

## Road trip nation

Contributed by Kristin Macdonald & Jeffrey Bloomer, Michigan Daily (U. Michigan)

(U-WIRE) ANN ARBOR, Mich. - It's hard not to wax poetic on the eternal allure of the open road -- radio up, bucket seats tilted back, black asphalt stretching into the hazy far-off and the window cracked just so for a deafening stream of breeze. And then you hear a backseat whine for a bathroom break and more griping against the radio station and a careless foot digging into the back of your seat, and you realize that it's actually just the road you love and the trip itself you hate.

Most road movies will make sure to have one of those postcard Zen moments. But the majority of them, and certainly the most interesting, focus more on the inevitable conflict of any number of people squashed up against one another for hours at a time. Note: mere quest movies don't count -- thus the omission of such classic travelogues as "The Wizard of Oz" or any of "The Lord of the Rings." The little boys of "Stand by Me" are also excluded for walking along railroad tracks, as are dependable on-the-road Westerns like "The Searchers" for moseying along on horseback. A real road trip movie needs a vehicle.

A real road movie also requires the trip itself to serve as overarching theme. With that qualification, only honorable mention can go to "Tommy Boy" and "To Wong Foo Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar" (John Leguizamo and Wesley Snipes in strikingly convincing drag), both of which feature their fair share of priceless on-the-road sequences -- David Spade and Chris Farley shamelessly belting The Carpenters, for instance. But their action is ultimately too localized to merit top-tier road movie status, and that echelon has already been decided upon. Envelope, please:

### "Lolita" (1997)

The story is famous for reasons entirely its own, but what few remember about the book, and the under-appreciated film versions of it, is that this is essentially a story of two people on a fitfully clandestine road trip, dodging an unnamed watcher along the way. Get the notorious 1997 version by Adrian Lyne, starring Jeremy Irons and a young Dominique Swain in the title role. Kubrick's earlier adaptation may have raised eyebrows, but Lyne -- the king of sexual melodrama ("Unfaithful," "9 1/2 Weeks") -- rendered his version so explicitly that no American distributor would touch it, and here more than ever the open road is the bearer of Humbert Humbert aberrant deeds. The winding highways are the film's playground, the characters' hide-out and ultimately their witness.

### "Thelma & Louise" (1991)

Ridley Scott's post-feminist chronicle of the enduring bond between two women on the run from the police is the poster child of the modern road movie, a filmic photo essay of the American southwest. With Susan Sarandon and Genna Davis in the leads and the scenery filling out the supporting roles (sorry Brad Pitt), the film is a love letter to the rustic beauty of a less-known America and friendship as few ever come to know it. The last scene, a jaw-dropping descent into the Grand Canyon, is among the great cinematic finales ever filmed.

### "My Own Private Idaho" (1991)

On their most superficial level, road movies are about escape, and no one needs to escape more than the sorry heroes of Gus Van Sant's wandering masterpiece of disillusioned youth, "My Own Private Idaho." River Phoenix (in his best screen role) and Keanu Reeves star as Pacific Northwest hustlers looking for everything and nothing all at once. They travel against majestic backdrops quoting Shakespeare and occasionally having sex, the end of the road and perhaps the end of their lives the only thing that could stop them. The film exists, and never quite finds its way out of it. The final line: "I'm a connoisseur of roads. I've been tasting roads my whole life. This road will never end. It probably goes all around the world."

### "Everything is Illuminated" (2005)

A sweet-natured fable that hijacks the conventions of the road movie and groups people who don't know each other, "Everything is Illuminated" has its destination in mind but has no idea how to get there. Directed by Liev Schreiber and starring Elijah Wood, the modest-minded film is a tale of self-discovery as vibrant as it is thematically understated.

### "Y tu mama tambien" (2002)

The intensely, undeniably sexual air of Alfonso Cuarón's "Y tu mama tambien" is a singularity that in itself sets it apart from other road movies, but this story of two teenage boys (Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna, international stars because of this movie) and a beautiful older woman (Ana López Merced) on their way to a beach that doesn't exist hardly stops there. The Academy Award-nominated screenplay (rare for a foreign-language film) at once fearlessly cuts

into two boys' sexual awakenings, provides a sweeping commentary on the modern Mexican landscape and has a well-hidden undertow of innocence lost in the harshest way.

"Dumb and Dumber" (1994)

If you had a car like the Shaggin' Wagon, would you ever take it off the road? Harry and Lloyd (Jeff Daniels and Jim Carrey) traverse the nation to return a woman's briefcase, unaware that she had purposely dropped it as payment to her husband's kidnappers. Then again, they're pretty oblivious to practically everything. Watch as they sing the classics a cappella, pair hot sauce with rat poison, sport the snazziest suits this side of 1980 and finally ascend the wintry Rockies on a scooter. Snot mustaches, laxatives and a straight-faced hooters joke? No one ever said top-grade funny had to be classy.

"It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad Mad World" (1963)

When an old thief dies in a car crash, his last words reveal the secret location of his lifetime loot to a random assembly of sympathetic motorists. They see dollar signs -- it's off to the races. 2001's "Rat Race" may be the modern equivalent, but any cinematic endeavor with Smashmouth as a climatic ending pales in comparison to a cast of Spencer Tracy, Milton Berle, Ethel Merman, Sid Caesar and Jonathon Winters, all at their hambone best. "Madcap" doesn't even begin to cover it -- when that old thief kicks the bucket, he, well, actually kicks a bucket. Yep -- it's that kind of comedy.

"Paper Moon" (1973)

The plot may have a young girl and a con man hitting the road together, but this "Lolita" this ain't. Real-life father-daughter Ryan and Tatum O'Neal pair up for a far less violent take on the classic Bonnie and Clyde life of traveling criminals, swindling vulnerable new widows and small five-and-dimes with a few well-oiled Bible-salesman routines. Add the ever-hilarious Madeline Kahn ("Blazing Saddles") as an aging carnie, and it's a winning little movie, sweet and sharp.

"Easy Rider" (1969)

Dennis Hopper's directorial debut is the road-trip movie at its very essence: "A man went looking for America and couldn't find it anywhere." More accurately, there are two men, and what they do find is a very young Jack Nicholson, some mind-expanding drugs and the sweetest motorcycle helmet to ever grace a movie screen. The stark ending will shake you, but you'll have already sworn to grow Dennis Hopper's mustache or Peter Fonda's chops by then anyway.

"The Blues Brothers" (1980)

Two men embark on a mission from God and encounter a waitress named Aretha and a backflipping preacher named James Brown. But how could you not have caught this one yet? Comedy Central replays it at least twice a week.