

On
The Making
the
and Unmaking
Road
of a
Again
Canadian Classic

by Geoff Pevere

Two guys leave the mar-
itimes for Toronto where
they hope to make a lot
of money. They quickly
become disillusioned.
One of the most impor-
tant films produced in
English Canada
Goin' Down the Road described in
the 1980 anthology *Self Portrait*

A funny thing happens when you mention *Goin' Down the Road*, Don Shebib's seminal 1970 feature, to contemporary Canadians of a certain age. Most have heard of it, some have actually seen it, and just about everyone expresses surprise that a quarter-century has passed since its release. But the only thing approaching unanimity of response is this: *everybody* remembers the brilliant parody of the movie done by SCTV,

the one where Joe Flaherty and John Candy flee their destitute eastern homes in search of hoser nirvana beneath the neon twinkle of Yonge St. It's true. Try sparking the *Road*-memory of any culturally attuned, 25- to 40-year-old English Canadian, and most will recollect the parody more readily than the movie which inspired it. Canada. Shit, we're still in Canada...
Attempting to mark the 25th anniversary of a Canadian movie like *Goin' Down the Road* brings one face to face with some of the most revealingly vexing cultural eccentricities this country can cough up. (And lord, it can cough up plenty.) There is, for example, no video carrier of the film, which relegates it to the largely spectral status accorded a distressingly large number of Canadian "classics" – like *Pour la suite du monde* (1963), *Le chat dans le sac* (1964), *Paperback Hero* (1973), *Wedding in White* (1974), or a few dozen others. *Goin' Down the Road* is a Canadian benchmark more referred to than actually seen – the bench it marked has gone missing. Even those who have seen it are increasingly likely to merge it in memory with that sublime SCTV take-off. I was

told that Telefilm Canada has considered striking a new 35mm print of the film (originally shot by Richard Leiterman in 16mm), but one has a hard time imagining it triumphantly touring packed houses across the country in 1995.

Then there are the increasingly itchy questions around how a classic is constituted in Canada in the first place, and whether the canonical process isn't an unaffordably specious enterprise in a country as culturally underdeveloped as this. The whole issue around the Canadian canonical impulse was raised by Peter Morris in 1992 in an essay called "In Our Own Eyes: The Canonizing of Canadian Film" (from the limited edition volume *Responses: In Honour of Peter Harcourt*), and is provocatively addressed by Harcourt himself elsewhere in this issue. Morris argues that the subjective agendas of certain critics and historians have resulted in an absurdly arbitrary and exclusive roster of sanctioned Canadian classics (like *Goin' Down the Road*, *Nobody Waved Good-bye* [1964], *Mon oncle Antoine* [1971] and *Les bons débarras* [1980]) while leaving a great many other titles – like William Davidson's *Now that April's Here* (1958), Sidney Furie's *A Dangerous Age* (1958), and the entire oeuvre of Larry Kent and (see Harcourt again) Paul Almond – on the shoulder of the highway of history.

While there is much about Morris's argument which is compelling for the crucial questions it raises about the process of defining English-Canadian culture – such as who defines it and to what end? – much of it can't help but seem like academic hair-splitting to those not professionally engaged in scholarly pursuits. While it may be true that the canon (established largely by academic critics such as Harcourt and Morris) has excluded many titles which don't correspond to the assumptions that canons are built on, the existing canon



PAUL BRADLEY, JAYNE EASTWOOD and DOUG MCGRATH, the archetypically luckless protagonists of Don Shebib's shaggy, grim, low-budget debut

could hardly be called common currency. Just go ahead and try starting a conversation about *Goin' Down the Road* at your next large family function, then see how long it takes before the subject shifts to more familiar territory, like *Pulp Fiction* or the Oscars. The fact is, while “canonized” films are more likely to provoke flickers of recognition among thoughtful Canadians than those that aren't, our “classics” are barely more familiar than those left in the ditch.

So where does that leave Pete (Doug McGrath) and Joey (Paul Bradley), the archetypically luckless protagonists of Donald Shebib's shaggy, grim, low-budget debut? While they happen to be the dramatic focus of one of the most enduring of Canadian movies this, as we have seen, hardly guarantees the film a comfortable cultural afterlife as a Canadian icon. Is the vehicle which conveys their cruel downward spiral truly a classic (whatever that is) and does it make any difference if it is? It may be 25 years old, but is there any reason to care?

