

On the Road in Search of Reagan's America

by Kenneth Francis (November 2017)



Panel from *America Today*, Thomas Hart Benton, 1930-31

A few years after a retired Hollywood actor moved into the Oval Office in Pennsylvania Avenue in 1981, a thought occurred to this writer during a rainy night in London: flee Thatcher's Britain and hit the road in search of Ronald Reagan's America.

After getting a visa, international driving licence and boarding a cheap flight from Heathrow to Detroit, a change of airline then proceeded on a flight to Chicago. On arrival at O'Hare Airport, with enough cash for six months' travelling and food, the plan was to drive to the west coast first, then back to the east coast before returning home.

On British television that year, one of the most popular programmes was *Entertainment USA*, a series broadcast by the BBC with Jonathan King as its host. This show, which ran for eight years, was a mega hit and presented entertainment news, interviews and music from the USA. Watching *Entertainment USA* was a good incentive to go see Reagan's America. And leaving London and the rain was a better reason.

After hopping on a bus at the airport and entering the Windy City, it felt more like a balmy August evening in London, despite it being late spring. In a local newspaper in the small ads, there were drive-out courier and delivery services (some called 'Drive-away'). These services offered a free loan of car to be delivered to the owner who left a state to live elsewhere (car owner and family usually took a flight to a different state and had their furniture removed and delivered, usually by a U-Haul truck).

Inside the Chicago office of one such service for car delivery was like a smoke-filled room without the secret political gathering. A man behind a cloud of cigar mist, resembling the actor Lee Marvin, stood by the counter. Behind him were his two male colleagues, on the wrong side of 50, both sitting down reading newspapers. The Lee Marvin lookalike said: "Can you drive stick-shift?" Coming from Europe, the reply had to be: "Stick *what?*" "Manual gearbox," he replied. "Tourists from Europe can usually drive 'em, but hell, I wouldn't trust my guys with stick, no way," he added. (One of the men behind the counter, who looked like he was soon to come into contact with a defibrillator, rolled his eyes through a puff of nicotine smoke.)

Stick-shift was not an option for such a long journey but an automatic vehicle was. Luckily there was one on offer, a big Oldsmobile (I was hoping for a Mustang, like the one Steve McQueen drove in the movie, *Bullitt*). There was a deposit to be paid and the car was to be picked up some five miles outside the city. The owner of the car and his family were moving to San Francisco. The car, not the coolest of vehicles, was an eight-cylinder type, built like a rhinoceros with receding seats one could sleep on. It had to be delivered within two weeks. With a tank full of free gas and a suitcase slung into the trunk, it was off to Route 66 before it became a decommissioned highway later that year. The first part of the journey was a 2,500-mile voyage through the American heartlands to a city where they used to wear flowers in their hair. The Heartlands are never specifically defined geographically, but generally depict those Midwest states beyond the Atlantic and Pacific coastlines. It's also a cultural term, conjuring up images of classic movies such as *The Searchers*, *North by Northwest*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and other such gems of the silver screen and American literature.

One of the big road movies of the early Eighties was *Paris, Texas*, by Wim Wenders, starring the late Harry Dean Stanton and Nastassja Kinski. The movie was described by some critics as a fantasyland, a place of striking images, a "mise-en-scene of desert and city" with references to American culture on the road to California. On that particular route in the world of non-fiction, the great, eight-cylinder rhinoceros stopped in every state along the way to lay its head, in both motels and camping sites along the highway. When it comes great roads, America is hard to beat.

But the roads and vehicles to such destinations to the City by the Bay, were not always that good. *Huckberry* online editor

Liv Combe writes: "In 1903, there were only 150 miles of paved roads in the *entire* United States, and most of them were within major city limits, leaving vast chunks of the country unconnected. There were no gas stations and there were no detailed maps."

