

## Interview: Director Walter Salles Takes Us ‘On the Road’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on March 20, 2013 - 10:44am

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CHICAGO – One of most important counterculture novels in American literature history is “On the Road,” by Jack Kerouac. First published in 1957, the film rights were purchased at the time, but it took over fifty more years to get it onto the screen. Director Walter Salles (“The Motorcycle Diaries”) took on the adaptation.

The history of adapting the book to film is as much of a journey as the characters take in the story. After late 1950s Hollywood couldn’t interpret the radical morality in the book (Marlon Brando was attached to play the lead role at one point), and the rights were reacquired by Francis Ford Coppola in the late 1970s. Problems with several screenplay versions occurred, and it wasn’t until the mid-2000s that the team that produced “The Motorcycle Diaries” – screenwriter Jose Rivera and director Walter Salles – took their own journey with the classic novel, and the result finally became the film version.



Sam Riley (left) and Garrett Hedlund are ‘On the Road’  
*Photo credit: IFC Films*

Director Walter Salles first gained international attention in 1998, when his film “Central Station” was nominated for a Best Foreign Language Film Oscar. His biggest film to date has been “The Motorcycle Diaries,” another road picture portraying the young Che Guevara discovering his destiny via a trip through South America. Salles began developing “On the Road” several years ago, by first embarking on the same route as the characters took in the novel to experience the roads they traveled.

HollywoodChicago spoke with Walter Salles via phone, as he mapped out the strategy that was necessary to bring an iconic novel to life, when it had eluded so many other attempts over the years.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Many people who love the source novel have opined that the feelings and philosophies behind the actions of Sal

and Dean couldn’t translate to film. What was the key to how you captured the book on film between Jose Rivera’s script and your direction?

**Walter Salles:** First of all, we did a very long research on the film, nearly five years, and shot a documentary in search of a possible film based on ‘On the Road,’ which led us to retrace the paths that Kerouac followed when he wrote the original story. We met the characters in the book who are still alive, especially the poets who would become part of the ‘Beat Generation’ movement. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Diane Di Prima and Gary Snyder were very generous to us. Little by little, we began to have access to information that we decanted into a screenplay. Jose worked for four years on the script, adding more layers to it as he went along.

We also had access to a facsimile – that was in Kerouac’s hometown in Lowell, Massachusetts – of the famous scroll, which was the original manuscript of the novel. The very first sentence of that version triggered something that before we had not been unaware of. The source novel begins with the line, ‘I first meant Dean not long after I divorced my first wife.’ The scroll starts with the line, ‘I first met Dean not long after my father died.’ It therefore allowed us to understand that the main character of Sal had suffered a loss, and needed to reinvent himself. It also brought him closer to Dean, also fatherless. It triggered the journey that characters take, to find the last American ‘frontier.’ That sense of redefining the future was what truly attracted Jose and I to the story, and that’s what we tried to translate to the screen.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** ‘On the Road’ has a history of potentially being made into a film virtually since the book’s publication in 1957. How did the timing work for your version, and what was the key creative element you brought to producer Francis Ford Coppola that finally got the film off the ground?

**Salles:** Interestingly, Francis told me that the first attempts at adaptations by Hollywood always ended with the death of Dean in a car accident. This was telling regarding how far ahead of his time Kerouac was, and how hard it was for mainstream culture in the 1950s to accept a character like Dean. He had to moralistically be punished in those first scripts, for the film to be made.

And why wasn’t it made in 1979 when Francis first acquired the rights to the book? Maybe because the Reagan and first Bush years were not sensitive to this type of material. We ended up working on this in a very different time. It finally was green lit when a number of independent distributors in France, headed by the company MK2 decided to finance it. The film was basically made possible by the book, which had such an echo all over the world. As in all universal stories, it becomes important to different generations all over the world. The fact that the film exists is a tribute to that impact.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What factors in American history and social culture contributed, in your opinion, to the actions and motivations of Sal, Dean and Carlo in your film. What do you think they were rebelling against?

