

THE ZINE THAT'S HOPELESSLY DEVOTED TO 80'S MOVIES

GIRLS, ON FILM



THE ROAD TRIP ISSUE

PEE WEE'S BIG ADVENTURE / THREE FOR THE ROAD / FANDANGO
LENINGRAD COWBOYS GO AMERICA / THUNDER ALLEY / WITHNAIL & I
FERRIS BUELER'S DAY OFF / PLANES, TRAINS, AND AUTOMOBILES

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THE ROAD TRIP ISSUE

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Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986)

LET US TAKE YOU FOR A RIDE

Welcome to the 10th issue of *Girls, on Film*, the zine that's hopelessly devoted to 80's movies! For each issue, we pick a theme and then select a handful of 80's movies to discuss related to that theme. We write about all kinds of 80's movies: the good, the bad, and the meh. Previous issues have focused on movies about music, sports, summer, food, work, role reversals, entertainers, animation, and robots.

In this issue, we talk about road trip movies! So, while you may have had to put the breaks on most of your travel plans this year, we hope you'll get some vicarious wanderlust from these films:

FANDANGO (1985) College friends delay the future with a boozy drive across Texas.

THUNDER ALLEY (1985) Rockers hit the road to make magic with their band, Magic.

PEE-WEE'S BIG ADVENTURE (1985) Pee-wee's search for his missing bike takes on a wild cross-country adventure.

FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY OFF (1986) Teens play hookie while a doofus principal and sourly sister attempt to crash the party.

THREE FOR THE ROAD (1987) An evil senator entrusts a virtual stranger to transport his daughter to a reform school.

WITHNAIL & I (1987) A holiday in the country should be relaxing. This one is not.

PLANES, TRAINS, AND AUTOMOBILES (1987) Polar opposites face endless disaster while trying to get home for Thanksgiving.

LENINGRAD COWBOYS GO AMERICA (1989) A band leaves the Wasteland of Siberia to tour America.

BEHIND THE ZINES

Girls, on Film was founded by Stephanie McDevitt and Janene Scelza. We are joined by returning guest writers Dr. Rhonda Baughman and Matt Scelza.

STEPHANIE MCDEVITT

Stephanie's one big disappointment in life is that she wasn't old enough to fully appreciate popular clothing styles in the 80's, as she was mostly attired in paisley sweatsuits. A full-time editor and occasional freelancer, Stephanie looks nostalgically back on 80's films such as *Ernest Goes to Camp*, *Adventures in Babysitting*, and *Can't Buy Me Love* and wishes she could pull off the hairdos of Cindy Mancini and her friends.

JANENE SCELZA

Janene has written a buttload of zines over the years. She spent her teen years combing musty video stores and public libraries for all the 80's movies she could find. There were lists! She's got plenty of favorites from the decade, but it's stylish indie films like *Desperately Seeking Susan*, *Repo Man*, and *The Terminator* that she loves best.

DR. RHONDA BAUGHMAN

Rhonda, a teacher and freelance writer, raised adolescent hell in the 80's and the horror films of that era were her BFFs! She loves all of 80's pop culture, but nothing spoke to her quite like *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-O-Rama*, *Nightmare Sisters*, and *Reform School Girls*. She had her own pink laminated Video Time Video rental card at 9 years old and she never looked back. Or forward, really; she still loves her VHS and sweet, sweet VCR. And let it be known, the scrunchie never died for Rhonda: she STILL wears one proudly!

MATT SCELZA

Matt loves to dissect and analyze everything. He is stoked to join his sister, Janene, for two essays in this issue. He logged a lot of hours at the same video stores and public library film collections with Janene in search of odd and unusual titles. However, he's got too many favorites to name.

We welcome guest writers for the zine!
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Released: January 25, 1985
Written and Directed by: Kevin Reynolds
Essay by: Janene Scelza

INTO THE GREAT WIDE OPEN

FANDANGO

Fandango is a wonderful, though sadly forgotten coming-of-age road trip comedy. Set in 1971, the film follows five friends, collectively known as the Groovers, who have just finished school at the University of Texas. Three of the friends have been drafted into the Vietnam War. The future immediately seems grim, but Reynolds keeps the war at a distance, focusing instead on the transition from carefree adolescence to dignified adulthood.

Most of the films follow The Groovers as they travel to the Rio Grande to christen the end of their "privilege youth." Their boozy hijinks in the timeless landscape of rural Texas offer a temporary distraction from post-college life, particularly for the three draftees -- lovable party dude, Gardner Barnes (Kevin Costner); nerdy nag Phil Hicks (Judd Nelson); and middle-man, Kenneth Waggener (Sam Robards)

-- as they come to terms with their respective futures. I'd describe it as a less crude version of *Animal House* meets John Knowles's wartime schoolboy novel, *A Separate Peace*.

Reynolds told *Film School Rejects* in a 2009 interview that the film is largely based on personal experience. "...I guess you just want to express how you feel about the end of an era. When you get out of college and those intense friendships that you have and how they sort of come to an end. You're trying to hang onto all of that, but something inside you tells you it's never going to be like this again. That's really what the picture was about. It's the end of an era for these four, and some realized it more than others" [1]. (Reynolds refers to four Groovers because perpetually comatose Lester (Brian Selak) sleeps through the entire trip).



Cracking up on graduation night.

The movie opens with a beer-fueled graduation party at a shabby UT frat house. Kenneth interrupts their crazy celebration to announce that he's called off his wedding, to happen in a few days, because he's gotten his draft papers. All the post-college optimism flies out of the room when the coldly-written notice is read aloud: "our records show you have finished school... your student deferment has expired... report to bootcamp on this date." *Ugh*. Phil and Gardner also got orders to report to boot camp in a few weeks.

Gardner, hoping to cheer his buddies up, rallies the gang (including perpetually mute bookworm, Dorman, played by Chuck Bush) for a ride in Phil's car to "somewhere... anywhere." It begins as an aimless, beer-soaked drive through the opening credits set to Elton John's anachronistic, rabble-rousing "Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting." By morning, Gardner proposes that the Groovers drive to the border to dig up the mysterious "Dom."

Phil immediately objects. For one thing, he doesn't want to put 400 miles on his beloved classic Cadillac. More importantly, he's intent on keeping everyone on schedule for Kenneth's wedding (should he change his mind) and boot camp. Gardner assures Phil that everything will be fine, which, of course, means it won't be. As soon he utters the words, they run out of gas in the middle of nowhere and stupidly decide to tow out by hitching the car to a passing train.



The long road to somewhere. Anywhere.

The Groovers spend much of the film meandering around rural Texas on little money in their patchwork Cadillac. (Cinematographer Thomas Del Ruth sets up some great shots in those big ass, empty settings.) They meet some dopey teenage girls at the Sonic Drive-In, sleep at an abandoned James Dean movie set, shower at a car wash, and best of all, test Phil's manhood at a makeshift parachuting school.

Reynolds sets up a pretty simple dynamic. Gardner is totally carefree and directionless. At the opposite end of the spectrum is tag-along Phil, who refers to the draft in terms of "service" and "duty." Kenneth wavers between the two, fretting about his former fiancée and the draft.

Fandango is really Gardner's story. He's one of those Lost Boy types. His student deferment expired because he flunked out of school. But, unlike his buddies, he didn't seem to have much planned for post-college life, anyways. He'd rather not think about the war and the wedding (he's sweet on Kenneth's girl). The trip is his way to preserve what he has with The Groovers for as long as he can.

The boyish antics they get up to out in the timeless, nothingness of rural Texas can only last for so long. Kenneth eventually agonizes about his fiancée. In heavier-handed imagery, nighttime fireworks light up a cemetery like a battlefield. True to the genre, Gardner's intent to stay in that carefree space creates friction among the friends. But it works out in the end, and



The pilot offers Phil his joint.



A wedding comes together.

eventually, they cross that threshold into adulthood, even Gardner in his own way.

