

# Peter Fonda Talks about “Easy Rider”

## Black Shadow

1969

(via Good Times/UPS)

Q: How do you feel about your movie?

A: How do I feel about my movie? Very strong, and a bit funny in the knees. No, I'm putting you on. I feel very good about the movie. I hope I do better next time.

Q: Have you got the next film started?

A: No, I have no...I'm writing a flick now. About the American Revolution.

Q: Which one?

A: About Valley Forge. The one that's still going on, that hasn't finished yet. The one that we're trying to implement the bill of rights from, and things like that.

Q: Was Easy Rider written to any great extent?

A: Yeah, it was. As a matter of fact, I wrote the story and then Dennis dictated the screenplay to his secretary. And we wrote whole scenes out for the bank, right? To look through the pages you know, to give us \$350,000.

Q: Did you write the dialogue, or just treatment?

A: We wrote dialogue. And we ad-libbed most of the dialogue, using what we had written as guidelines for what we wanted to say. But the style of the film anyway is that we don't want to give any information out in our dialogue to begin with. It wasn't really important whatever we wrote down, we'd figure out something to say when we got there. With the exception of two major speeches. That was the one about the flying saucers—

Q: Oh, is that written?

A: It's written—

Q: Far out.

A: That's the beautiful part about it, that's the one that's written, and the one about freedom. That's written. And it's all Dennis' dialogue. With Jack Nicholson being able to work it so beautifully that it works just fine with his ad libs up front. When I say “Try this,” [a joint] that's all ad-lib.

Q: That sequence is really beautiful.

A: It's one of my favorite sequences in the movie. It's the one I look forward to most, because it brings everybody in it. It brings in the heads, and it brings all the straights, who...it brings all the heads who aren't there already and it brings the straights in too, you know?

Q: Did I ask you what you thought of “The Wild Angels?”

A: Well, it was interesting cinema, it wasn't good as film. It's just that, uh, it didn't make any statements necessarily, well, it didn't make any statement. So that was interesting cinema. It could conceivably be called... uh, good on that level. I feel it was just exploitation, and blatant exploitation. What we use for exploitation in “Easy Rider” is the exact same things.

Q: Well, you don't claim to be the Hell's Angels.

A: No, we didn't need to. The point I'm trying to make is that Roger Corman copped out to all the shit he didn't need to cop out to. We dealt with motorcycles as statements, rather than gangs, or the thing itself. It becomes an

idea, like a horse. It's irrelevant, it's, uh, a symbol of the U.S., the outlaw becomes identifiable riding a black horse, or whatever, so we put him on a motorcycle, and it's chrome, because the U.S. is chrome machinery. "Wild Angels" well, gee, I don't know—it made a lot of money. It made it possible for me to make this movie.

Q: Yeah, it's pretty to look at too.

A: Yeah, there were some great bike shots.

Q: Same photographer?

A: No, a guy named Richard Moore did "Wild Angels." The guy who did "Hell's Angels on Wheels," Lazio Kovaks, shot our movie.

Q: How does the 93-minute version of the film compare to...like I read in the Free Press that there was originally a four-hour rough cut.

A: Four hours with a "scene missing" flag, which stood for about fifteen minutes of film that we didn't have together yet. Well, you know, it was a different film. And yet it was the same film. It was pretty full. We had all of "It's Alright Ma" playing, seven minutes and fifty seconds of "It's Alright Ma" is the last ride.

Q: Yeah, that hurts when it chops off.

A: It doesn't hurt you as much as it hurts me man We had a better version of it, too, we had not only Dylan singing it—and Dylan doesn't want us to use his own voice, because he hates the recording. He thinks the harmonica sounds lousy, the voice is terrible, and he said he copped out that he only did the song to fill out a side on an album.

Q: Wow!

