

Review of American Graffiti by Stephen Farber  
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‘Graffiti’ Ranks with ‘Bonnie and Clyde’

SUPERLATIVES are dangerous, but sometimes hard to resist. George Lucas's "American Graffiti" is easily the best movie so far this year. Beyond that, I think it is the most important American movie since "Five Easy Pieces"—maybe since "Bonnie and Clyde." The nostalgia boom has finally produced a lasting work of art.

"American Graffiti" opens a little uneasily, with an overdose of fifties camp: waitresses on roller skates at Burger City, double chubby chucks and cherry Cokes, snowball at the sock hop, the classic pop songs, from "Rock Around the Clock" to "Teen Angel," and the exotic lingo — "cooties," "boss," "bitchin'," "bod," "dork." For the first few minutes, the trivia threatens to get out of hand; one expects another "Summer of '42," or a "Grease" on wheels. But the movie deepens as it goes along. Its definitive, remarkably resonant portrait of adolescence transcends all generation gaps. On a budget of just over \$700,000, and on a very tight shooting schedule — 28 days (28 nights, to be precise) — Lucas has brought the past alive, with sympathy, affection, and thorough understanding.

The film actually takes place in 1962, in Modesto, California, on the night before two high school graduates are scheduled to set off for college in the East. There is no conventional "story"; the movie has a freer musical rhythm, interweaving the adventures of four teen-age boys as their paths crisscross during the night. Lucas uses all the resources of the medium to build his mosaic of impressions of small-town life.

The soundtrack has a special importance. A nonstop stream of fifties music, punctuated with fragments of disk jockey's crazy freeform monologue, accompanies

all the action. The radio is these kids' lifeline, and by keeping it in the background of almost every scene, Lucas mesmerizes us right along with the characters. The music releases our own memories, and gives an emotional charge to everything on screen.

Great films absorb the audience in a distinctive world, and the garish night world of "American Graffiti" is vividly detailed, sometimes claustrophobic. But the film represents' more than a technical triumph. The stunning screenplay by Lucas, Gloria Katz and Willard Huyck is rich in characterizations, full of wit and surprise. First impressions can never be trusted. For example, John Milner (Paul Le Mat), the car freak who carries his pack of Camels rolled up in the sleeve of his T-shirt, could be caricature of a greaser, but his sweetness and vulnerability keep undercutting his belligerent pose; he's the town Galahad, the protector of the weak and the helpless.

All the characters burst out of stereotype; they seem to have an independent life, and by the end they are so real that it's painful to leave them. The whole movie is brilliantly cast and performed. Lucas's technical flair was already visible in his first movie, "THX-1138," but his work with the actors in "American Griffiti" is a revelation. His gifts are prodigious; at 28 he is already one of the world's master directors.

Lucas has an interesting sense of social history. Set at the tail end of an era, the film freezes the last moment of American innocence.

*Vincent Canby is on vacation.* In 1962 the kids in Modesto still drive fifties cars, listen to fifties music, and pattern themselves after fifties culture heroes — James Dean, Connie Stevens, Sandra Dee. It's as if they were trying to make time stand still. They can't know how radically the country will be shaken and polarized by the cataclysms of the next few years; but they do have an intuitive sense that their culture is disintegrating. "The whole strip is shrinking," the

dragstrip champion Milner complains forlornly. “Five or six years ago it used to take a couple of hours and a whole tankful of gas just to make one circuit.” A little later he dismisses the Beach Boys’ new brand of surfing rock: “Rock and roll’s been going downhill since Buddy Holly died.”

The transience of this world regulated by Ozzie and Harriet is always implicit, and the titles at the end of the film make the point explicit — probably overexplicit. That sense of impermanence gives the comedy its undercurrent of pathos. Everything seems precious because we know it can’t last. “American Graffiti” conveys the feeling of a dream about to dissolve. The whole movie was shot at night, and Lucas and Haskell Wexler (credited as “visual consultant”) create a dream landscape; the cars glide through the darkness in a strange, hallucinatory Parade.

It seems as if several years are compressed into one night — a series of comic, terrifying, romantic adventures that represent the most hypnotic possibilities of small-town life. The film isn’t meant to be a naturalistic record; it’s a carnival fantasy, a pageant of wonders, seen through the eyes of kids who don’t want to leave. The class president, Steve (Ronny Howard) breaks up with his steady girlfriend (Cindy Williams), but they reunite at dawn. On this charmed night even the awkward, creepy boy nicknamed Toad (Charlie Martin Smith) can pick up a bouffant kewpie doll (Candy Clark) in his borrowed Chevy, and although he does everything wrong, he manages to win her anyway. Luckily for him, she thrives on disasters; she can accept anything but a routine evening.