Thanks to some generous locals, the Groovers throw together a lovely, last minute wedding, though the wedding itself feels as though it drags on too long. Gardner dances with the bride (Suzy Amis) -- the word "fandango" refers to both a Spanish dance and foolish acts -- before finally letting go of the fantasy of being with her. (I love the way the film ends, otherwise).

Fandango marked writer/director Kevin Reynolds's foray into feature films, expanding on his 1980 USC short film, *Proof* (available on YouTube). In the 20-something minute short, one of the Groovers reluctantly learns parachuting from a goofy stoner pilot (played by the wonderful Marvin J. MacIntyre) after his friends call him chicken. The sequence remained in the feature film, with MacIntyre reprising his role, and it's definitely the best part of *Fandango*.

Fandango came to fruition after Steven Spielberg saw *Proof* and lobbied Reynolds to turn it into a feature-length film to be produced by his company, Amblin Entertainment. Reynolds said: "...[It] is sort of a back-asswards way of working. You gotta write a whole picture around that. But as I sat down to do it, I think something more poignant came out than what everybody expected. Again, it was just a product of my own experiences" [2]. *Fandango* marked the first leading role for Kevin Costner as Gardner Barnes

(who's shabby tux and broken shades are worthy of a Huey Lewis gig). They would work together on two more films -- *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* and the disastrous 90's epic, *Waterworld* -- before parting ways over what sounded like creative differences.

The film's tiny cast also included pre-stardom Judd Nelson, who starred in *The Breakfast Club* and *St. Elmo's Fire* later that year. Suzy Amis and E.G. Daily (maybe best known as Dottie in *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*) both made film debuts. Glenne Headly, mentioned in our previous issue for her role in the 1987 android comedy, *Making Mr. Right*, has a wonderful bit part as the stoner pilot's hippie wife.

Penultimate movie nerd Quentin Tarantino raved about *Fandango*, calling it the best directorial debut in cinema history after watching it five times during a one-week theater run [3]. Spielberg, on the other hand, hated it so much he had his name removed from the film, pretty much dooming *Fandango* to utter obscurity.

Indeed, the movie received a meager theatrical release in early 1985, though it found cult fame on the home video circuit. Luckily, it's still enough of a blip on someone's radar that you rent it online. I recommend checking it out.



Released: August 1, 1985
Written and Directed by: J. S. Cardone
Essay by: Rhonda Baughman

NOTHING MATTERS BUT THE MUSIC

THUNDER ALLEY

In 1845, Hans Christian Anderson penned *The Red Shoes* – a shockingly grim fairy tale that warned children of the perils of vanity. In the 1948 film adaptation of *Shoes*, Lermantov says: “The music is all that matters. Nothing but the music.” So, since I’m a lover of rock and roll and magical musicians, and the daughter of a rock and roller, this quote became: “Nothing matters but the music.” It has remained: a mantra in my head for at least 30 years, a close enough iteration for horseshoes and hand grenades. And it’s some powerful juju, that saying – just like *Thunder Alley* (1985) – the film I think about every time I hear it.

Thunder Alley remains an epic road trip movie locked in the love chamber of my heart. Alley’s Richie (Roger Wilson) and Donnie (Scott McGinnis) are BFFs – the former is a naive farm boy, the latter a keyboardist aiming for the bright lights, big city with his band, Magic. On a visit to a club called the Rat Trap, Richie is welcomed

warmly by three of the five band members and referred to as the ‘Lonesome Guitar Strangler’ [1]. All work and no play make Richie a still hot, but dull cotton harvester; so in a playful puff of fate, the evening brings together an inebriated lead guitarist (Jimbo) and a successful blind date. Richie meets Beth (Jill Schoelen), BFF of Donnie’s girl Lorraine (Cynthia Eilbacher). It’s awkward and adorable love at first sight for the pair. Later, Richie fills in on the fly, for the band’s evening performance and it’s success at first power chord.

The music and the stage call to Richie and his bandmates and soon, so will the open road. While Richie’s romantic musical adventure is coming-of-age, he’s also on a hero’s journey – and it’s important to note that he twice shows a hero’s “refusal of the call” of the open road, stage, and lure of rock and roll. This farmboy has a subconscious working hard to protect him, but his shadow is stronger.



Donnie worries Richie's turning into a spud head.



Richie and Beth strike a chord.

After his initial refusals, he eventually succumbs both times – and before long, his greatest fears are realized: he's going to be wanted. He's going to be successful. He's going to be hot. And all of this brings a new set of problems. Richie intuitively knew he was happiest with his old problems: cotton harvests and ... well, that's it – cotton harvests.

When I initially decided to re-watch and write about *Thunder Alley*, I didn't know that I would land an interview [2] with film's star Jill Schoelen. I was just going to write a little love letter to the film – for its beauty and humanity, its lyrical and literary hues, and definitely for its music. This piece is all of that – an affectionate epistle – but it's now so much more to me after the interview. It's also a missive of startling synchronicity.

I asked Jill if, 35 year ago, she had any idea that the film's major themes would resonate so strongly and so far into the future:

"No, at the time I never thought of it like that. But I think I resonated with the film, with the script. Some thing resonated in me right away, from day one because of the basic humanity – and I think that's what the film really tapped into. It just showed basic humanity. In this case it happened to be about that young man and his best friend and the set design, so to speak – the environment of that story was around music – and that was a beautiful environment because music connects us all in so many ways – and it really connects humanity. It doesn't matter what language it's sung in: we feel it." [3]

Humanity and its interlaced connections – set to music. That's really the foundation and structure of *Thunder Alley*. Jill continued:

"It's a special kind of love I have for this film. Although not that many people ask me about it – the thing is though, when they do ask me about Thunder Alley – it is so special to them and that makes it so special to me. I have a love for it."

And on the film's resonance: *"the lifestyle choices we make, and following our dreams, how we stay small, and how we choose to grow big, let ourselves blossom and I think the [film's] drugs angle is a wonderful parallel story to people given the choices in their lives,"* says Schoelen. *"Because I think we always say we're afraid of failure, but sometimes I think we're more afraid of success."*

The characters in *Thunder Alley* are all tarot cards come to life to tell the coming-of-age rock and roll story of the world. (Jill Schoelen understood this kind of strange synchronicity and magic the film creates). As a kid I just loved the way the movie looked. It feels auto-biographical and looks like what I've heard my Boomer pals in the Old Pueblo talk about when reminiscing about their local '80s music scene.

The film feels warm and innocent even when viewers catch eyefuls of eightballs, booze, and a completely nude Melanie Kinnaman in a party pool. The whole film is inviting, no matter where you are in the story: on the road, on the farm, in a club, or cavorting with Richie and Beth in a scenic quarry.

But the real winning aspect is the movie's strategic forward momentum, propelled by the song titles and stage performances – a clever, whimsical device that's not unlike that saucy radio dj in *The Warriors* (1979).

When Richie first wanders into the RapTrap to see Donnie, the band is practicing a painful rendition of "Do You Feel Alright?" (w/Jimbo!). Soon though, Jimbo passes out before a show and once Jimbo is out, Richie is in. Their first song for the throng is "Danger, Danger": *You've got the bright lights, and you're staying out all night ... you've got a bad name and I want you just the same.* When Richie does his solo, the crowd goes wild – and like it or not, even Skip has to admit Magic is more magical with Richie in the band. He dithers a bit, but eventually Richie decides to join Magic and so the boys and their handler Weasel (Clancy Brown) hit the road.

During the next show, the much better version of "Do You Feel Alright?" hits: *I never felt so alive ... it's a quarter to ten and I'm at it again ... it's the only way I know to survive.* Richie and his own Les Paul are in top form. He feels all right. Everyone feels all right. The frontman rarely feels all right and a minor little tiff erupts between Skip and Richie – the latter feels upstaged (because he was). The guitar man is on fire. It's here, too that we see the first cracks in Richie and Donnie's relationship – when Donnie's love of cocaine comes out.

