# Visceral ‘On the Road’ Honors a Great American Novel

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on March 23, 2013 - 7:01am

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Rating: **4.0**/**5.0**

CHICAGO – The 1957 novel “On the Road” by Jack Kerouac, was a missile across the bow of American social conventions, and a precursor to the radical 1960s. For over fifty years, it has eluded a film adaptation, until director Walter Salles (“The Motorcycle Diaries”) found the way to capture it.

It is a reverential depiction, with all the familiar characters from the novel springing to life. And that is the key word here…life. This adaptation is life itself, which is what the novel embraces. Somehow, by just indulging in the characters and their lifeblood, Walter Salles – in partnership with his screenwriter Jose Rivera – was able to understand what makes this story tick. It is about youth, discovery and the consequences regarding all of that. It is about the relationship between two kindred souls, not part of a lost generation, but part of everything that is discovered when challenging the society they are born into. Kerouac and his merry band of fellow travelers unearthed a new way of being, and helped to launch a new era. Somehow, by expressing that theme within the film, Salles was able to coral the lightning in a literary bottle, and make us understand that in a short life, there are only a few moments to take advantage of youth.

This is a road picture, as the title implies. Sal Paradise (Sam Riley) meets his muse Dean Moriarty (Garrett Henlund), soon after his father dies. Dean likes to expand his boundaries, and draws fellow revelers into his radar, including his young wife Mary Lou (Kristen Stewart) and the poet Carlo Marx (Tom Sturridge). Sal and Dean set out to discover America, or at least the America behind the restrictive air of the post World War II conformity and paranoia.




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

In their travels, they come upon Old Bull Lee (Viggo Mortensen) and his wife Jane (Amy Adams), Ed and Galatea Dunkel (Danny Morgan and Elizabeth Moss) and Camille (Kirsten Dunst). Camille becomes Dean’s second wife (while he is still married to Mary Lou), and has his child. Sal’s adventures with Dean and his myriad of relationships inspire the chronicle on the road, and in becoming his own brand of adult through their relationship he will go on to inspire generations to come.

The film is episodic, like the book, but in the combination of almost perfect casting, a literal script and reverent performances, “On the Road” comes alive in ways that seemed impossible for a film version, in comparison to its classic source novel. The youth is energetic, enigmatic and makes all the mistakes of their being young. Dean is mysterious and heroic, yet also proves to be dismissive and irresponsible towards his relationships. Sal is a wide-eyed optimist in approaching his adventures, but also gets burned along the way. It’s all captured, all accessible and an admirable companion to the source.

Director Salles and screenwriter Rivera chose to expand the roles of women in the film (as opposed to the book), to give the viewer a sense of the consequences of the men’s blithe freedom. All the women actors give tart and thematically defining performances, especially Kristen (Stewart) and Kirsten (Dunst). Stewart goes beyond Bella Swan to show some substantial chops, and she exemplifies her character’s defiance in the face of her two-timing man. Dunst communicates her frustration marvelously in few scenes, when she is given the right role and direction her beats are right on.

And speaking of “Beats,” the novel “On the Road” was a veiled autobiography of a significant movement within post-war America, the “Beat Generation.” Sal Paradise is the author Jack Kerouac, Dean Moriarty was Kerouac’s road partner, counterculture icon Neal Cassady. Carlo Marx is legendary poet Allan Ginsberg, and old Bull Lee is author William S. Burroughs. In the film, there is an indication that the actors are portraying both the fictional characters and the real men (and women) behind them. It is history, especially American social history, come to life.



Mary Lou (Kristen Stewart) Gains Exposure in ‘On the Road’
*Photo credit: IFC Films*

The film would not work if the casting of the two main protagonists was not precise. Garrett Hedlund, known previously for the TV show “Friday Night Lights,” embodies Dean Moriarty in a Brando-like way, straightforward yet mystifying. The British-born Sam Riley as Sal is the glue of the film, and as he proved in the Joy Division biography film “Control,” he can carry a film when given the opportunity. It’s a joy to see these legendary literary figures brought to sweet life, Hedlund and Riley do those elusive ghosts proud.

The book, and this film, remains in essence a search for something that in the case of “On the Road,” may have been found. It’s all about the spirit, and through that inspirational group of men and women, and all the generations that came afterward and continue to represent them, the “Beat” goes on.

*“On the Road” continues its limited release in Chicago on March 22nd. See local listings for theaters and show times. 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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By PATRICK McDONALD [18]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [17]

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http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/21644/visceral-on-the-road-honors-a-great-american-novel

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