To watch the film today, a quarter-century after it – like many other canon-friendly Canadian movies – was held up as yet another new beginning for the national cinema, is to be struck in two ways: first by the almost paradigmatic way it encapsulates and anticipates the “loser” cycle in Canadian movies of the seventies – which also explains its ripeness as a subject for parody – and second by the contradiction between the modesty of its aims and the status it attained. In other words, for all the dreams of a robust and distinct national cinema that were pinned on *Goin' Down the Road*, it was a bit like strapping a medal on a daisy. The honours were something the film (not to mention the country that produced it) just couldn't support.

This is not to say that the film isn't worthy of celebration – a quarter-century later, it still exerts a raw, propulsive charge – it's just that the terms of the initial celebration were disproportionately grand for such a tiny, imperfect gem of a movie. Had it been released at another time or in another country, one wonders whether it would loom in quite the same way. Had Shebib made the movie in the States, where he'd obtained his film education, might it not have disappeared beneath the deluge of downer/buddy/road movies – *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* (1970), *Two Lane Blacktop* (1971), *Pocket Money* (1972), *Scarecrow* (1973) – unleashed in the aftermath of the out-of-nowhere success of *Easy Rider*

(1969)? Or might it have clicked stateside, thereby giving Shebib the longevity as a feature-maker denied him in very the same country – make that city – that let Pete and Joey down? (I realize such speculation involves an immense conceptual leap that imagines a non-Canadian *Goin' Down the Road*, but just give it a whirl for argument's sake.) On the other hand, had he made it at another intersection in Canadian cultural history, would it have acted as the same lightning rod for nationalist zeal that it did in 1970? Today, for example, Bruce McDonald's reupholstered road movies (which are discussed in detail elsewhere in this issue by Marc Glassman) depend simultaneously on a familiarity with classic road movies and a *de rigueur* degree of post-modern removal from them. Apart from the obvious contradiction between the rosily naive nature of Pete and Joey's dreams and the tart reality they wake up to, *Goin' Down the Road* is as bereft of irony as it is happy characters. In the era of *Exotica*, *Eclipse*, *Highway 61* or *Double Happiness* – all of which assume a certain level of post-modern detachment – would a movie like *Goin' Down the Road* penetrate the national consciousness quite so deeply or enduringly?

Certain Canadian cultural artifacts bear scrutiny as much for the contemporary reaction they elicited as for what they achieved independently as works of art. That's because this is a country where the debate around the function and nature of culture has at times seemed more vigorous and prolific than the culture itself. (Go to a library. Can there be any other country in the world with so many off-putting tomes on domestic cultural policy?) Because cultural production is so intimately related to public policy, the defining of culture has itself come to constitute a category of public debate in Canada. If it isn't intermittent state commissions tabling cultural reports – and the intensive press response to such reports – it's the discussion of cultural policy as a subject ripely conducive to Op-Ed commentary. Since regulation and subsidization have served to make Canadian cultural affairs a matter of state economics, culture is a favourite editorial football in newsrooms coast to coast. (After the library, check out a major newspaper: one is far more likely to find a rant about cultural funding or – god save us – the CBC, than a review of a Canadian movie.)

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What this means is that while culture in Canada is the subject of nearly constant analytical scrutiny, it tends to be culture discussed as an issue, i.e., as a matter of public policy which is only interesting insofar as it reflects governmental practice and relates to tax payers. To define it is therefore a matter of nickel-and-dime practicality – knowing what you're paying for. This has left the meaning of the cultural artifacts themselves in a strangely peripheral position in relation to the public discussion of culture, which becomes a concept existing independently of the works which constitute it. Thus, the funding apparatus for film in this country gets far more mainstream media attention than the films funded, and culture itself takes on an odiously pragmatic aspect. It becomes a state expense whose “affordability” is the primary reason for talking about it in the first place.