**Salles:** They were rebelling against a society that was becoming more and more claustrophobic due to the beginning of the cold war and the Joseph McCarthy anti-communist witch hunt. They collided against that culture and redefined it from within.

When I first read the book in Brazil, I was living in the dark ages of a military regime. I couldn’t redefine the future. The characters in the book, who were also colliding against a very conservative society, were able to. Somehow, those characters became my heroes.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** So within that connection, you found the key to the adaptation?

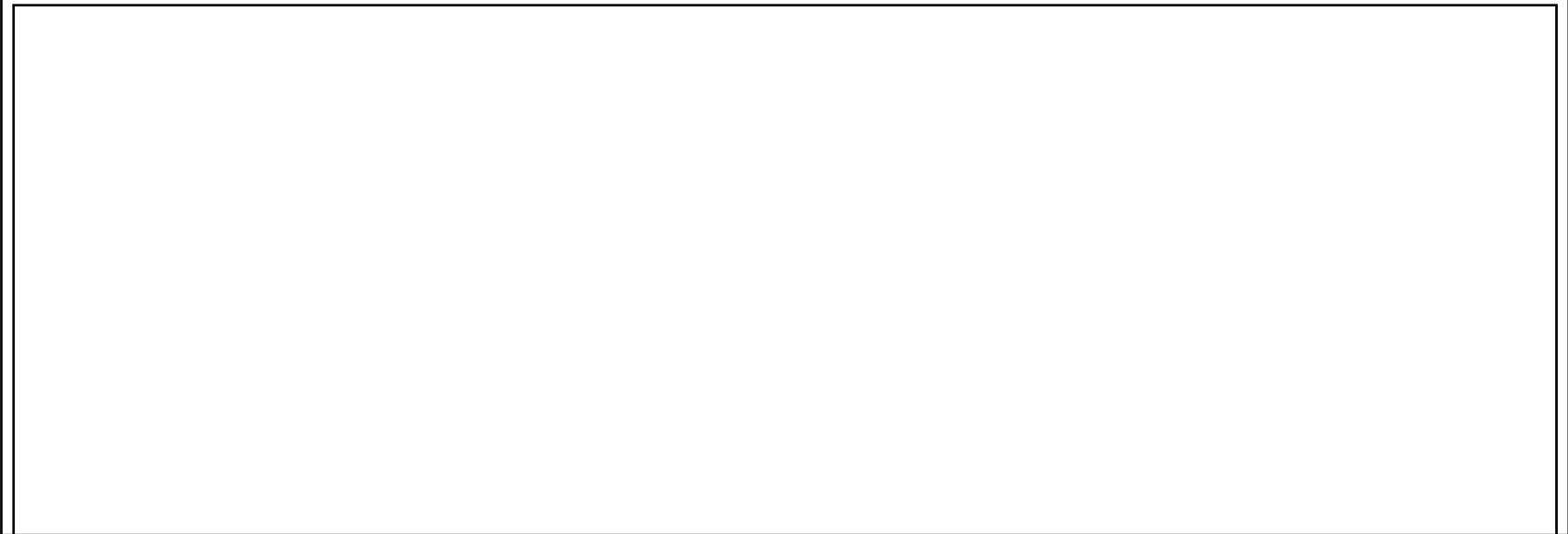
**Salles:** There is something about the book that transcends the character’s moment in time and can be descriptive of whole generations. I recently read a quote from Dr. Oliver Sacks [author and neurologist], which seemed related to ‘On the Road,’ he said, ‘To live on a day-to-day basis is insufficient for human beings. We need to transcend, transport and escape, we need meaning and understanding, and we need the sense of the future. To do that, we need freedom.’

So the book is about the search for all possible forms of freedom, in order to understand our understanding of the world. This is why I think the book had such an echo in several generations. Not only here, but in other latitudes as well.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** One of the elements that struck me about the film version was the moments where you focused on the women in the lives of these men, especially with Dean. Were you trying to establish a bit of a penance for the wild men of the road?