Then comes a sultry song: "Can You Feel My Heartbeat?" *Baby, when you're near me, I've got it all ... I've looked high and low and everywhere for you ... I did not mean to send you so far away ... there's lots of debauchery.* We're well into that danger zone Kenny Loggins sang about.

A few weeks in, while in hostile heckler redneck venue territory, major conflict ensues when Skip decides he doesn't want to do their new song, "Heart to Heart." Richie sings it instead, hopeful, upbeat, and center stage. Richie wins the crowd over, saves the evening – again.

Magic sizzles deep in the game. Will they be signed by a label? Will they get to play

the Rainbow Festival? Will Donnie's drug use ruin everything they've worked so hard for? Before you can say "yes" to two of those, the boys are on the road back home to Tucson, booked by music scene bigwig The Fatman (Randy Polk) into the hottest venue in town: The Palace. Magic will open for Surgical Steel [4] and when they do, you know it will be Richie and the hit "Can't Look Back": ... *no tears for the prodigal son ... his troubles have just begun ... in the eye of the hurricane, it's enough to make a madman sane ...* These lines that cut the deepest: so true and you can't dodge them. Why would you want to?

"Sometimes in the Night" is the song storm before the storm song: Beth and Richie are cute-coupling, while Donnie and Lorraine fall apart, and then just Donnie – as becomes what Weasel has seen time and time again: "Just Another Pretty Boy" ... *He's a man on the scene and he knows what it means ... he's gonna use you like a toy ... he's got time on his hands and he's makin' his plans ...* And then the inevitable – a midnight call relays terrible news as only midnight calls can.

There's powerful dynamics and scenes between all of the characters, but it's Beth and Richie and Weasel who hold the film together from beginning to end. After much dithering and dallying, waffling and wavering, Richie finally decides to take center stage for the big show/film closer and do right by his mates. The last song is another rendition of "Can't Look Back" for they have all been changed by the journey.

It's nothing short of a tragedy that Thunder Alley has not seen a true DVD release with all the interviews and extras befitting a film of its genre importance; it's an even bigger tragedy there is no soundtrack for this film, either. One fan goes so far as to make his own soundtrack, complete with crowd cheering (no dialogue cuts), and offering to share a link to the file via email. And still another fan lists the albums the film songs appeared. THIS kind of sharing of knowledge is true dedication. WE are legion – the forever fans of *Thunder Alley* – and we know everything matters – especially the music.



Released: August 9, 1985
Written by: Paul Reubens, Phil Hartman, and Michael Varhol
Directed by: Tim Burton
Essay by: Stephanie McDevitt

I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE BUT WHAT AM I? PEE-WEE'S BIG ADVENTURE

Pee-wee Herman was a staple of my childhood. The weird, little guy in the gray suite was one of the best kids entertainers in the 80s. While I enjoyed *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, nothing really held a candle to *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*. To my younger self, this movie was perfect. It was funny, it had mystery, it was creepy at times, and it was so quotable. And, as I hope most of you would agree, it's one of the rare times that treasured childhood entertainment holds up.

Pee-wee's Big Adventure stars Paul Reubens as man-child Pee-wee Herman. Pee-wee lives a charmed life. He has an awesome house, an incredible Rube Goldberg breakfast machine, and a cute dog named Speck. Pee-wee also has the

coolest bike in town: a souped-up 1940's Schwinn Flyer that is the envy of everyone, including Pee-wee's nemesis, Francis (Mark Holton).

One morning, as Pee-wee goes out to pick up his new, custom bike horn, someone steals his bike. Pee-wee completely freaks out. He calls the cops, accuses Francis, is mean to his friend Dottie (Elizabeth Daily), and, in a last ditch effort to find it, he visits a fraudulent fortune teller who tells him that his bike is in Texas. She says it's in the basement of the Alamo.

So begins the big adventure as Pee-wee sets out to get his bike back. He's forced to hitchhike his way to the Alamo and in the process meets escaped felon Mickey



Francis hits all the villain tropes.

(Judd Omen), ghostly truck driver Large Marge (Alice Nunn), and diner waitress Simone (Diane Salinger). Simone tells Pee-wee that she's not happy in her job or with her boyfriend, Andy, so Pee-wee convinces her to follow her dreams and move to Paris. What Pee-wee doesn't know is that Andy is a giant dude (played by 7'8" wrestler Jon Harris, AKA Silo Sam), and when Andy sees Simone and Pee-wee together, he chases after Pee-wee.

Well, Pee-wee eventually makes it to the Alamo and, in one of my favorite parts of the movie, is forced to sit through an Alamo tour before he can ask about the basement. The tour guide, played by the brilliant Jan Hooks who improvised the entire Alamo tour, finally breaks the news that there is no basement in the Alamo. Pee-wee is devastated. He eventually calls Dottie to apologize and ask for bus fare back home. But, before Pee-wee can get on a bus, Andy appears and Pee-wee is forced to hide in a rodeo. He rides a bull, gets injured, and is in a coma.

When Pee-wee comes to, he's in a hospital and he sees his bike on TV! Child actor Kevin Morton (Jason Hervey) has it in Hollywood. Pee-wee gets out of the hospital and heads for California. Will he make it before Andy crushes him? Will Wayne from *The Wonder Years* give him his bike back? Was Large Marge really a ghost?!? I'm not going to tell you. If you haven't already seen *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, you need to watch the movie.



TEQUILA!

Paul Reubens created the character of Pee-wee Herman while performing with The Groundlings, an LA based comedy troupe. According to Wikipedia, Pee-wee made his debut in a sketch in which troupe members created characters you might see in a comedy club. Reubens decided to play a person who would never make it as a comic (based partly on the fact that Reubens could never remember a punch line) [1]. And thus, Pee-wee Herman was born.

In 1980, after not getting a part on *Saturday Night Live*, Reubens developed a Pee-wee Herman stage show that featured the writing of fellow Groundlings member Phil Hartman (he also co-wrote this movie and makes a brief appearance at the end). The *Pee-wee Herman Show* played for 5 sell-out months at the Roxy Theater in LA, and then HBO filmed it and aired the show in 1981 [2]. Reubens took Pee-wee on the road and made an appearance on *The Late Show with David Letterman* as Pee-wee, which he credits with making him a star. In 1984, he sold out Carnegie Hall in New York City [3].

Hollywood came calling, and the next stop for Pee-wee was *Big Adventure*. Originally, Reubens was writing the movie as a sort-of remake of Disney's *Pollyanna*. Pee-wee was supposed to be the new guy in town who eventually endears himself to even the grumpiest townspeople [4]. However, when Reubens was on the Warner Brothers' lot, the studio



Can you say "tor-till-a"?



James Brolin, as sexy Pee-wee.

gave him the 1940's Schwinn bicycle to get around. Reubens decided to toss the first script and reimagine *Big Adventure* as a surreal retelling of the Italian film *The Bicycle Thief* [5].

Pee-wee's Big Adventure was Tim Burton's first major film, and Reubens had to fight to get him hired. He had seen Burton's short film, *Frankenweenie*, and refused to proceed unless Burton was on board. *Big Adventure* was also Danny Elfman's (of Oingo Boingo fame) first time scoring a movie. Elfman made a demo, got the job, and Burton and Elfman went on to make over 15 films together [6]. Elfman credits *Big Adventure* for his film career. He said, "I went from zero to 90 the day 'Pee-wee' was released" [7].

The movie earned about \$41 million at the box office and went on to be a cult favorite. At the premier, before even knowing if the movie would be a success, CBS executives approached Reubens about making a cartoon for kids, but he wanted to do a live-action kids show instead. *Pee-wee's Playhouse* debuted the following year [8].

In addition to *Big Adventure* and *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, Pee-wee appeared in *Pee-wee's Playhouse Christmas Special* (1987), *Big Top Pee-wee* (1988), *Pee-wee's Big Holiday* (2016), and numerous TV shows and movies. I wrote about *Big-Top Pee-Wee* for our 7th issue [9]. It's not a good movie; I wouldn't recommend watching it.

