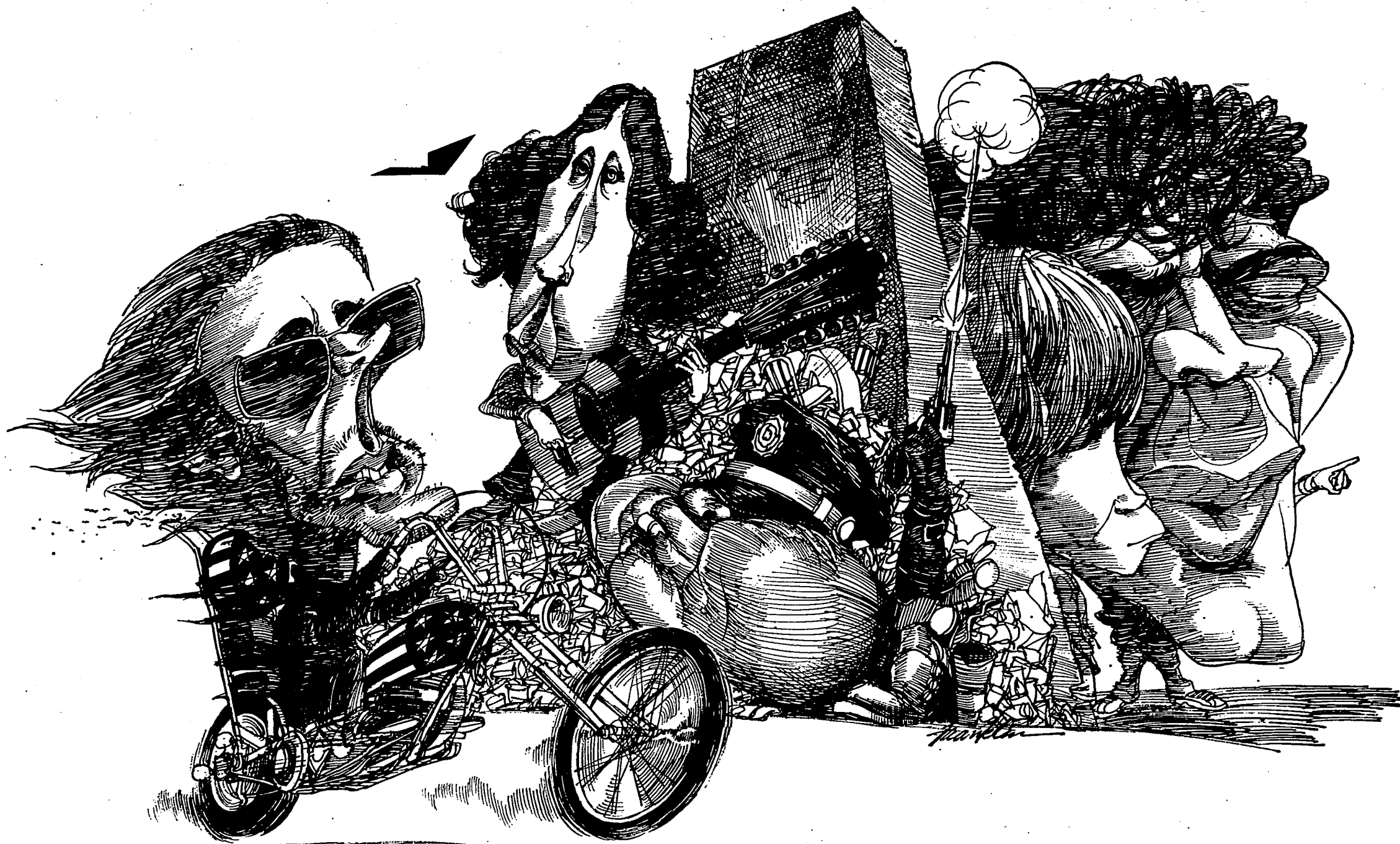


THE REBELS CREATE A LEGEND



THE NEW REBEL-HEROES of the movies are creating their own legend, and it's not a set piece like the western or the crime thriller. There have been alienated heroes before—strong silent cowboys, Bogey's tough guy, Paul Newman's charming bastard—but the young hippie romantics riding out in search of a new frontier that has to do with more than geography are heroes in a way that goes beyond all that. Peter Fonda in *Easy Rider* and Arlo Guthrie in *Alice's Restaurant* aren't just playing rebel-heroes; for their audience, they are folk heroes, and not so much for the roles they've played as for the roles they've lived.

The distinction between on-screen and off-screen, between onstage and backstage, no longer counts. After making *The Wild Angels*, a crummy motorbike movie, Fonda became a pop star with a personality poster that showed him driving a bike in Hell's Angel gear. He became a hero because he was a rich kid who dropped out, took drugs and got busted.

