

Where Will 'Easy Rider' End Up?

By **JESSE KORNBLUTH**

INCRECIBLE, romantic haze — in the desert! Of course: it's photographer Laszlo Kovacs' patented long-shot, with the focus reduced to make background a kind of moving abstraction. And now the two baddest mothers of the New Age, our Batman and Robin, come up the hill and into focus, the aura of their cycles golden in the sun. And that's Steppenwolf hitting "Born to be Wild" on the soundtrack. And out there is an audience of millions loosening up and grooving a bit with the Walter Mitty-ness of it all, for this is "Easy Rider," starring Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper and co-starring, if you will, the Byrds, the Band, Jimi Hendrix, the Electric Flag, the Electric Prunes, and Bob Dylan via Roger McGuinn. Somewhere in the bleachers, critics and competitors are busting their skulls trying to figure out why this cheapie grosses so much, and the best anyone comes up with is that "Easy Rider" is . . . revolutionary.

Revolutionary! Wittgenstein would have roared at Hollywood's definition — Revolutionary: a new genre, subject usually "now," soundtrack always rock.

The soundtrack is always rock because, however badly it has been hyped, packaged, turned into the hippiest of Muzak, rock is still able to communicate something, and "now" films—which generally have nothing to say to anybody about anything—need all the support their producers can purchase. No matter if the songs of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young seem



Peter Fonda
"Revolutionary?"

to clash with the sensibility of "The Strawberry Statement" — by God, the second C. S. N & Y album had orders for a million copies before it was even released! Rope them in, at any price, and pray you're halfway home, a hit by association. Magic?

Weird, too. In just five years — the "TAMI Show," the first rock film classic, with James Brown, Chuck Berry, the Stones, the Miracles and the Beach Boys, was videotaped in 1965 — the rock soundtrack has become a set form, a *rite de passage*, for the now filmmaker. It is how producers tell some undefined Life Conspiracy that they are indeed "with us." It is how folks who think about Generation Gaps and the like try to make cheap bridges of understanding. It is about the Fast Buck, and worst of all, it has become a dismal failure, threatening, for the foreseeable future, any production about the lives of young people which does not simply splash television on a big screen.

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At the start, it was casual, almost serendipitous. As late as 1967, Mike Nichols chose Simon and Garfunkel for the soundtrack of "The Graduate" because he played their music in the morning while shaving. Antonioni, who long ago decided that music as commentary is always "old and rancid," used the Yardbirds brilliantly in "Blow-Up." And "Monterey Pop," from the Summer of Love, was as informal and energy-giving as "Woodstock" is calculated and overlong.

Then, with the success of "Easy Rider," it seems, everything changed. Critics found meaning for the masses in rock music, the revenues of the records demanded attention, rock became an art form of sorts, and as such, it made State-

ments. Something that makes Statements has many uses; rock became a problem-solver. We take this song, and while it's on, we shoot a fancy mood bridge, or put this song against that scene, and . . .

It gets too confusing. Dylan refused to let Peter Fonda use "It's All Right, Ma" at the end of "Easy Rider" because he no longer felt that way, but the Band, hyped by many as Dylan's successors and rock's guardians of Integrity, apparently offered to write all the music for "Easy Rider" after seeing the film. Joni Mitchell stood in a snowy graveyard and eulogized a smackhead in "Alice's Restaurant" and everybody knows that's not where her head is supposed to be. Even the Beatles—or someone at Apple — gave Stuart Hagmann ("The Strawberry Statement") permission to film an auditorium full of kids getting gassed and beaten by the pigs while they're chanting John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance."

It's not that rock is a sacred form, or that They can't use it well. The issue isn't political, like Liberation News Service endorsing the Rolling Stones and their "Street Fighting Man" in an "ideological rift" with the Beatles' "Revolution." It's just that rock and drugs and sex—the foundations of the so-called New Culture—have been around long enough so they're subliminal in our lives; movies that herald the arrival of drugs in Greenwich, Conn., will no longer draw mobs of college kids and "young adults" though they may, like "Alice's Restaurant," have a strong following in the 10-to-16 set. The great majority of the youth audience is once again ahead of the producers, but the producers, in their relief at finally catching up, are just beginning to realize that the ground has shifted again.

Shifted where, though? The success of "Joe" and "Five Easy Pieces" (which features Chopin and country-western) augurs a rash of "people's movies." No doubt some basement now resounds with a group perfecting "hardhat rock," and that will bust the charts open for a while. "Getting Straight," "Strawberry Statement," "Out of It," "The People Next Door," even "Easy Rider"—they will look like period pieces, scenes from a faded history, only it will be a false history, with false myths, and a conception of freedom which, though romantic, is foolish and dangerous. For the youth movie as we have seen it is the obsessive story of Bummerlife in America, and rock has become its saccharine accompaniment, the opiate of characters who can neither cope nor escape.

What is maddening about all this is that the few films which have used rock well have not done spectacular box office. Antonioni, whatever else he was trying to do in "Zabriskie Point," at least was able to mesh his sense of expanded space and time with appropriate music. With the exception of an unforgivable theme song ("For those who care / Zabriskie Point is anywhere"), the music is from groups that specialize in wide sound and expanded consciousness: the Pink Floyd, the Stones, and the virtually unknown Kaleidoscope.

And "Performance" — well, "Performance" features Moog synthesizer; the cultist's favorite, Randy Newman; a Jack Nitzsche score, and Mick Jagger doing a wonderfully funny parody that even relates directly to the film (with the rest of the Stones hidden, uncredited, in the background). Against all this musical brilliance, Donald Cammell and Nicholas Roeg have put together a film that is equally powerful, bizarre, and calculated to hallucinate any audience that can endure its ugliness.

Though the audience is clearly bored with the industry's offerings, the industry seems unwilling to catch up again. Middle America is where the untapped gold lies, they say, leaving authentic movies about the young to the independent producers. It's no loss for the music; music is only feeling, mostly good feeling. Rock is too vital to vanish from Hollywood's inattention. Whether the studios can survive without coming to terms with the feeling behind the music is much more debatable.