Paul Reubens's arrest in 1991 for lewd behavior slowed the Pee-wee train down. But, in 2010, Reubens revived the Pee-wee stage show, and in 2016 he released *Pee-wee's Big Holiday* on Netflix (produced by Judd Apatow) [10].

2020 marks the 35th anniversary of *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*. To celebrate, Reubens had planned a cross-country tour where he would screen the movie and then tell stories and answer questions. The tour kicked off in January in LA and was supposed to end in March in DC. Reviews from the LA show mentioned that some people were annoyed that Reubens appeared instead of Pee-wee [11]. On March 13th, the end of the tour was postponed. However, you can still access the tour's delightful website [12].

One final note on *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* is, of course, about his bike. Reubens apparently used at least ten different bikes during production [13]. In the movie, he says his bike is worth a hundred, million, trillion dollars. Pee-wee might have been a little off with that number, but in 2014, one of the bikes sold for \$36,000 on eBay [14]. It would be cool to own such an important piece of childhood nostalgia, but I think I'll stick to simply rewatching the movie... unless that breakfast machine is for sale.



Released: June 11, 1986
Written and Directed by: John Hughes
Essay by: Janene Scelza and Matt Scelza

SEIZE THE DAY, DUDES!

FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY OFF

There's a lot going on in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, but at the center of John Hughes's excellent 1986 screwball teen comedy are three friends who ditch high school for the day, borrow a vintage ride, and head to downtown Chicago for one last hurrah before graduation. It might seem like an unusual choice for our road trip issue. After all, their adventure only lasts a few hours, and very little of that time is actually spent in a car. But, it does meet the road trip movie formula where the journey challenges norms and inspires enlightenment [1].

The 34-year old comedy starring Matthew Broderick as Ferris, Alan Ruck as his best friend Cameron (a part originally offered to Hughes regular, Anthony Michael Hall),

Jeffrey Jones (in perhaps his best role) as the overzealous school principal, and *Dirty Dancing's* Jennifer Grey as Ferris's sourly sister still feels just as fresh and funny after all these years. It was a huge hit when it released -- the 10th highest grossing movie of 1986 [2] -- though it never seems to get the same fanfare in recent years as John Hughes's other teen films.

Of course, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* doesn't traffic exclusively in adolescent matters. As a celebration of escapism and personal liberation, the movie is likely to resonate with audiences young and old. Ferris even breaks the fourth wall when he delivers his immortal lines: "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop to look around once in a while, you could miss it."



Ed Rooney has entered the chat.



Art imitating art?

The movie opens with Ferris pretending to be sick so his parents will let him stay home from school. The terrible ruse is just the start of an overly-elaborate plan to meet up with best friend Cameron, borrow Cam's dad's cherished car, bail Ferris's girlfriend (Mia Sara as Sloane) out of school, and head downtown. Surprisingly, his mom and dad fall for the act while Jeanie pouts at their gullibility and her brother's ability to get away with everything.

Ferris is the All-American carefree gambler with the winning smile. He's the precursor to Corin Nemec's short-lived TV character, Parker Lewis (*Parker Lewis Can't Lewis*), Bayside High hot shot, Zach Morris (*Saved by the Bell*) and even Clarissa Darling (*Clarissa Explains it All*), who borrows his teaching methods [3].

"The sportos, the motorheads, geeks, sluts, bloods, waistoids, dweebies, [and] dickheads" all think Ferris is a "righteous dude." And yet, he's not obnoxiously popular like you find so often in teen fare today. In fact, Ferris is at times delightfully oblivious to his reach. It serves for a great running gag in which concern for Ferris's "illness" is blown way out of proportion. A marquee at Wrigley Field reads: SAVE FERRIS. A newspaper headline boasts about the city rallying around a sick teen. A police detective (possibly played by cinematographer Tak Fujimoto?) tells Ferris's confused mother that the officers are all "pulling for him."

"How can I possibly be expected to handle school on a day like this?" Ferris asks us, referring to promising blue skies. At Shermer High, the normally beloved setting for John Hughes's teen films, monotone teachers like Ben Stein drone on while students stare, sleep, and silently rage. You can understand why Ferris needs a day off. (Check out classroom cameos of Max Perlich (*Gleaming the Cube*), Scott Coffey (*Shag*), and Kristy Swanson (*Deadly Friend*).

But, as film critic Richard Roeper points out, it's really Cameron Frye's day off [4]. Ferris intends the trip to be therapeutic for his socially awkward, overly-anxious friend, and hopefully help him loosen the hell up before he goes off to college. Ferris takes a huge risk to make it happen. With too many unexcused absences on record, he won't graduate if he's caught, though he relishes the challenge.

The mustachioed school principal, Ed Rooney (Jones), preserver of the stuffy status quo, suspects that Ferris is up to something and vows to personally catch him in the act. "I did not achieve this position in life by having some snot-nosed punk leave my cheese out in the wind," he tells his bubbly assistant, Grace (Edie McClurg). Jeanie investigates, too.

Downtown, a parking garage attendant (Richard Edson) goes wild behind the scenes in the Ferrari. Ferris & Co. get playful at the Chicago Art Institute, eat



Shabby chic interior by Samantha Baker.



Putting Cameron's resolution to the test.

pancreas at a snobby French restaurant, catch fly balls at a Cubs game, and Ferris lip syncs to Wayne Newton's "Danke Shoen" on a parade float at the annual Von Stuben Day celebration. Meanwhile, Ed Rooney and Jeannie hilariously fumble around the empty Bueller residence in search of Ferris. Eventually they bump into each other, with Jeannie bolting upstairs to report a "possibly armed, certainly weird" intruder to the police who just don't buy it. (Sigh... Jeannie, at least *The Take* came to your defense [5]).

As said before, this is really Cameron Frye's day off. His much-needed epiphany happens at the end of the day, when the friends try to return the car undetected. For Cameron, his dad's Ferrari isn't eye candy, but a reminder of a shitty father who cares more about a car than his son. "My old man pushes me around. I never say anything!" He decides it's time to start sticking up for himself. This was Alan Ruck's first major film role, and he is excellent.

His resolution will certainly be put to the test, because what follows is one of the most unforgettable *Holy shit! My parents are going to kill me!* moments. Ferris offers to take the blame, Cameron sticks by his guns. The aftermath happens offscreen, but we'd like to think that things work out OK for Cameron and we refuse to entertain any theories otherwise!

While John Hughes made loads of hit films during his short career (he died about

ten years ago of a heart attack), it's his teen films for which he is most celebrated. As Robbie Collin of *The Telegraph* put it: Hughes could "articulate[e] what it meant to be teenage more acutely than any single writer or director had done since" [6]. That's especially true with Hughes's teen comedies, where he created these often absurd universes, especially in *Ferris Bueller*, but still gave you characters you really felt for, and it never comes off feeling like a disjointed mess.

Even Jeannie has a change of heart when a groggy young Charlie Sheen offers some amusingly parental advice: "spend a little less time worrying about your brother." It may mean never holding Ferris accountable for anything, but it's certainly less stressful to just let go sometimes. Otherwise, you'll end up like Rooney.

By the film's end, Rooney is utterly defeated. He's been kicked in the face, chased by a dog, stuck in mud, and his car is towed. The final scene is our favorite: he's forced to hitch a ride home on the school bus like a teenage pleb. He spots some graffiti: Rooney eats it.

Ferris Bueller's Day Off is one of John Hughes's best films. There was talk about a sequel years ago (when is there not) and renewed interest by various listicle websites. Broderick put the kaibosh on that idea long ago, saying the story has been told, and there's no more to tell. You hear that, Hollywood?!