Guthrie used to give folk concerts looking as though he'd just wandered down to the corner for a milkshake, talking between songs in paranoid-humorous style about the FBI, the CIA and the Pentagon. He became a celebrity with an unlikely hit, a 19-minute talking song called *The Alice's Restaurant Massacre*, which told how he and his friends were given a hard time by hick-town cops for dumping garbage over a cliff after a community feast.

In 1969 the romantic hip martyr, already part of the mythology of rock music and pop posters and communal events like the Woodstock Festival, was brought into commercial American movies. Arlo plays himself in *Alice's Restaurant*, loosely based on his song and directed by Arthur Penn, who two years ago directed *Bonnie and Clyde*, the start of the American new wave and the most exhilarating movie of the decade now ending. Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper (Fonda's co-star and the director of *Easy Rider*) fashioned a vibrating movie with serious intentions, out of scraps from the American-International formula for teen movies like *The Wild Angels*, whose only serious intention was to exploit sex, cycles and violence for a few fast bucks.

What's exciting about the new movie legend is that it spills out of the films and into our own lives, partly because it's impossible to separate the characters in the movies from some of the people watching them and partly because almost all the interesting movies of 1969—*Medium Cool*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *If . . .*, *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Monterey Pop* as well as *Easy Rider* and *Alice's Restaurant*—are to some extent about the experiences we have all shared recently.

In the past movie-goers may have identified with Humphrey Bogart or John Wayne, but they

weren't acting out the parts—carrying guns and dressing like cowboys and private eyes. Today the kids lining up for *Easy Rider* and *Alice's Restaurant* look like characters from the movie, and they share attitudes and habits as well as dress and hair styles. Watching a movie about drug culture, you may detect more than a whiff of marijuana in the theatre.

What is common to these movies is a feeling of community among the young and the rootless, people adrift and cut off from everything and everyone except others like themselves. Like the characters in it, *Alice's Restaurant* seems to be finding its way, and this open-ended, leisurely quality is part of what is appealing and charming; it suggests an honesty that one has learned not to look for in American entertainment.

The restaurant itself is the centre of a hippie community in Massachusetts. The characters live in what used to be a church, and there is a religious flavor to many of the episodes that are scattered through the movie like verses of a ballad; a Thanksgiving feast that is truly joyous, a wedding that turns out to be the last tribal celebration before the group disbands, a funeral at which *Joni Mitchell* sings *Songs to Aging Children* while the snow falls softly.

The sense of discovery that makes *Alice's Restaurant* attractive is also a factor in *Easy Rider*, whose aging children are Captain America and Billy, moving across the land with helmets and leather jackets and long hair into the crooked heart of law-and-order country. It's possible to reject the naive ideas in these movies (in *Easy Rider*, it's the beautiful hippies against the whole rotten world) and still be caught up in the feeling. *Easy Rider* has exquisite, fresh photography, the exciting rhythms of acid rock and the wonderful, double-edged wit of Jack Nicholson as a boozing lawyer from the South who joins the hippies on the road.

The feeling of community and the sense of discovery are the positive side of what is frequently expressed negatively in hysterical rage against the oppressors (almost always identified with the conservative middle-aged) and uncharitable caricatures. *Easy Rider* is summed up by Jack Nicholson's line: "This used to be a hell of a good country; I don't know what's going on." And this feeling that something has gone terribly sour is part of what people are responding to in the new movies.

Yet beyond the revulsion, movie-goers are looking for an escape from their own cynicism, for some evidence of good-heartedness that escapes the pollution. What carries *Midnight Cowboy* is not the crude souvenirs of American vulgarity as supplied by John Schlesinger's frantic cutting and inhuman penchant for closing in for the kill on the freaks of 42nd Street, but the humanity in the performances of Dustin Hoffman

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and Jon Voight (or what's left of the performances after Schlesinger's cutting) as two of the down-and-out.

What carry *Goodbye, Columbus* are the attractive performances of Richard Benjamin and Ali MacGraw rather than Larry Peerce's satire of affluent suburban Jewish life, which turns out to be too much like Mike Nichols' satire of affluent suburban non-Jewish life in *The Graduate* anyway. The sensibility is about 10 years out of date despite obvious attempts to update Philip Roth's 1959 novella. The sensitive kids of the Fifties and early Sixties were offended by vulgarity around them, but couldn't accept the alternative of open rebellion either, because it seemed ridiculous, and so they just felt alone. In the late Sixties it's easy for the alienated young to take themselves seriously, because there are so many of them they have their own subculture. One may feel embarrassed for them, but they aren't afraid of taking themselves seriously.

The romance of revolution is attractive, and those who are college educated and success-oriented may take part by dropping out after hours; they can dress like hippies, buy protest records and decorate their apartments with anti-establishment posters. Or they can go to movies like *If . . .* whose setting is not the real arena of power struggles but the mock structure of the educational system, where the revolution can be carried on as an extra-curricular activity without much real danger.