A: Yeah, one of the songs that I think is one of the heavier songs to come out of the entire time that I've ever heard songs, or ever read anybody else's songs, "He not busy being born is busy dying," and this kid is telling me he filled out a side of an album just with the song, well, you know, everybody's got their reasons. I wouldn't mind filling out everything with that one. I can do a fourteen minute version of that song alone. You know at the end, after Dennis gets shot and I get shot, we pull back, well, in the four-hour cut we started that "A question in your nerves is lit and you know there is no answer fit to satisfy and show you not to quit to keep it in your mind and not forget...that it is not he or she or them or it that you belong to," so Dylan said. "No sir, man, I don't like the song there. You can use the first verse that you use, but I don't want to use the second verse." And we said, "Why?" He said, "Well, it's hopeless. You know, you just don't give us any hope. I'd like you to change the ending of the film." And I said "Yeah? What do you want to have happen?" He said; "Well, why don't you have Fonda run his bike into the truck and blow up the truck?" I said, "Well, what's the difference in the ending man, I mean, is that hope? Because I can be violently involved with those people and kill them, is that hope for you?" "Well, you don't understand what I mean, you see, you gotta listen to my new album, man, listen to my new album. I'm a whole different bag, now," I said, "Oh, I see, well we're five years behind you, let's put it that way, can we use the song?" "No, no, I don't like the song, the harmonica sucks," so he said, "No, I don't want you to use the last verse," so we didn't and he wrote us something else, and he can't put his name to it because of his company.

Q: Did you ask him if you could re-record the song?

A: Yeah, and he said yes, we could re-record it, but he said McGuinn had to sing it. He tagged McGuinn to sing it. But he didn't want us to use that, "A question in your nerves is lit," 'cause he felt that everything had been said in the film up to that point, and he didn't want to have it repeated in the song. And I said, "Well, it's end credits there, and if your song is playing I won't roll credits. I want everybody on the hook, I don't want anybody off the hook, and I think as a matter of fact that it's hopeless, how about that?" He said, "Have you heard my new album man?" I heard his new album, but I still think it's hopeless. The fact that it's hopeless is not based on what you might think "hopeless" means. "Hopeless" to me is a rather positive...mood. Because "hope" is a word that relates to "try," and "try" is a negative word. Hope breeds despair, and I refuse to despair, and all that bullshit, so it's hopeless, we are doing what we have to do. There's no hope involved. Hope reminds me of some carrot dangling in front of my face. Get it out of there, man, I want to see life! None of this hope bullshit. So I wanted the thing to be heavy at the end there, and very...you know, like a song about the river going to the sea. And we put it in. It works nice, I think it's a pretty song, Roger McGuinn gets the credit for it.

Q: But Dylan wrote it?

A: Well he wrote most of it, except for one verse that McGuinn wrote. Fortunately, I like the verse McGuinn wrote, because it relates not only to the film, but it puts a little bite back in, uh, "All they wanted was to be free, and

that's the way it turned out to be." That little verse McGuinn wrote—the rest Dylan wrote. Just a simple little song, but it's all along his new lines of...apple pie, mom and...hope.

Q: Did Terry Southern write the treatment?

A: No, he just wrote the title. I did the treatment, Dennis did the screenplay. Terry's a friend of ours, and he lent us his name to help us get the bread up front. We didn't even want to bother to write the script. We knew everything we had to put down—we just wanted a camera and the film, but there's other people who have to give you bread.

Q: Is there anything profound you would change at this point?

A: The riding stuff. I had camera mounts built to fit on the bikes, and we didn't use them. We traveled very slowly. And there's a certain feeling that's good. but it could have been counterpointed with a little speed.

Q: Also an image off a bike bounces differently than any other kind of traveling shot.

A: Yeah, it's a different kind of scene. You know, I built that machine myself, and it'll go 140. I would have liked to at least gone once at about 100. It would have been far out. I would have done the Mardi Gras a bit differently.

Q: That line, where you say you blew it, really baffles me.