American roads have come a long way since the bad old days of dirt tracks and noisy cars. From cloudy Illinois, over an 11-day drive through Missouri/Kansas/Oklahoma/Texas/New Mexico/Arizona, sunny California began to come into view on the horizon. The Route 66 journey had its fair share of semi-trailer juggernauts, but was mainly quiet for most of the way with little or no traffic, especially at night.

Along the road, many towns and cities were briefly visited to get a feel of the place and people. Back on the highway at night, the desolate, rocky-desert landscape could at times be eerie but always fascinating: the odd campfire light flickering in the distance; an abandoned gas station, a small ghost town, a dilapidated water tower and decaying drive-ins. A few images on the route jumped off the canvas of an Edward Hopper painting.

But for some strange reason, the ruins of a once lively hub had a certain aesthetically pleasing quality to it. Not in the less-appealing 'ruin porn' one beholds of an abandoned Detroit tenement. A sight like that is apocalyptically depressing. But on the desert highway, such a place is where, paradoxically, run-down, Rat-Pack-era motels can look like oddly Romantic, as the sun sets on the desert plains. One can almost imagine the haunting, ghostly echoing sounds of a carnival of souls long since dead, laughing and having fun to the soundtrack of Bill Haley & His Comets. In such a place, tumble weed blows along

the cracked pathways where a small-town cinema once screened the last picture show. To quote poet W.B. Yeats, here a terrible beauty is born.

But ruins aside, the lively diners and drive-throughs off the highway served delicious pancakes, coffee and burgers. And the rustic small towns and ranches evoked Marlboro-Ad imagery, with tightly knit communities of hardworking folk just trying to get by from day to day, struggling with the questions of origin, meaning, morality, destiny and survival.

Meanwhile, as the Golden State drew nearer, Randy Newman's satirical big hit would occasionally blast from the car radio:

*From the South Bay to the Valley
From the West Side to the East Side
Everybody's very happy
'Cause the sun is shining all the time
Looks like another perfect day
I love L.A.*

Celebrated in popular movies, songs, novels and short stories, Route 66 to L.A. was also known as 'The Great Diagonal Way' (because the Chicago-to-Oklahoma City journey ran northeast to southwest), as well as the 'Main Street of America' and 'The Mother Road'.

After leaving Route 66, it was off to downtown San Francisco to a skyscraper carpark to return the valeted-and-washed vehicle to its rightful owner. San Francisco is a beautiful

city, when viewed from above a hilltop. The crooner Tony Bennett once left his heart there:

*To be where little cable cars climb halfway to the stars
The morning fog may chill the air, I don't care*

I left my heart . . .

Meanwhile, with a handshake and farewell, it was off to another Drive-away company in the foggy city that needed a Jeep to be delivered to Portland in Oregon. After Portland, the journey-routine was then repeated by the final car to be delivered, back down the Pacific Coast, through L.A. and all the way back to Georgia on the east coast by various routes—the entire trip clocking around 10,000 miles.

In Atlanta, a couple of weeks before leaving Reagan's America, a 1960s 'disposable' Ford was purchased for \$300, hitting the road again for the last time, journeying to the foothills for some final sightseeing. Along the way, a convoy of Hell's Angels on Harley Davidson's overtook my Sixties' Ford jalopy. The cynical, 1969 anti-America movie *Easy Rider* was also a road-trip story in more ways than one. The blurb on the poster for the movie read: 'A man went looking for America and couldn't find it'. It should have read: 'Two narcissist hippy stoners went looking for a perfect America that would see to all of their weed needs but couldn't find it.'

America is a different place now. Just like the West (with the exception of Poland), there is a spiritual warfare between anti-theism, theism and worldview. Back in Reagan's America, most people were too busy surfing on the wave of the

president's Tiger-booming economy, which turned out to be the greatest in American history. There was also an optimism and feel-good factor in almost every state visited.