Released: April 10, 1987
Written by: Richard Martini, Tim Metcalfe, Miguel Tejada-Flores
Directed by: Bill L. Norton
Essay by: Rhonda Baughman

TAKING THE EXIT RAMP

THREE FOR THE ROAD

My reaction to a *Three for the Road* re-watch astonished me: strangely negative, quite visceral and exhausting. I had once adored this movie. This stung as a depressing breakup of the worst kind: no warning. Re-watches can have that potential effect: once beloved films seen in a new, more harsh light and once-charming turned cringe-worthy. I fixed it though – found my usual sunny disposition again quickly. I'll let you know how later.

In the '80s, Alan Ruck (as TC), Kerri Green (as Robin), and Charlie (as Paul) teamed up and hit the road trip highway in *Three for the Road* (1987). The year itself shines like only last week, but watching the movie again (after 30 years) made me feel like it might as well be another lifetime on another planet. It was a time though when we could believably imagine that Sheen would NOT attend a raging all-night kegger, and instead pull an academic's

all-nighter working on a position paper for a presidential contender. I miss this clean-cut and beautiful-faced boy Sheen. Of course, younger me saw and heard another beautiful-faced boy (and in character as the goofy roommate and aspiring writer!) Ruck call out MY name to his previous night's hook-up: Rhonda. (A sign for young wannabe writer Rhonda! Also a sign to begin the ritual rental of this film once a week for a year from a local video chain) [2].

Sheen and Green appeared as love interests in *Lucas* (1986) while Ruck and Sheen had roles in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) garnering star turn attention. However, *Road's* Wiki is so ominous, indicating careers essentially ended! Up and coming star lights dimmed! Really mean comments from Sheen on IMDB like: "*Three for the Road* was a piece of shit that I wished didn't exist and that I was



Losing his cool.



Eat with your feet. It's totally neat. Or, whatever.

terrible in". I would never say that, but something is definitely wrong with the film.

A brief synopsis of this 90-minute, chuckle-free, zany road hijinks movie where irritatingly shrill or manic folks also find love, brings no justice to the fact it took me three hours to get through. Everyone mostly behaves like a dick in this movie. Lines blur between drama, wacky comedy, love story, and buddy movie with a social conscience.

The whole major plot point of evil senator (Raymond J. Barry) entrusting a virtual stranger on his staff (Sheen) to transport his daughter (Green) to a reform school is really weird now. The senator obviously wants to lock his offspring away – and he's a politician, so everyone knows he's corrupt, except Sheen – so why the rigamarole with getting his daughter safely anywhere if he's just going to lock her up to avoid embarrassment?

Toward the end, Sheen realizes he's on his way to becoming a political hack piece of garbage himself, but hey? According to Ruck: "Promotion!" So why question this pre-pre-pre midlife crisis too deeply? Considering our current 2020 climate, the film feels super dated with the whole idea that presidential candidates can BE GREAT MEN! Okay dudes at best, maybe, but GREAT MEN!?! Nah.

Robin's journey to a reform school held some sort of mysterious thrall for younger

me, judging also from my youthful obsession with *Reform School Girls* (1986). No spoilers on the end of *Three for the Road*, but I DO understand where Sheen's cantankerous quote above came from now. The movie's box office failure was not Sheen's fault; it was no actor's fault. It's poor storytelling.

The film rings as untrue and insincere in every way, which is unfortunate because these are all likable actors playing unlikable characters. Sally Kellerman's brief appearance (as Robin's mom Blanche) rings false – she's in a whole different league in this film – apparently channeling great dramatic strength and exercising some serious acting chops.

Most of *Road's* humor dropped with a thud, and stayed there, unable to sink lower: Ruck's "What's the latest book you've read?" schtick lands as unbelievably not funny now. It feels cruel now: making fun of people for what they read or do not read. As an educator I'm happy if people read anything outside of social media. Someone really thought this running gag out, too – it does come full circle when TS meets his dream girl. They quote Faulkner a lot.

Older Rhonda felt strangely protective toward Green's young (high school age) character making her first goo-goo eyes at Sheen's oil slick lawyer jargon jive talkin' mansplaining Civil Rights discourse with the maître d' to get service and the best



Another escape attempt.



Dear old dad makes an appearance.

table in the house on the side. It took way too long to get to one point: Robin's father is abusive.

Robin gives Sheen and Ruck the slip several times, which leads me to believe that if they're THIS naïve – allowing multiple, barely-wily escapes – are they really cut out to be a politician and a writer respectively? By the third Robin escape I only wondered if Ruck and Sheen aren't simply incompetent.

Additionally, there might be some kind of subliminal message or literary symbolism with the "ultra-religious African-American male truck driver who loses his egg/chicken cargo as he tries to assist a strangely unlikeable white female teen" but I can't think what it might be. Martini's script seems to have been mishandled, but reading what some of the original scenes were – I'm not sure either would have worked.

You can catch a glimpse of 'what might have been' at the hour mark when Sheen and Green canoodle at a lake. Green kisses Sheen – that might have been the first time I could identify with ANYTHING happening in this movie now. The young and impulsive road trip feel Rhonda resurfaced long enough to recall what that kind of rash and exuberant and hopeful 'we're living forever' mentality that the pre-9/11 era held and the era where those kinds of kisses mattered.

Finally, the personal road trip sync burst in with the introduction of Missy (Blair Tekfin) [4] at the movie's halfway mark. Robin and Missy meet through trauma, make brief small talk, and Missy questions Robin as to her destination. "South. Wanna come?" Robin asks. "Sure," Missy says.

That is EXACTLY how my own first impromptu road trip happened: standing in line at a book buyback counter at Kent State University in 1999 next to a large young man in my Speech class. "Great speech today," Speech Class Member said. "Thanks," I returned. "What are you doing after this?" he asked. "I think I'm going on a road trip to Champaign-Urbana, IL. Wanna come?" "Sure!" he said and our epic shared legend was born.

I would see and fall in love with this same M.O. in the brutally dark film *Baise-Moi* (2001) – a film both my new pal and I would come to love. Only realizing now, right now, as of this precise writing, just how our road trip beginnings echoed the sentiments of the beginning of the road trips in both *Three for the Road* and *Baise-moi*. [4] There's no DVD release for *Road* and no plans. I am quite all right with this information for once.

So, after this exhausting re-watch, how did I return my wearied mind back to cheerful mode? I watched another road trip movie Surely, I could not strike out twice?



Released: June 19, 1987 (US)
Written and Directed by: Bruce Robinson
Essay by: Stephanie McDevitt

THERE'S ALWAYS TIME FOR A DRINK! WITHNAIL & I

This was my first viewing of *Withnail & I*. In fact, I had never heard of it until I researched movies for this *Girls, on Film* issue. I was surprised to learn that it is a very popular movie in England. I think it's one of those movies you have to watch over and over until you can eventually quote the whole thing. It was funny, but I also found it to be sad and desperate at times. In the end, I'm not sure how I feel about this movie, so you should read my essay and then watch and decide for yourself.

Withnail & I is the story of two struggling, out-of-work actors, living in a squalid London flat in 1969. Withnail (Richard E. Grant) is drunk most of the time, and often rails about his terrible agent who never finds him work. Marwood (Paul McGann) is the titular "and I." Marwood's name is never spoken in the movie, and the credits only refer to him as "...and I." However,

towards the end of the film he receives a telegram that's addressed to Marwood. Anyway, Marwood decides that he and Withnail need to go to the country to rejuvenate, so he convinces Withnail to ask his rich uncle to lend them his country house.

Withnail and Marwood pay a visit to uncle Monty (Richard Griffiths), who is an uncloseted gay man and also a failed actor. After a few drinks, Withnail pulls Monty aside and speaks to him privately about the cabin. We don't see that conversation, but we do see Withnail triumphantly wave the key to the cabin around as soon as they step outside. It appears our boys are going on holiday.

Withnail and Marwood arrive at the country house to find there is no electricity, no heat, and no food. So, they approach the locals, explain "we've gone on



Call the travel agent. It's time to get away!



They have to kill it first.

holiday by mistake," and ask if they can buy food from them. When a farmer agrees to drop some food off to them, he returns with a live chicken. Cut to Marwood trying to stuff a poorly plucked chicken into a teapot. I can't imagine it was a good meal.

