

# Easy Rider Summer

IT WAS 40 YEARS AGO THAT DENNIS HOPPER AND PETER FONDA PROVED HOW COOL COUNTERCULTURE WAS. NOW TAOS SUMMER OF LOVE 2009 GETS GROOVY AGAIN.

**P**eter Fonda and Dennis Hopper riding motorcycles on an empty high-desert road under a pure blue sky—Fonda in flag-adorned leather and Hopper in a suede-fringed buckskin like rocker David Crosby would later adopt as his look—as Steppenwolf pumps out “Born to Be Wild” on the soundtrack: “Head out on the highway/ Lookin’ for adventure/ And whatever comes our way...” Pine trees fly by as the choppers climb into higher Southwest elevations. The sun sinks behind the mountains and the bikers pull up to a roadside motel. “Hey man, you got a room?” Fonda’s character inquires. The manager takes one look at the long-haired bikers and flashes the No Vacancy sign. “You a--hole,” shouts Hopper’s hot-tempered character. So starts **Easy Rider**, the 1969 road movie that became a cult classic and the cinematic anthem for the rebellious counterculture.

The tale of two bikers, the film follows Wyatt (Fonda’s character, named after Wyatt Earp) and Billy (Hopper’s character, named after Billy the Kid) as they travel the Southwest en route to Mardi Gras. Shot in California, Arizona, Louisiana, and New Mexico’s Las Vegas, Taos, Madrid, and Santa Fe, the film traverses a diverse landscape. But the location that made the biggest impression on cast and crew was Taos. With its hippie communes and art galleries, Taos worked its laid-back allure on Fonda, who co-wrote and produced, and Hopper, who co-wrote and directed. The two spent time at the New Buffalo commune just outside of town and had wanted to film there, but commune founder Rick Klein was hesitant.



The year was 1969. The groundbreaking film was *Easy Rider*. From left to right: Dennis Hopper as Billy, Peter Fonda as Wyatt, and Jack Nicholson as George Hanson.

So the movie folks shot elsewhere around Taos, then re-created New Buffalo in California and intercut it with local footage.

Along with advocating a back-to-the-land lifestyle, Native American spirituality, peace, love (much of it free), freedom, individuality, and yes, drugs, the movie was controversial and even shocking in its day. But it was also memorably moving and philosophical. And it turned out to be the big breakthrough for a then little-known Jack Nicholson. Playing alcoholic square ACLU lawyer George Hanson, Nicholson got some of the best lines: “This used to be a helluva good country. I can’t understand what’s wrong with it.” To which Hopper retorts, “Everybody got chicken, man, that’s what happened. Hey, we can’t even get into, like, a second-rate hotel. I mean, a second-rate motel, you dig? They think we’re gonna cut their throat or somethin’. They’re scared, man.” Nicholson’s knowing response: “They’re not scared of you. They’re scared of what you represent to ‘em...freedom.”

Movie critic Roger Ebert hilariously observed in his *Chicago Sun-Times* review of the heavily experiential movie, “Henry Fonda is said to have come out of *Easy Rider* a confused and puzzled man. He had worked in movies for 35 years and made some great ones, and now his son Peter was going to be a millionaire because of a movie Henry couldn’t even understand.” But everyone under 30 understood, parlaying the movie’s estimated \$340,000 budget into \$19 million at the box office.

*Easy Rider* became a touchstone for an entire generation. Now on the 40th anniversary of its release, that boomer generation will be joined by subse-



Dennis Hopper at Home in Mabel Dodge Lujan’s House [Taos] by Douglas Magnus.

quent generations in the celebration of the landmark film. No surprise that it’s Taos heading up the festivities. Taos Summer of Love 2009 is refashioning 1967’s original Summer of Love with love-beading workshops, Indian dances, rock concerts, and radio flash-backs. There’s also Hopper at The Harwood, two art exhibitions involving Dennis Hopper (who’s been a full- or part-time Taoseño since the ‘60s): Dennis Hopper Photographs and Paintings, and Hopper Curates—Larry Bell, Ron Cooper, Ronald Davis, Ken Price, and Robert Dean

Actor-collage artist Dean Stockwell was at the opening reception, and so was Dennis Hopper. “*Easy Rider* influenced the whole country,” says Stockwell, who was so inspired by Taos that he made it his home in 2004. Ray Trotter, who owns R.B. Ravens Gallery in Taos, offers local proof of the magic that the movie and its Taos scenes made: “There’s still people to this day that come here on account of *Easy Rider*. They saw it, and lo and behold, some of the old hippies are still here!”

—Wolf Schneider

## C&I Online

For more *Easy Rider* fun—photos, original movie trailer, soundtrack and DVD—go to [www.cowboysindians.com](http://www.cowboysindians.com).

## LUV CALENDAR

It’s the 40-year anniversary of *Easy Rider*, and Taos is commemorating with more than 300 events. Here are some of our favorites.

- **JULY 24–26:** Las Fiestas de Taos at Taos Plaza.
- **AUGUST 1:** Panel discussion with Dave Hickey and Dennis Hopper at The Harwood Museum of Art in conjunction with Hopper at The Harwood, which continues until September 18.
- **AUGUST 1:** Caravan for Peace travels through Taos.
- **AUGUST 1–2:** Third Annual Taste of New Mexico.
- **AUGUST 1–24:** Spiritual Heir of the ‘60s: Erin Currier show at Parks Gallery.
- **AUGUST 8–9:** Taos Summer Arts & Crafts Fair at Taos Plaza.
- **AUGUST 11–OCTOBER 15:** Birds, Beasts, & Flowers tribute to Dennis Hopper and D.H. Lawrence at Two Graces.
- **AUGUST 21–23:** Taos County Fair.
- **SEPTEMBER 5:** Kit Carson 200th Anniversary Parade with Native American tribes.
- **SEPTEMBER 8 & 12:** BMW Motorcycle Rally in Sipapu.
- **SEPTEMBER 12:** Robert M. Ellis Retrospective at 203 Fine Art.
- **SEPTEMBER 13:** Top of the World Mountain Bike Race.
- **SEPTEMBER 19:** Ledoux Street Art Stroll.
- **SEPTEMBER 29–30:** San Geronimo Day at Taos Pueblo.

—W.S.

For more info: [www.taossummeroflove.com](http://www.taossummeroflove.com).



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