The author James Nuechterlein wrote: "After weathering a severe recession, the economy, spurred by a controversial tax-cut program that Reagan steered through Congress with flair and skill, took off in 1983 on the longest peacetime expansion in American history. Leaving behind the stagflation of the 1970s, the economy grew steadily over the next seven years, while inflation, unemployment, and interest rates all declined."

Echoing those sentiments in the *New York Times* in January 1990, Martin Anderson wrote that from 1982 to 1989 was the greatest, consistent burst of economic activity ever seen in the U.S. "In fact, it was the greatest economic expansion the world has ever seen—in any country, at any time," he said.

During that period and beyond the economy, it seemed like conservative sentiment was ubiquitous. The Sexual Revolution of the previous decades was in burn-out mode but the last remaining embers were still morphing. That Hippy/Glam Rock generation of Boomers were duped into thinking promiscuity/porn was about freedom and equality. It wasn't. It enslaved them, making them docile sex addicts, distracted from the economy and political scandals, forever in a state of bondage.

Despite MTV videos occasionally screening sleaze in the subsequent Eighties, it was the last proverbial sting of a perverted, dying wasp that unfortunately rose again years

later with the wall-to-wall, twerking degeneracy we have today as 'music entertainment'. There is nothing more powerful than sex to enslave the masses, as a degenerate/demoralized people are easier to control. Anything-goes-sex might not literally make you go blind but it certainly dims one's vision when political and social failings are a regular occurrence.

The great Russian writer on the Soviet gulags, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, had lived in exile in America during the Regan era and he criticized what he saw as the ugliness and spiritual bankruptcy of the degenerate pop culture of the dominant West, especially on TV and popular music. He said the human soul "longs for things higher, warmer, and purer than those offered by today's mass living habits . . . by TV stupor and by intolerable music".

As for the failings of everyday fashion in Reagan's America, it certainly was the decade that style forgot. Many young women had big, outlandish hair and wore shoulder-pad sweaters and skinny jeans, sometimes with legwarmers. The young men wore tracksuits or polyester polo-necks and straight-leg denims. Some had their hair styled in the then trendy mullet, which now looks hilarious, 'complimented' by a ridiculous-looking shell suit. The City stockbroker types wore double-breasted, pinstripe suits, as they chatted-up pretty women in bars and nightclubs.

Back then, over 30 years ago, there were no widespread gender wars and no Feminist jihad against men; no tearing down historical statues of Christian "white supremacists" or defacing and beheading monuments of saints, while erecting statues of Baphomet and satanic commandments monuments.

In the yesteryear of Reagan's America, there was also no anti-America, New Leftist, students rioting on the streets for more censorship, a ban on free speech, and constantly screaming 'racist!'. *Spiked* magazine deputy editor, Tom Slater, wrote: "The idea that the Trump phenomenon is all about racism is as lazy as it is insulting. And the phrase white supremacy, thrown so often at Trump and his supporters, has basically lost all meaning."

Also back in Reagan's America, there was no Facebook or smartphones. Most people had to physically meet real friends face-to-face. And although the popular synthesized music was bland compared to the previous three decades, at least it wasn't infused with 'Smack my Bitch Up' lyrics or tens of thousands of iPhone wavers at concerts filming it. Outside of music in the world of science and sociology, many hard facts weren't politically incorrect and the word 'racism' was seldom mentioned on TV, radio or academia.

Even in the soulless, tacky shopping malls and on the local radio stations, to add to the sunny mood of Reagan's America, there was a popular song at the beginning of the president's second term in office playing non-stop called *Walking on Sunshine*. Despite all of this, America still had many social and health problems, as to be expected in a fallen world.

However, in the era of the Eighties, in general, the Americans I met were the friendliest, kind, good-humored people on the planet. Was this a reflection of the Regan era? It's hard to tell because Reagan, who many believe was 100% conservative, was once a Democrat before turning Republican (for opportunistic, pragmatic reasons?). As a Republican, he had some RINO/Dem traits but ultimately he had the human touch and

was in tune with *realpolitik*