One therefore detects a number of agendas lurking behind the reception of certain Canadian movies, many of which have little to do with the individual merits (or lack thereof) of the films themselves. The films happened to come along at a fortuitous moment in the ongoing debate about what's culturally appropriate in Canada, and happened to fit snugly within the contours of that debate at that time. The challenge to rearview observers is thus to juggle the film with the circumstances of its reception. Looking back, for example, at the interest generated by the late '80s triumphs of Denys Arcand, Jean-Claude Lauzon and Atom Egoyan, it becomes necessary to understand the role played by gestures of foreign interest in Canadian culture in that decade. During the Mulroney years, Canada's striving for approval as a world-class player reached fever pitch, and the strong reception to these films at prestigious foreign showcases corresponds to that cultural need for external validation. (Later, Egoyan's films would also be frequently contextualized as certifiers of fledgling forms of funding policy. Since



the filmmaker's early triumphs – like *Family Viewing* [1987] and *Speaking Parts* [1989] in particular – were largely funded by the still-toddling Ontario Film Development Corporation, they were just as likely to be discussed as instances of successful funding initiatives as they were challenging works of art.)

It is within the context of their reception that the success of some films in Canada and the dismissal of others can be explained. This is what Morris was describing as an academic phenomenon in his arguments about the arbitrary nature of the canon; that certain movies “fit” the prevailing cultural desires and academic inclinations of their moment, while others – those excluded from the canon – didn't. Cringingly retro-trendy though *Un zoo, la nuit* now seems, it served a vital cultural validation function in 1987. It proved that Canadians were every bit as capable of slick *Miami Vice* or *Diva*-esque entertainments as anyone, in the process helping shrug off the dull reputation for earnest, docu-dramatic realism it was impossible to take much pride from by the mid-'80s. In the emergent global cultural economy, who the hell wanted to play the role of Earnest?

Likewise, external factors must account for both the celebration of Bruce Beresford's numbing *Black Robe* (1991) and the often savage attacks on Richard Bugajski's simultaneously released but already forgotten *Clearcut*. While the latter is an immeasurably more complex, intelligent and challenging rumination on contemporary race relations between Native and white Canadians, the former corresponded more flatteringly with a post-Oka need among sympathetic pundits to appear to be onside with aboriginal politics and issues. (It was much prettier too.) Similarly, there's no question that David Cronenberg's climb to Canadian cultural respectability reflects some of the same tendency. While many

of our domestic tastemakers remained indifferent or hostile to the former goremeister's genre-bending experiments of the '80s, the increasing international reputation of the work served to rehabilitate it even for the hall monitors at home. While Cronenberg's films could be attacked as wastes of tax dollars in the '70s – which is exactly how Robert Fulford framed his famously miffed middlebrow assault on *Shivers* in 1975 – they commanded almost hushed respect during the '80s. Hair-raising as Cronenberg's vision might have seemed to those busy erecting a national identity built on comfy WASP propriety, if it helped Canada look a little less dowdy and a little more sexy, one could set aside one's objections or, just as likely, confusion.

When *Goin' Down the Road* was released in the summer of 1970, it was sent afloat in a Canadian critical climate much different than today's. During the post-Expo period, which had merely inflated the uncomfortable impression that Quebec was indeed monopolizing both the international press and the national identity sweepstakes – don't forget that *Goin' Down the Road* was released after the Quebec cinema had already earned international attention and domestic support, and within weeks of the October Crisis – there was a palpable desire among English Canadian critics and commentators to seek out



from top left, director Don Shebib; with actors Doug McGrath and Paul Bradley; cinematographer Richard Leiterman. GOIN' DOWN THE ROAD'S LOW-BUDGET FORMAL PRACTICE WOULD SUBSEQUENTLY BE WIDELY CITED AS A STANDARD OF DISTINCT NATIONAL EXPRESSION