One night, Withnail and Marwood head to a local pub where they once again attempt to buy food off of a local who delivered a pheasant to the bartender. They end up arguing with the guy, and he eventually threatens to kill them. That night, someone breaks into their house, and Withnail and Marwood are terrified. But, no bother, it's just uncle Monty, who's randomly come to join them on their trip.

Monty brings food and firewood and even tries to buy them appropriate boots in which to walk about the countryside (Withnail and Marwood instead use the money to drink). You'd think their holiday was saved, however, as the days go by, Monty starts making aggressive advances towards Marwood. Marwood, who is not gay, does his best to politely avoid Monty's passes, but Monty refuses to take the hint. This brief respite from city life isn't turning out as Marwood and Withnail had hoped.

Writer and Director Bruce Robinson based most of *Withnail & I* on his experiences living with Vivian MacKerrellin in London in the 60s. Vivian was a sometimes actor and an always alcoholic. There is a scene

in the movie where Withnail, so desperate for a drink, downs a bottle of lighter fluid. Robinson said MacKerrellin actually did this and it left him blind for several days [1].

Vivian MacKerrellin seems to have led a pretty sad life. He was from a well-off family, educated, and good looking, but his addiction took over. He was diagnosed with throat cancer in his 40s, and he eventually had a laryngectomy, which left him unable to eat or speak. Towards the end of his life, he took to injecting alcohol directly into his stomach. MacKerrellin died in 1995 at the age of 50 [2].

Much like his real-life counterpart, Withnail comes from money and is very well educated, but his privilege doesn't do much for him. He complains throughout the movie about not getting work, but when he's offered a role as an understudy for Konstantin in *The Seagull*, he flat out refuses. In fact, he's offended at the thought of being an understudy.

Withnail is funny, but arrogant and obnoxious. Underneath it all is a desperation for something: attention, success, work, happiness, or all of the above. Grant portrays this effortlessly, especially in the final scene of the movie.

Marwood ends up getting cast in a play and has to move out. Withnail walks him to the train station and Marwood asks him not to come in. Withnail is left alone, in the pouring rain, quoting Hamlet's soliloquy



Uncle Monty getting creepy.



Marwood gets a job.

including, "What a piece of work is a man!" [3]. We're left to wonder if Withnail meets the same fate as MacKerrellin.

Richard E. Grant gives a great performance as Withnail, but he wasn't the only actor that Robinson considered for the role. He also auditioned Daniel Day Lewis and Kenneth Branagh, both of whom probably would have brought an intensity to *Withnail* that would have completely changed this movie.

Furthermore, Paul McGann almost didn't get the role of Marwood. Apparently Robinson didn't think McGann's Liverpool accent was right for the character. McGann convinced Robinson to let him audition again, this time with an accent more like that of someone from London, and he won the part [4].

Another great performance comes from Richard Griffiths as Monty. Similar to Withnail, Monty is an unsuccessful but well-educated actor. He lives a much more privileged lifestyle, but not much is known about how he earned (or inherited) his money. The *Los Angeles Times* review said, "It is not too much to say that Uncle Monty is just about the most endearingly comical uncloseted gay character the screen has ever seen" [5].

I have to disagree with the *LA Times* here. Once Monty arrives at the cottage, his pursuit of Marwood becomes super creepy (apparently, Robinson based this

plot point on the advances he received from Franco Zeffirelli when he was playing Benvolio in Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* [6]). Marwood tries to barricade his door, but Monty bursts in his room and eventually corners Marwood while slowly undoing his robe. Griffiths gives a great performance, but I would argue that it's his transition from "comical uncloseted gay character" to creepy, sexually aggressive uncle that really shows Griffiths range.

One bit of trivia about *Withnail & I*: throughout most of the movie, Marwood has shaggy hair and often wears circular glasses, which makes him look a lot like John Lennon. So, I thought it was interesting to see that George Harrison was an executive producer. Furthermore, as I was reading about the movie, I learned that Ringo Starr is credited as a "Special Production Consultant" under his real name, Richard Starkey [7].

The British Film Institute voted *Withnail & I* the 29th greatest British film of all time. In 2009, prominent British filmmakers ranked it the second best British film in the past 25 years. And, in 2011, *Time Out London* named it the seventh greatest comedy film of all time [8].

And yet, it is hard to track the film down here in the States. It's on the Criterion Channel streaming service, and I signed up for a free two-week trial in to watch it. If you can find it, you should check it out and let me know what you think!



Released: November 25, 1987
Written and directed by: John Hughes
Essay by: Janene Scelza and Matt Scelza

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAY

PLANE, TRAINS, AND AUTOMOBILES

Planes, Trains, and Automobiles is one of those classic Murphy's law disaster road trip comedies. Neil Simon's *The Out-of-Towners* (1970) might have been the first incarnation of this kind of road trip movie where anything that can go wrong, will go wrong, big time! In any event, the genre was certainly familiar territory for writer/director John Hughes who, by 1987, had already written two ill-fated Griswold family vacations. *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*, however, has more in common with Hughes's 1991 comedy, *Dutch*, which also involves mismatched travelers defying the odds to make it home in time for Thanksgiving. Basically, they're modern takes on the *Odyssey*.

In *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*, two polar opposite strangers -- smug

Chicago marketing executive Neal Page (Steve Martin) and chummy Midwestern shower curtain ring salesman (business was booming in 1987), Del Griffith (John Candy) -- embark on a disastrous trip to Chicago together. Their paths first cross in Manhattan two days before Thanksgiving. Neal, desperate to catch an early evening flight home, fruitlessly tries hailing a cab in rush hour holiday traffic. (He even races Kevin Bacon for one). Meanwhile, oblivious Del, bound for the same flight, rides off in the only cab that stops. This sets off Neal's chronic grumbling and grimacing.

What should have been a relatively quick trip from the Big Apple to the Windy City ultimately spans two crazy days plagued by inclement weather, detoured



Neal, about to pop.



Co-stars with magnificent chemistry.

flights, pickpockets, an icy truck ride, malfunctioning trains, an over-crowded bus, and, in one of the best sequences in the film, a near-death experience with a rental car. John Hughes said he had based the idea for *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* on a similar experience that stretched into five days [1].

By some strange fate, Neal and Del suffer these "indignities of modern travel" (to borrow Roger Ebert's words [2]) together. It's as if a Ghost of Thanksgiving Present is trying to teach Neal to show more compassion for people by forcing the city boy to rely on weird and overly cheery Midwesterners, particularly Del, to navigate his way home.

These strange inhabitants of Middle America include Michael McKean, Ben Stein, Larry Hankin, and the excellent Edie McClurg, who has a hilarious bit part as a dopey car rental agent in the only scene where Steve Martin drops the F-bomb... a whopping 19 times.

Since their first encounter, Del is an inescapable presence (hence our Ghost of Thanksgiving Present theory). Neal discovers Del sitting across from him at the airport in New York, asking if they've met before. Neal's forced to squeeze in next to Del and the old "dangly earrings" guy from *Home Alone* after he's inexplicably bumped from first class, after which Del proceeds to take off his shoes and talk Neal's ear off. They bump into each other

again in Wichita, when their Chicago flight is rerouted because of snowstorms. Del offers to help Neal get a motel room, which they awkwardly share for the night.

Del seems like a prototype for Gus Polinski, the chummy polka player John Candy played in *Home Alone* (also written by John Hughes) who comes to Catherine O'Hara's aid. Del is overly chatty and has some irksome habits (he's a total slob at the hotel), but he's the nicest guy you'll ever meet. And, like Gus, Del is a savvy traveler who seems to have friends all over who can do him a favor, and he's always eager to help. He saves Neal's ass A LOT.

