

AMERICAN GRAFFITI

Directed by George Lucas
Produced by Francis Ford Coppola
Distributed by Universal Pictures
Released in 1973

The young living through the heady days of 1962 could never know the trials to come. Much as with the burgeoning adults characterized in *American Graffiti*, a sheltered world of extended childhood was soon to end.

This age group is wholly unique in the American experience. Born at the close of the war that positioned their nation as the most powerful in history, these children grew up in an age of unprecedented prosperity and fear. Many of the huge cultural shifts that seem to be triggered by President Kennedy's assassination gathered steam while parents hosted cocktail parties, indifferent to endemic racism and collapsing moral standards, particularly in the sensitive arenas of sex.

George Lucas was prescient enough to recognize his generation's revolutionary loss of innocence even before the decade was out. Learning that cruising was a courting ritual peculiar to America, he set out to document its passing in cinema-verite fashion, using a semi-autobiographical account of fading high school glories.

His extraordinary efforts still resonate today. The concerns of these characters find voice through succeeding generations—the fundamental issue presented in *American Graffiti* is one still unmet by an easy answer: Should a person leave home, testing ambition against talent, dismissing anything less as an abrogation of education and an indictment on individual worth; or should he stay close, caring for family and community, dismissing anything more as fruitless questing and selfish indulgence?

As the movie begins, Curt betrays his preference for stasis, not sacrifice. Clinging to a sad netherworld of lingering immaturity, with nothing to contribute, staying home would benefit no one but himself. But, displaying great perception and thoughtfulness, his potential engenders hope in the audience. He teeters between idealism (his strong affection for Kennedy) and indolence (killing time with gal-pal burnout Wendy).

Curt's episode with the Pharaohs is particularly revealing. Trapped in a dangerous predicament, he stays cool and works to build their trust and secure his freedom. However, he performs his chores of conscription with curious aplomb, such that these killers are impressed enough to welcome him into the gang.

The film is not merely a snapshot of time and place. Though it was the first to follow the actions of a large number of characters through a series of disassociated vignettes, *American Graffiti's* radical methodology serves the story. Curt is one of four young men we follow. Many auxiliary characters interact with them, the most important being Lori. However, the girls' stories are ignored except for when they directly involve Curt, Toad, Steve, and John. We see how four men accept the responsibilities that come with adulthood. We see Curt turning away

from the inevitability of change. We see Steve embrace it. We see Toad look ahead, eager; we see John look back, wistful. With this broader sampling, a more holistic truth emerges.

In addition to its pseudo-documentary feel and refreshing emphasis on ensemble performance, *American Graffiti* is revolutionary in its use of music. In the years immediately preceding its release, hit songs came to be seen as a primary component of a hit movie. Lucas turned this convention on its head. If a couple of songs could contribute to a merely successful film, what would forty do?

But Lucas wanted old songs (that nobody listened to), not new. And instead of providing a break in the action, these songs would never stop. They would be 1962 in a way that the production design and costumes could not with the tight budget. From the director's perspective, *American Graffiti* was a musical without singing. It was brilliant, audacious, and unprecedented.

The only score in the film fleetingly contributes to the goat-killer scene out in the woods. It is the songs that serve in the place of traditional scoring, commenting on the action. "Chantilly Lace," with its memorable opening "Hello, Baaaby!" begins right as Toad looks up to find the two muscle-bound car thieves hovering over him. "Goodnight, Sweetheart" is played for Curt's farewell at the airport, and Steve and Laurie dance to "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" as they reflect on the genesis of their love. Fearing their future lost, Laurie cries. "To the Aisle," laying out the progressive nature of young lovers destined for marriage, is played as Steve and Laurie discuss his plans for the future, in the Edsel.

In this same scene Steve tells Laurie, "Now, you know what I want out of life. And it's just not in this town." Did Steve really want more? Was his goal of distinguishing himself asinine? We never know, because he stays. Facing desperate entreaties, Steve relents; with Lori's behavior bordering on the self-destructive (her fateful ride with Bob Falga permits no other interpretation), Steve either realized how much he dearly loved her, or, out of guilt, felt he had no choice but to stay. After initially inspiring the audience with an impassioned desire to accept the challenges of college, Steve's selfishness became apparent in his insensitive exchanges with Lori. But, in the end, he demonstrates great selflessness. Though the poorest drawn of the four lead roles, Steve's character arc emphasizes the centrality of motivation in all decisions—indeterminate motivation precludes wisdom. Because his motivation is unclear, we do not know if Steve made the right choice...until we look at the film's characters together.

Because of its fragmented perspective, jumping between the four main characters as they proceed through this momentous night, identifying a single protagonist is difficult. Ultimately, Curt is the man. It doesn't seem to be his story all along, but by the end he is central. And in a film with many different characters, one man is revered by all—Wolfman Jack. He is the unifying element. All radios are tuned to this voice. By this reasoning, the most important scene in the movie is Curt's visit to the Wolfman. He goes to track down the Thunder-blond, but he also needs advice. Wolfman is humble, identifying himself as a mere appendage to the great DJ's operations. He continually offers Curt a popsicle. The popsicle serves as a symbol, a metaphor for worry-free living. Asked to disclose the location of the real Wolfman, he replies, "The Wolfman is everywhere." On the cut back to Curt, we hear a strange echo of the Wolfman's voice from one of the tapes. It is like the Wolfman's voice is the

Wolfman, himself, and because his voice is carried by radio all over, he is everywhere. The whole scene reinforces the mystery of the Wolfman, even after his true nature is disclosed. A god-like figure, he offers the clearest moral advice of the whole film. Thus, Curt's decision to leave is the right one simply because that is what the Wolfman wanted for him.

Of all the great finishes to great films, the shattering conclusion of *American Graffiti* may be the finest, striking the perfect balance of plot resolution with the mystery and frustration of an open-ended denouement. As the fates of the four characters are revealed with ominous yellow text, we see why we've ended with Curt—of the four, he is the one guy who will move forward in life. Quietly overwhelmed with wonder and sadness, we are left with the memory of moments that now assume a previously unrealized poignancy: Curt walking the halls, alone, thinking; Toad and John commiserating as the sun rises, "Okay, Toad—we'll take 'em all"; Steve badgering Curt for lingering in his "cell"; John recalling the great street drag calamities of the recent past with Carol; Toad walking toward the water with Debbie.

But before we get too torn up, the timeless sounds of The Beach Boys launch us into the credits—and what could be more appropriate?; "All Summer Long" is the perfect song, encapsulating joys of youth lost to the past, never to be forgotten.

The film is exquisitely designed. It is balanced, symmetrical, loaded with humor, conflict, great beauty, and the happy memories we'd all like to have known. This is landmark cinema.