**Salles:** In that transition from youth to adulthood, you have moments of bliss and exhilaration that stems from that restlessness and the desire to venture into the unknown, but you also have the pain that the restlessness creates. Camille, the character that Kirsten Dunst embodies, defines this state of mind. She says at one point, ‘do you realize how much I’ve given up for you?’ On one hand, the men are going further than they ever dreamed about, but on the other hand, their actions have consequences.

I really wanted those consequences to be felt. So by expanding the roles of women in the film, giving them more back story and scenes than the book, was based in the desire to show that no matter how much the men wanted to find freedom and follow quests, it still causes pain.







Kristen Stewart Gains Exposure in 'On the Road'  
*Photo credit: IFC Films*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** I found Kristen Stewart's performance to be very memorable. What do you think she understood about Mary Lou that audiences would never see if they just know her as Bella Swan?

**Salles:** I first heard about Kristen about the time she did 'Into the Wild,' early 2006, and she was recommended to me for 'On the Road.' So we met, and once we started to exchange ideas about the book, not only did she know it inside out, but she also had an in-depth understanding of the Mary Lou character. She realized that Mary Lou was ahead of her time – a free thinker and an independent decision maker, given she was a woman during the 1950s.

Kristen, in her independent film work, drifts towards roles in which women are independent and have a voice. She fought for the role with everything that she could, it was very moving. She got access to hours of interview with the late Luanne Henderson, who was the real life basis for Mary Lou, and that material was truly inspiring for her. She realized how sensitive and how non judgmental her character was, and it freed her to give a three dimensional quality to that character. I find her performance to be moving and generous.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You worked intensely with the period to get the right look. What was interesting to you about immersing yourself into the cars, clothes and atmosphere of late 1940s, early 1950s America? And did you notice any anachronisms once you got to post production?

**Salles:** First, we tried to make as little use of computer generated changes as possible. Every time you see rain or snow on the screen, it is what nature brought to us as 'gifts.' [laughs] We make use of timing in many of the settings, shooting early or late, in order to grab the reality. That comes from my background as a documentary maker, I loathe digital recreations. We tried to incorporate as many elements from the reality that were still unspoiled.

In terms of respecting the era, there was a lot of research done by our production designer, Carlos Conti. All the interior scenes stemmed from this specific research. This was something that he had been doing for a long time.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** I can't help but think that 'Motorcycle Diaries' and 'On the Road' is the same journey told through extraordinarily different circumstances. What are the key similarities and differences in the two books, now that you've become a world expert on each?

**Salles:** There is a common denominator, both stories are set and told in the same time era, and the main characters in both stories are young men who are planting the seeds that would later become – in Che Guevara's case – social and political revolution, and within the young characters in 'On the Road' are planting the seeds of a cultural revolution. Therefore, we're witnessing the radical transformations that would have an echo in virtually every single latitude.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Like Che Guevara, you were born into privileged circumstances, and have sought to find yourself outside that social class. What is it about filmmaking that defines your rebellion, and how has the adventure of being a director contributed to the way that you see the world?

**Salles:** What first attracted my attention was not cinema, but photography. The humanist photographers from the 1940s, what they were doing was naming what had not been named yet. I was taken by the traveling photographers and the writers who did this. It drew me to documentary, to register worlds that I was not aware of. I'm part of the generation in which cinema was an instrument that the world is much larger than I thought.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Finally, on your own journey On the Road, recreating the route and feel of the path Kerouac took in preparation for the film, where or when did you sense his presence through what you were doing and experiencing, and what was the closest you got to your own Beat Generation moment?

**Salles:** What you learn from Kerouac that it is important to experience every single moment in the flesh. I now have two children that I didn't have when I started this project, and I have tried to take them on journeys and places that they will keep in their memories and experiences. Thanks to this book and film, I'm trying to show that the world is larger than it was when I began this process, to relay that to the next generation. This is what I learned from being ‘On the Road,’ and all the roads before.

*“On the Road” continues its limited release in Chicago on March 22nd. Featuring Sam Riley, Garrett Hedlund, Kristen Stewart, Amy Adams, Elisabeth Moss, Kirsten Dunst and Viggo Mortensen. Adapted by Jose Rivera, based on the novel by Jack Kerouac. Directed by Walter Salles. Rated “R”*



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