Curt (Richard Dreyfuss), the sharpest of the teenage quartet, is still trying to decide whether to go East to college, or stay at the mediocre junior college in town; the town has a strong hold on his imagination. On his last night he gets picked up by a gang of hoods, the Pharaohs, and although he almost gets killed

carrying out their horrifying ultimatums, he proves himself to them and wins the chance to take part in their blood initiation. He even discovers a woman of mystery cruising main street — a blonde in a white '56 Thunderbird who whispers “I love you” as her car passes his, and then disappears.

This shadowy woman in white embodies the magical promise of the familiar world. Cruising through town one summer night, a boy can see his old friends, meet glamorous or dangerous new people, experience just about everything — love at first sight, break-up and reconciliation, felonious assault, a hairbreadth escape from a fiery death — from the sublime to the ridiculous. Why would anyone want to leave?

Yet in spite of everything that happens, nothing really happens. You feel stimulated by the drive through town, and you also feel trapped in the circle; there's no way out. For all the charm of this world, there is pain in it too — the constant pressure of testing yourself against the challenges of the tribe, the cruelty of adolescence at a time when behavior was regimented. The street is enchanted by night, transformed in the spectral glare of headlights. In the morning, everything, looks smaller, drabber.

Toward the end of the movie, the comedy is displaced by a growing sense of wistfulness and melancholy. Even Milner, the king of the road, feels strangely depressed by dawn, as he walks away from his latest victorious drag race. “I was losing. He had me, he was pulling away from me,” he tells the blindly idolatrous Toad. The triumphs that this world offers no longer satisfy Milner; he is nagged by a feeling of failure, the fear of time slipping away from him. He knows that his only future is in the car graveyard he haunts. One day his shiny yellow deuce coupe will be junked right on top of the legendary '41 sedan he never had a chance to race.

For Curt the night ends with a visit to the Wolfman (played by the real Wolfman Jack), the disk jockey on the outskirts of town. To the kids, the Wolfman is Modesto's most exotic, resplendent culture hero. Some people say he broadcasts from a plane that never lands; others believe he lives in Mexico. But when Curt goes inside the radio station, he finds only a kind, befuddled man eating a Popsicle from a broken — down refrigerator. The Wolfman who stirs the town's imagination is a fictional character, the real Wolfman is a ragged Wizard of Oz, the great pretender. This encounter clinches Curt's decision to leave his childhood wonderland. At last he knows that the emerald city is a mirage.

But when Curt finally does leave town, we feel deeply torn — saddened by what he must sacrifice, relieved that he is breaking away. Somehow the sense of melancholy seems stronger. This emotionally complex film retrieves the exuberance of a carefree moment of youth, but by the end it is suffused with a feeling of lost opportunities, shattered possibilities. You feel sad for the kids who stay, equally sad for the boy who leaves. No decision is the right decision. Everybody loses. That blonde in the T-bird is still on the highway as Curt's slaw takes off, tantalizing, elusive, unattainable; she will always be the one that got away.

The ambiguity of this film disturbs whatever preconceptions one brings to the theater. I don't happen to share the current nostalgia for the fifties — a period of apathy, complacency, and anti-Communist hysteria — but found myself irresistibly drawn to the world created in “American Graffiti.” That's because the film is free of special pleading. It acknowledges the insularity of the fifties, but it also recalls the innocence and the sense of community — the shared language, music and humor that contributed to the last authentic national folk culture. The kids who left home in 1962 didn't know they were embarking on a journey across

centuries. We have to contemplate their innocence with mixed emotions.

In thinking about the past, one almost always distorts it — either sentimentalizing it or indicting it by applying the standards of the present.

“American Graffiti” takes us inside the gaudy, swollen universe of the fifties; it sees the period whole, without settling for easy judgments.

The film has the spirit of rock music — bold, confident, colloquial, casually lyrical, unpretentious but evocative; it is a tribute to the beauty of American graffiti. Although it is a highly personal film, drawn from Lucas's own experience (he grew up in Modesto and was graduated from high school in 1962), it has the universality of the greatest popular art. Part of the experience of moviegoing is private dreaming in the dark; but the best movies create a fragile community of dreamers.

That is why movie houses are still on occasion the true churches of the twentieth century. On the streets everyone is isolated, but sometimes when the lights go down in the theater, the current that races through the house overwhelms all differences, dissolves all barriers. “American Graffiti” connects with an audience in a way that few movies ever have.

The only thing that worries me is the thought of all the exploitative fifties nostalgia pix that this movie may spawn. “American Graffiti” happens to reflect the public's yearning for the innocent contentment of the fifties, but the special excitement of the film is that it takes us beyond nostalgia —into a rediscovery of the past, and of memories that might have been lost forever. For those of us in Lucas's generation, watching “American Graffiti” is like going home; it's a primal experience, and the deeply conflicting feelings that it stirs cannot possibly, be resolved.