A: Good, good. That was the last scene we shot, and we'd forgotten to shoot the scene, and suddenly I said, "My god, we haven't gotten the last campfire." And we didn't know what to say. Should we cop out and say, "Man we shouldn't have scored the cocaine," or Dennis had me say, "Well, we blew our inheritance," and then he had me say, "When we went for the easy money we blew our inheritance," and all that, and I kept saying, "No, all I want to say is "We blew it," cause I wanted everyone to figure it out for themselves, what we blew. I wanted to be confusing with that, on purpose. I felt that if I labeled what we blew I'd let somebody off the hook, and if I didn't everybody would be confused. I felt it was alright to confuse the audience because Dennis has got his brows furrowed, you know, and he can't figure it out. That's part of the tragedy, The film is a tragedy, and our two characters are tragic characters. They think of themselves as heroic, but they're not. They think of themselves as free, but we've seen at the top that they've bought their freedom, so it ain't real. They think of themselves as searching for something, but they can't even see it as it's all around them. That's the truth of it. If I had made somebody who was free, traveling across the country, then it would be an untrue story. Because a free person wouldn't deal coke, wouldn't even care about getting the bread together, probably wouldn't even be living in Los Angeles.

Q: Well, maybe the problem is in the commune sequence, then, because if there's an alternative—

A: There is no alternative.

Q: it's that one, and it's a bummer.

A: No, that's why we don't stay there. It was badly shot. That's the weakest sequence for me, the commune sequence. And as a matter of fact it contains the one line that I dislike the most, where I say, "They're gonna make it." I kept trying—every time I would go in I would cut that out. And everyone would put that back in the film again. And not only did they put it back—it was in a master, and I cut out the master, so they put the master back in and even punched into a close up, which really pissed me off. But I guess the people in Omaha want to know that it's a bum line. I wouldn't do that the next time out. I wouldn't be so pretentious to say—that these people kicking their feet in sand are going to make it. Because right now they're not making it. Last week three of them got castrated in Taos, three guys, really, for real, one of them was a friend of mine. That jail that we were in, in Taos, is now packed wall to wall with longhairs, and there's no johns in that jail, and real fleas and real crabs. And it really stinks, and fifteen chicks have been raped by the Anglos and the Chicanos and the Indians and six people have been shot by the side of the road. That was two weeks ago. But I don't believe that violence... is the way to combat it. Like I'm in opposition to SDS. I want to bring society down, but it's got to go from within. I already know from the changes I've had to make in my own life that they have to happen inside. Nothing could come at me from outside. I was protected. I was protected good. I learned how to set up a defense if there wasn't a defense for a particular attack. I set it right up, right away. Now the establishment's got to be cleverer than I am, they've got all those bloody computers. So I figure we don't throw' bricks at them. It's out of hand, man. You see, what's happening is they're taking the revolution into the streets and the communities, so the cops are moving into the communities. And the people have to see it. When it's just on the campus they can deal with it just as a campus problem. What's happening is we're really creating a police state. If we haven't already got one in this state. It's coming down fast. And it's going to be harder to deal from a police state, because the more power they have, the less they'll give up.

Q: When Peter Townshend was up here a few weeks ago to promote his record, he said people should cut off their hair and live the happy straight life, and get it together inside their head, and stop all this hassling.

A: Well, in a way it's what I'm saying, because it's not that the hassling is getting in the way, it's just that they're fortifying it more. See, these guys aren't dummies. I mean, they are about certain things, but they're not about others. They're especially not dummies about how to protect what they've got. These "haves." I happen to dig the hair, you know, I cut it alternately, but I like—my old lady likes my link long. And I grow a beard because I don't have to shave in the morning. It's great to not scrape my bloody face, you know, it's just so much easier. It's a matter of convenience for me, not a statement of principle. When it becomes a statement of principle I think we're wasting our time, saying something with long hair, and you're setting yourself up as a target.

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