he doesn't, so he's going to stone get down on them with everything he's got. Because he's got all these things, man, you know, and he says to himself: "I've worked all my life for my kids and they're going to be just like me and I'm going to give all this to them"...and nobody wants it man.

N: Maybe he also thinks that they're just trying to take it away from him, too. He sees any change as a threat to what he's worked his whole life for. And even though he doesn't dig it, he can't deal with the fact that he doesn't dig it.

Z: It's like what Huey Newton said. The pigs are here not to protect our property, because we don't have any. So they must be here to protect somebody else's property. When you haven't got anything, it's just yourself, wow.

N: The flick never really deals with what you're going to do about that.

Z: It's like in life. If you're walking down the street and you get hit by a car, it's not a big plan or nothing. You leave a lot of loose ends when you die. You never finish anything. It's just like life. Would you rather they got to Florida and got blown away by a cop or something? At least they didn't rot away in a bed somewhere eighty years old. They were doing their thing and they got cut down. That's all. It happens all the time.

N: But if you are making a film, you put things together in a certain way, nothing is accidental. What was the purpose of the whole thing?

Z: Well, you saw it. What they looked at, what they started out to find. They wanted to take a look at America, see what was happening, what it was really about, and what did they find? They got fucked over every place they went. I mean, they had a few good times and all this, you're bound to hit on something once in a while.

N: What effect does the film have on people who are conditioned to sensational biker films?

Z: There's a lot of things they won't be able to comprehend at all. Like sitting on the side of the road blowing grass, or something. They can't relate to that at all. All right, it's a bunch of dopers talking out of their heads.

Z: Still, there's a lot of people smoking grass now, you'd be surprised. There's that lawyer, who's like a straight.

Z: But don't forget, at first he was a drunk. He kept getting thrown in jail and his daddy kept paying to get him off and it never got in the papers and nobody ever heard about it and everywhere he went before he got on the back of that scooter he was laying out fins, everywhere he went he paid his way through the whole thing. And then finally in the end after he had laid down his shit, he had rapped what he really felt, he couldn't lay down that small fin, he couldn't do it.

They laid it right on him, right on his head.

Z: The lawyer ran it all down about the freedom and stuff like that. And he said the people saw some freedom and they were scared.

N: I don't think the film does a hell of a lot on that question. What it does is lay out that there are going to be two Americas, people who are trying to be free and people who are threatened by that freedom. I think what the film is trying to do is take a basic American myth: the guy who cuts out, the loner, and elaborate it. But that's not enough. As far as changing society, you can't do it by just doing your own thing. And I'm hung up on the flick not dealing with that. It's really an obstacle, because people think we're the enemy and they think we're the ones who keep them in the traps they are in and we're the ones who fuck up the country. And at some point a flick like this has to get down to that.

Z: Well, going back to your traps, okay, these people feel trapped, and they can't get out of this bag that they're in and they see other people that are not in that bag, that aren't trapped and they can't understand it. And things that people can't understand, it scares people. And anything that scares you too long, you do away with it.

N: But if you're into that, wouldn't you make films that would try to point that out, that would try to get down to it?

Z: I don't think this film was made for general audiences. It was meant to appeal to young people, who are caught up in this revolution and this biker thing and this commune thing and it will really have a message for them. But I don't feel that the everyday citizen will get anything out of it at all, except for the blood and guts.

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<https://www.fiftheastate.org/archive/86-august-21-september-3-1969/bikers-talk-about-peter-fonda>

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