What's new about *If . . .* is that the rebels are not the lower-class boys, as in earlier British social-conscience movies of the Sixties, but the privileged kids being groomed for aristocratic lives. The style of the semi-documentary material on a repressive boys' school is too cold to be very appealing, but audiences have been responding to an ugly liberation fantasy at the end of the movie, in which the rebels shoot down their commander in a mock skirmish with real guns, set fire to the hall during commencement and give it to the headmaster right between the eyes just as he is calling on everyone to keep calm and be reasonable because he understands youth's need to rebel. The message is that it's not reasonable to ask the young to be reasonable.

There is a hysterical desire at almost every level of mass culture just now to get with youth's need to rebel against the system. If Coke has *Soul* and Plymouth tells it like it is, who is left to play the role of the oppressor? After years of counting on the same old square formulas, Hollywood producers have discovered that the people who go out to the movies (mostly young, urban and educated) instead of waiting to

see them on television aren't buying the old stuff any more, and so the movie-makers have become desperately anxious to find anything kinky, off-beat or hip that might sell.

People got tired of those expensive road-show productions, and the most successful movies of 1967 were *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Graduate*. All the old Hollywood assumptions had to be discarded; one of the new rules for success seems to be that a movie should not feel like a Hollywood production.

The movie backers don't know what the new audience is looking for, but because they're desperately anxious to try anything that might work, it's suddenly possible for talented people to make movies the way they want to and still reach a mass audience. It has always been common for European directors to get backing without interference, but in America that is something new. Independent producers like Warren Beatty and Peter Fonda and directors like Paul Newman, Francis Ford Coppola, Haskell Wexler and Arthur Penn are fighting a guerrilla war against the cultural imperialism of the collapsing studio system.

It's not surprising that people who go to movies are tired of seeing reruns of the old legends and are responding to a new legend that has something to do with their lives. I can't work up much enthusiasm about the prospect of going to *Battle of Britain* (yet another war epic) or a new crime comedy or a new family melodrama. But a movie that's on a discovery trip, really lighting out for new territory, can be exciting even if things don't work out. It is more satisfying to see one of those terribly amateurish, clumsy movies made by college kids—if they at least try to touch the lives of people like those you know—than it is to see some of the supposedly sophisticated comedies with Doris Day or somebody like her and several million dollars worth of interior decorating.

The new audience wants to participate in something more human. The National Film Board's *Mort Ransen* made a movie about kids telling him how to make a movie about kids, and though a lot of it was just plain awful, it was charming and appealing for the same reasons that *Alice's Restaurant* was—for its freshness and sense of improvisation and for the innocent, tender way it seemed to be groping toward something.

The movie ends abruptly when the brass of the NFB, alarmed by newspaper stories that the movie-makers were involved in trouble in Yorkville village, orders the film crew back to Montreal and one of the kids asks Ransen as he's packing up whether he thinks he can make a movie out of the pieces. Ransen says he doesn't know, and then the credits roll.

(Ransen made a movie out of the pieces, all

right, but the NFB doesn't quite know what to do with it, so hardly anyone is getting to see Christopher's *Movie Matinee*. No doubt it's because of the stiff competition of all those Canadian features we get treated to, like *Isabel* and *The Rape of a Sweet Young Girl* and *The Ernie Game*. What does the NFB select for the official entry at Cannes and for theatrical distribution in this country? Don't Let the Angels Fall—our answer to *The Subject Was Roses*.)

This sense of participation that audiences are seeking at the movies is a hopeful sign, and it is making a shambles of McLuhan's theory that a cool medium like TV is involving but a hot medium like the movies isn't. One of the movies that people are getting involved in has a title that is based on the McLuhan theory that people don't get involved in movies. *Medium Cool* tries to integrate fiction with political documentary; and while it doesn't work, because there's not much connection and the fiction isn't any good (the hero is a TV newsman covering the Democratic convention in Chicago), the movie carries an emotional charge because it appropriates events we lived through: the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the racial tension, the revulsion against Vietnam, and in a truly stunning sequence, the battle between the cops swinging sticks and kids hurling obscenities (their only weapons).

To the romantic mythology of the new movie legend—the outcasts battling against a corrupt society—*Medium Cool* adds the idea of the responsibility of people recording social upheaval to get involved, borrowed from Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, but with a different effect.

The last shot shows Haskell Wexler, the director, closing in with his camera on Chicago and on us. The newsman-hero is radicalized in the streets of Chicago 1968, and so is the audience watching *Medium Cool*. The villain is Mayor Richard Daley, and when the movie cuts from the violence outside to a staged spontaneous demonstration for Daley on the convention floor, people in the audience show their involvement by hissing. As the cops start swinging, the kids chant, "The whole world's watching," and of course the fact that we're seeing this movie is proof of that.

What the audience is participating in is the crackup of American society. Both *Easy Rider* and *Medium Cool* end with highway smashes that are meant to suggest America is going up in smoke. These movies deal with a gap that separates a lot more than the generations, but part of the gap is between those who are going to see these movies and those who aren't. The rebels live in a new psychic environment that their own movie legend is helping to create. America may be going up in smoke, but at least there's new hope for American movies.