It takes Neal a while to warm up to Del, of course. Neal (understandably) reaches his breaking point with Del after Del's beer explodes all over the bed they are sharing after running one of those vibrator machine things you often see in shitty motels in old movies. (The Magic Fingers machine wasn't just a trope! [2]). Neal lays into him, saying some pretty awful things about Del that clearly breaks his spirit. But, Del manages to soldier on, telling Neal: "I could be a cold-hearted cynic like you... but I don't like to hurt people's feelings." Oof! And after all that, Del still helps Neal get home. That's a pretty solid dude in our book.

As we mentioned in our *Ferris Bueller* essay earlier in this issue, John Hughes had a particular genius for creating screwball situations with characters that



Clocked for speeding.



A little late and a little wiser.

you genuinely care about. Behind Del's jolly facade is a tragic backstory. On the last leg of their trip, Neal is daydreaming about his family waiting for him in Chicago when it suddenly dawns on him that Del has no place to go. So, Neal invites him to spend Thanksgiving with his family. Good work, Ghost of Thanksgiving Present!

Planes, Trains and Automobiles is a pretty solid comedy, but what makes Del's story a bit sadder nowadays are the parallels between him and John Candy, the beloved late comic who portrayed him. Steve Martin said of his co-star: he was "[very] sweet... and complicated. And so, he was always friendly, always outgoing and you know, funny and nice and polite, but I could tell he had kind of a little broken heart inside him" [3]. Roger Ebert, who had run into him in a bar, something similar. "[All John Candy] wanted to do was make people laugh, but sometimes he tried too hard, and he hated himself for doing that in some of his movies. I thought of Del. There is so much truth in the role that it transforms the whole movie" [4].

Last year, *Rolling Stone* declared *Planes* to be the "Ultimate Thanksgiving Movie," admitting that there really aren't that many other contenders in the that category. But, what sets *Planes, Trains, and Airplanes* apart, apparently, is how differently it approaches the holiday theme. "If there's a Thanksgiving feast involved in a film's plot, chances are good that it's there to heighten the

story's conflict, expose secrets and/or allow somebody to drop some kind of bombshell. ... *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* is the opposite of all of that. The whole movie is about Neal getting home so he can enjoy the day with his family. That's it. That is the goal" [5]. There's a sweet simplicity to it. *Dutch* was the same way.

When *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* was released in 1987, John Hughes had worked almost exclusively on teen films. The *L.A. Times* asked: "Could someone who would stoop to milking laughs from a Chinese exchange student named Long Duc Dong (*Sixteen Candles*) rise to the occasion of entertaining adults as well?" [6] Clearly, he could. *Planes* was a box office hit and undoubtedly became part of some folks' holiday viewing tradition. We certainly enjoyed it.

But, what's a popular 80's movie without a remake? News came out as we were writing this essay that Kevin Hart and Will Smith will produce and star in one next year, and Ayesha Carter (*Brooklyn 99*) will pen the screenplay [7]. While our reaction to remakes these days usually goes from "why" to "meh...," we're curious to see whether it will be as much of a heartwarming ode to the Midwest.



Released: March 24, 1989 (Finland)
Written and directed by: Aki Kaurismäki
Essay by: Stephanie McDevitt

DO YOU HAVE ROCK & ROLL?

LENINGRAD COWBOYS GO AMERICA

The 80s produced many popular movies about bands, including *The Blues Brothers*, *This is Spinal Tap*, and *Purple Rain*. At the very end of the decade, we were blessed with a movie about a Siberian rock band called the Leningrad Cowboys. Their first feature film, *Leningrad Cowboys Go America*, was released in Finland in 1989, just making the cut for *Girls, on Film* (the American premiere wasn't until 1990). It's a funny movie but also very aesthetically pleasing, and I recommend checking it out.

Director Aki Kaurismäki created the Leningrad Cowboys in 1986 with Sakke

Järvenpää and Mato Valtonen (who were members of the Finnish rock band, Sleepy Sleepers) as a joke about the diminishing power of the Soviet Union. Aki Kaurismäki directed their first music video, which resulted in the short film *Rocky VI* (1986). They made two more short films together before *Leningrad Cowboys Go America*. Nicky Tesco, founding member of the UK punk band The Members, joined them for the movie, and the Cowboys were born [1].

Leningrad Cowboys Go America opens with a wide shot panning the frozen tundra somewhere in Finland. The camera



Bass so cool it's ice.



Best rock band in Siberia.

stops on the body of the Cowboys' bassist, who stayed up all night practicing and froze to death. The Cowboys, with their outrageous pompadour hair and pointy shoes, are in a nearby barn auditioning for a promoter despite the death of their bandmate. The promoter thinks they're terrible and tells them to go to America because they'll buy anything there.

The band, along with manager Vladimir (Matti Pellonpää) and the frozen body of their bassist (followed by village idiot, Igor (Kari Väänänen)), head to New York, where they go straight to CBGBs. They meet with a music promoter who suggests their first gig could be at Madison Square Garden or Yankee Stadium. However, once he hears them play, he tells Vladimir to contact his cousin, who is looking for a band to play a wedding in Mexico.

So, they buy some sheet music to learn American rock and roll songs, pick out a used car, tie the bassist's coffin to the top of the car, and head out on the road to the Mexican wedding. They stop along the way to play shows in Memphis, TN; Natchez, MS; New Orleans, LA; Langtry, TX; and Galveston, TX with varying success. All of their gigs are in dive bars or crappy clubs, and in one instance their show puts the club out of business.

Any money they made off those gigs goes directly in Vladimir's pocket. He refuses to feed the band and makes them wait outside while he eats at restaurants and

feeds his leftovers to stray dogs. In one scene, they ask for food, and Vladimir goes to a grocery store and buys a big sack of onions, which the guys greedily tear into. While Vladimir drinks copious amounts of Budweiser, the band starves, and they eventually rise up and tie Vladimir up in the back of the car.

In the end, they make it to the wedding in Mexico, and their performance seems to be well received. While the band is playing, Igor pours tequila into the bassist's frozen mouth, and he begins to defrost. He completely thaws out in time to join the band on stage, and for the first time since coming to America, the Cowboys are complete.

Leningrad Cowboys Go America reminded me of *The Blues Brothers* (1980). Both movies follow quirky musicians who travel across the country and stop along the way for musical numbers. However, as Cine Outsider pointed out, "Where [John] Landis revels in the comedy of excess [in *Blues Brothers*], Kaurismäki employs a resolutely minimalist approach, and does so to typically delicious effect" [2]. The *Blues Brother* musical numbers are large, star-studded affairs, while the *Cowboys* play in dive bars to minimal audiences with minimal approval.

Furthermore, the *Blues Brothers* trip around the country is dotted with police chases and crazy antics, like when they drive through the mall. In *Go America*, the



Prison blues - an American rock experience.

travel between cities is uneventful and shown in barren American landscapes. In fact, Kaurismäki finds a way to make the American scenery look similar to the Finnish frozen tundra we see at the beginning of the movie.

Despite the fact that the Cowboys play in such cities as Memphis and New Orleans, we never see the highlights of those city skylines. Instead he shows factories, nondescript suburbs, and unlabeled southern landscapes that call back to the Cowboys' homeland. Cine Outsider remarks that Kaurismäki was inspired by Jim Jarmusch, and, as an acknowledgment, he cast Jarmusch in a small cameo as a used car salesman [3].

In addition to the wide, barren, landscape shots, Kaurismäki played on the ridiculous look of the Cowboys. He often lined them up outside of traditional looking American buildings, like a diner or grocery store, and in one scene, he even had them lying on the beach. By putting their pointy hair and shoes up against these backdrops, Kaurismäki created scenes that looked like "playful surrealist reworking[s] of Edward Hopper paintings" [4].

After the movie came out, the Leningrad Cowboys took off (similar to Spinal Tap). They recorded music, made videos, and played shows. In 1992, they released an album called, *We Cum from Brooklyn*, a sarcastic nod to appropriation of American culture, and Kaurismäki directed more music videos, which you can see



Playing American rock n' roll.

on YouTube. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed and the Berlin Wall fell, and "Kaurismäki had to reflect this new reality in his second feature starring these fictively Russian rockers" [5].

