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The World's Fastest Indian Movie Review

By Kenn Hartmann

The best motorcycle movie ever produced is 'The World's Fastest Indian' written and directed by Roger Donaldson. Does it matter that a San Francisco review labeled it a fairy tale? Another Left-Coast critic lamented it lacked drama. Like Ebert said, 'it's not about the world's second fastest Indian.' It's the true story of Burt Munro, an illustrious codger from New Zealand who in the 60's broke the under 1000cc land speed record at Bonneville Salt Flats, 'the Holy Grail of speedways' on a relic 1920 Indian Scout race officials at first refused to let run. Consider the decade where Craig Breedlove's 'Spirit of America' and Art Arfons' 'Green Monster' both turbo-jet cars set huge records. At about the time Burt Munro ended his career at the Salt Flats, the 'Blue Flame' rocket powered car (which was constructed in Milwaukee) set the land speed record of 630 mph. Imagine Munro, played impeccably by Anthony Hopkins, arriving at racing Mecca with an antique, peculiar looking contraption, a 70 year-old man with nothing but a dream.

Donaldson had already produced a documentary called 'Offerings to the God of Speed' about Munro circa 1970. That title came from Munro's chalk marks on a wall in his workshop shed above a bin of homemade broken pistons and bike parts sacrificed to his pursuit. Donaldson became a big time Hollywood director ('Dante's Peak' with Pierce Brosnan, 'Cocktail' with Tom Cruise, et. al) but his original vision endured. Is this really about motorcycles? What other biker flicks compare?

The grand daddy of all biker flicks 'The Wild One' provided diversion for pre-TV post war teens seeking refuge from 1953 faire like Roman Holiday, a weenie-ass scooter film for Mods on Vespas. Rock and roll had yet come of age and 'The Wild One' inspired black leather style for decades to come, from the Elvis sneer to Village People fashion. That alone should not condemn 'The Wild One.' Marlon Brando's Johnny broods, shuns women and pouts enough to be early 'Broke-back Biker' material; Lee Marvin's raffish portrayal of Chino offers a flicker of his later brilliance but reeks a clownish caricature of real bikers. The movie misconstrues the 1946 Hollister rally with gross stereotypes and fabrications about the Boozefighters MC. In the movie, the club is called Black Rebel Motorcycle Club, which inspired a contemporary San Francisco rock band to embrace that moniker. Reason enough to redeem the flick. In 'The World's Fastest Indian' a local biker gang crashes Burt Munro's party. The ensuing dialogue and events unfold gracefully to reveal each character's personality. When the biker gang returns, a curious tension is already established between Burt and his girlfriend. As the bikers surround them a moment of truth develops. Burt believes he can break the record; she doesn't care.

'Easy Rider' became the quintessential biker flick in 1969, however Americans were denied access a year earlier to the 1968 X-rated 'Girl on a Motorcycle' starring Marianne Faithfull, a rock diva and at the time, Mick Jagger's main squeeze. Perhaps as retaliation

for England's banning of 'The Wild One' Europeans watched a hot slut on a Harley tooling around the countryside while Americans viewed two drug-dealing pot-heads in search of America but couldn't find it anywhere because they were stoned. Starting in LA, how hard can it be? Head east and turn right at the Mississippi. The cinematography of 'Easy Rider' mimics 'Girl on a Motorcycle,' the panoramic vistas and perverse fascination with trussed bridges, the hallucinogenic interlude and road café angst, the final fiery crash and aerial pan. While these movies were being concocted, the real Burt Munro took his show on the road. 'The World's Fastest Indian' presents a series of vignettes that capture a more accurate portrayal of chance encounters. Not everybody takes a trip on a motorcycle gets murdered. Burt Munro enjoyed a quick wit, loved life and resembled nothing of the punk-asses that populate the genre. To paraphrase Burt, 'a man lives more in five minutes with the throttle wide open than some men live in a lifetime.'

The seventies launched Dan Brown's 'On Any Sunday' with Steve McQueen, one of the coolest pure motorcycle flicks. The movie, though dated is still a joy to watch. Of course, Brown had an earlier hit called 'Endless Summer' about surfers seeking that perfect wave. 'Quadrophenia' offers a mild glimpse into England's supposed café biker culture, the celebrated Mods versus Rockers conflict. Drive-In movies like 'Hells Angels on Wheels' later parodied on an episode of the Simpsons, and Billy Jack's 'Born Losers' fail to create any enduring empathy for the characters. In the Simpson parody, Homer's cartoon clash with the gang leader, each holding their motorcycles overhead and wielding them like light sabers easily outshines the original. Oddly, fat actor John Goodman voices the gang leader. The original starred Jack Nicholson, although real gangster Sonny Barger got top billing for a cameo. Digging deeper, the 70's cult thriller, 'Psychomania' today may entertain a heap of stoned reprobates glued to a midnight couch. Biker zombies return from the dead to exude mayhem on the living. Of course, who among us has not seen that scenario in real life? A note to film buffs: actor George Sanders killed himself after appearing in this movie, his suicide note blamed boredom.

Can we include true stories 'La Bamba' (about rock star Ritchie Valens with shots of The Galloping Goose MC) and 'Mask' (about biker mom Rusty Dennis and her deformed son Rocky)? Both engage the biker scene with a modicum of respect.

Some audience members may confuse Burt Munro with Rollie Free, another eccentric speed demon. The character of Rollie Free actually appears in 'The World's Fastest Indian.' Free rode a tuned Vincent Black Lightning to everlasting glory setting a land speed record at the Salt Flats in 1948. You may have seen the infamous photo. To eke out one more mph in aerodynamics, Free strips to his skivvies, lays prone like Superman in flight, legs stretched back, head tucked low and streaks into the record book. However, the two men share a kindred spirit.

Burt Munro made his own pistons out of car parts, 'two parts Ford, one part Chevy.' After melting and molding he cools them in the same water he makes tea. You never see him at the bike shop. He scrounges, fabricates, fashions, labors intensely but embraces an obvious joy exploring his own ingenuity. Is he quirky? No doubt. Too tame perhaps for a movie critic's usual appetite of alcoholic, anorexic, sexual deviates. What's wrong with a movie that speaks from the heart? Why was this movie only released in four Chicago theaters? One critic bemoaned a certain group of viewers would like this movie, but offered no clue as to what group that would be. I imagine it'd be people who actually watch the movie using a seat cushion and not their heads to comfort their ass.

-Kenn Hartmann

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