In 1994, *Leningrad Cowboys Meet Moses* was released. Later that year, they released *Total Balalaika Show*, a movie of a concert that took place on Senate Square in Helsinki. The concert was a unity event between Finland and Russia and included the Alexandrov Ensemble, a Russian group. 70,000 people attended the concert, where they enjoyed a mix of Western rock and Russian folk music. By all accounts, the concert was a success [6].

The Cowboys released albums and played shows well into the 2000s. In 2010, *Empire* magazine ranked *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* as #88 in the 100 best films of World Cinema [7]. According to my Internet searches, the Cowboys haven't been active in the last few years, and their official website doesn't work.

I watched *Go America* on the Criterion stream channel, and they currently have all three Leningrad Cowboys movies (*Go America*, *Meet Moses*, and *Total Balalaika Show*). This movie is worth watching, and maybe some time in the future, we'll be able to see the Cowboys live on-stage again.

WANNA KNOW MORE?

ENDNOTES

FANDANGO

[1] "Interview: Kevin Reynolds Looks Back at 'Fandango'" (Film School Rejects, 2009), <https://tinyurl.com/y3y8wfrz>

[2] *Ibid*

[3] "Tarantino's Favorite Films" (The Quentin Tarantino Archives), <https://tinyurl.com/yxry97sw>

THUNDER ALLEY

(1) Schoelen is also a musician, too – in case that wasn't obvious.

[2] Full interview appears in one of the August/September 2020 issue of *Grindhouse Purgatory or Exploitation Nation* (as of this writing).

[3] Reference to Dr. John's 1969 LP "Babylon."

[4] AKA Racer X frontman Jeff Martin, a legitimate hot item on Phoenix-area music scene.

[5] [Moviechat.org](https://tinyurl.com/y4ow283v) Forums: "Thunder Alley Soundtrack" <https://tinyurl.com/y4ow283v>

PEE-WEE'S BIG ADVENTURE

[1] "Pee-wee Herman" (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/jhbszn9>

[2] *Ibid*.

[3] *Ibid*.

[4] "15 Facts About Pee-wee's Big Adventure On Its 35th Anniversary" (Mental Floss, 2015) <https://tinyurl.com/y5jox2yt>

[5] *Ibid*.

[6] *Ibid*.

[7] "Danny Elfman Looks Back at Tim Burton's Cinematic Adventures in Melody" (Variety, 2016) <https://tinyurl.com/y6gcjx5m>

[8] "15 Facts About Pee-wee's Big Adventure On Its 35th Anniversary" (Mental Floss, 2015) <https://tinyurl.com/y5jox2yt>

[9] "The Circusless Circus: Big Top Pee-wee" (Girls, on Film, 2019) <https://tinyurl.com/y3jsx7j4>

[10] "Pee-wee Herman" (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/jhbszn9>

[12] Pee-wee Herman 35th Anniversary Tour, <https://tour.peewee.com/>

[13] "EVENT REVIEW: 'PEE-WEE'S BIG ADVENTURE' 35TH ANNIVERSARY TOUR KICK-OFF" (Horror Geek Life, 2020) <https://tinyurl.com/yy62m5by>

[14] "15 Facts About Pee-wee's Big Adventure On Its 35th Anniversary" (Mental Floss, 2015) <https://tinyurl.com/y5jox2yt>

[15] "Pee-wee Herman's Bike Sells at Auction" (CinemaBlend, 2014) <https://tinyurl.com/y29hvubc>

STILL GOING, HUH? ENDNOTES (CONT'D)

FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY OFF

[1] "A road movie is a film genre in which the main characters leave home on a road trip, typically altering the perspective from their everyday lives." -- Laderman, David. *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie*. University of Texas Press, 2010. Ch. 1, <https://tinyurl.com/y6alxyu4>

[2] "1986 in film" (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/yy49kl6b>

[3] Ferris also became a one-season 90's TV show with Charlie Schlatter as Ferris and Jennifer Aniston as Jeanie [VIDEO] <https://tinyurl.com/hw39f8j>

[4] "Ferris, Kevin, Samantha and Uncle Buck are in mourning. Saying goodbye to John Hughes." (Richard Roeper & the Movies, 2009) <https://tinyurl.com/y3w9bm6l>

[5] "Jeanie Bueller: The Surprise Heroine of Ferris Bueller's Day Off" (The Take, 2018), <https://tinyurl.com/y48ur9ec>

[6] "Will there ever be another John Hughes?" (The Telegraph, 2015), <https://tinyurl.com/y42gfy9>

THREE FOR THE ROAD

[1] So much rental money, I'm sure I bought the film eight times over even at ridiculous 1987 sticker prices.

[2] I recall freaking out my beloved grandparents with that attempt in Knight's Restaurant in Canton, OH and I DO still enjoy eating ice to this day which begs

the question: how much of my personality is from the subconscious osmosis of all the weird shit I watched as a kid? Am I ready for that answer? This re-watch and subsequent article answers that question and I'm awestruck.

[3] Tefkin is also a singer/songwriter and is strangely best known for replacing the tragically-murdered Dominique Dunne on the TV series *V*.

[4] Let's be clear: *Three for the Road* may be strangely inaccessible to me now and *Baise-Moi*, well, my pal and I didn't rob nor kill anyone. My road trip was stellar.

[5] My father is local Canton, OH music/record store legend "Kosmic Bob" Baughman and the *Bimbos* LP was given to me in his second store, Major Moves. I LOVED the triggering of this memory!

WITHNAIL & I

[1] "A side effect of alcoholism: My thumbs have gone weird!" (RogerEbert.com, 2009) <https://tinyurl.com/yxqfeklg>

[2] "Vivian MacKerrell" (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/y2m4uhx5>

[3] "A side effect of alcoholism: My thumbs have gone weird!" (RogerEbert.com, 2009) <https://tinyurl.com/yxqfeklg>

[4] "Withnail and I" (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/y5l5xmck>

[5] "Movie Review: Withnail and I Carry on in Rural England" (LA Times, 1987) <https://>

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

ENDNOTES (END'D)

tinyurl.com/y4tobc3t

[6] "A side effect of alcoholism: My thumbs have gone weird!" (RogerEbert.com, 2009) <https://tinyurl.com/yxqfeklg>

[7] Withnail and I (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/y5l5xmck>

[8] Ibid.

PLANES, TRAINS, AND AUTOMOBILES

[1] "Getting There is Half the Fun: The Story of Planes, Trains and Automobiles" (Video), <https://tinyurl.com/yy8pnb4x>

[2] "Planes, Trains, and Automobiles" (Roger Ebert, 2000), <https://tinyurl.com/y55sv28p>

[3] IMDB Trivia for Planes, Trains, and Automobiles, <https://tinyurl.com/y4uw8hrz>

[4] "Planes, Trains, and Automobiles" (Roger Ebert, 2000), <https://tinyurl.com/y55sv28p>

[5] "Why 'Planes, Trains and Automobiles' Is the Ultimate Thanksgiving Movie," (Rolling Stone, 2019) <https://tinyurl.com/y56zl4pp>

[6] "'PTA' Transports John Hughes Beyond His Teen Comedy Image" (LA Times, 1987), <https://tinyurl.com/y2mxttrss>

[7] We consider the raunchy 2010 comedy, *Due Date*, to be an unofficial remake.

LENINGRAD COWBOYS GO AMERICA

[1] "Leningrad Cowboys" (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/yygewnd5>

[2] Review: Leningrad Cowboys Go America (Cineoutsider) <https://tinyurl.com/yx93oal5>

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] "Eclipse Series 29: Aki Kaurismäki's Leningrad Cowboys" (Criterion, 2011) <https://tinyurl.com/y32wasn6>

[6] "Total Balalaika Show" (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/y36n7kwd>

[7] "Leningrad Cowboys Go America" <https://tinyurl.com/jlrth8a>

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