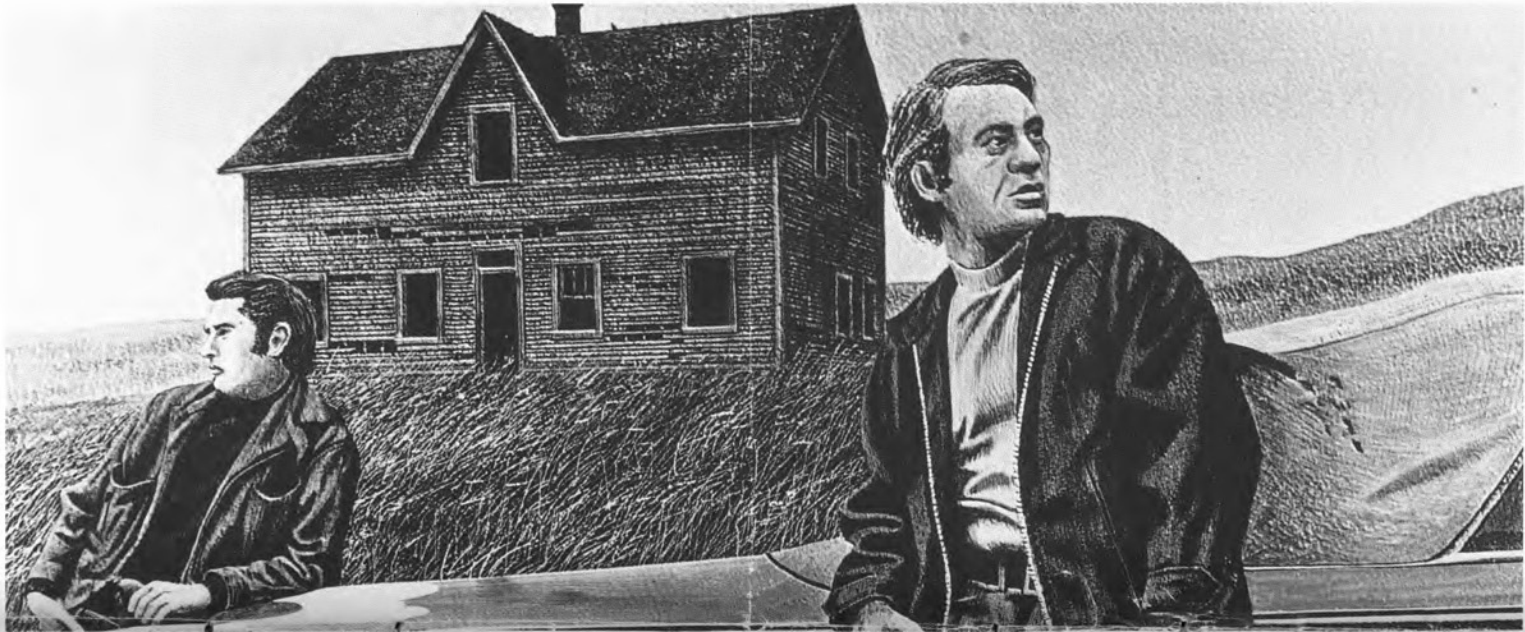
instances of cultural expression that were usually characterized as “distinctly Canadian.” (Tellingly, the phrase “English Canadian” was not often used.) Quite apart from how dangerously arbitrary such matters are as standards of any kind – let alone of aesthetic evaluation – they can be positively brutal when used to gauge the apparent value of something as fragile and tentative as a Canadian movie. Even worse, the operative evaluative question tended not to be whether something was Canadian, but whether it was Canadian *enough*.

Clearly, Don Shebib's unpolished but heartfelt little movie about maritime drifters down and out in Toronto was

10 Two carefree and footloose drifters...

Goin' Down The Road

Directed by Donald Shebib





A couple of bucks... A bottle of beer...
And always the dreams...of tomorrow

Starring

**Doug
McGrath**

**Paul
Bradley**

Colour

with **Jayne Eastwood,
Cayle Chernin, Nicole Morin**

Screenplay by William Fruet music Bruce Cockburn Camera Richard Leiterman

An Evdon Films Production

For Phoenix Film Inc. Release

Canadian enough. That and more: it was both obviously Canadian and *English* Canadian (its two French characters – the bottling-plant foreman “Frenchy” and the factory flirt played by Nicole Morin – are offered as more obstacles to the upward mobility of these unblessed protagonists), and it spoke frankly about its geographic position: “My Nova Scotia Home” is painted (by Shebib’s friend and future filmmaker Carroll Ballard [*Never Cry Wolf*]) across the shitbox convertible Pete and Joey drive to Toronto. “Lock up your daughters!” yells Bradley as he and McGrath pull off the Don Valley Parkway – and the city itself is never disguised as anything but what it is. (In the sublime SCTV skit, this specificity of locale would be rendered with hilarious belligerence. Every time Candy and Flaherty get wound up for a tear, they start whooping, wolflike, “Yonge St.! Yonge St.! Woooo! Woooo!”) Interestingly, this became a point of praise for a number of critics, who were ecstatic over the reflection of their own city as the setting for a movie, and typically trumpeted this as a sign of the film’s integrity as a national artifact. Canadian fact: many Torontonians in positions of media influence seemingly have no idea why, or even *that*, the rest of the country holds their city in livid contempt. Letting Toronto stand in for the “national” experience would seem a good place to start.

It seems worth quoting Piers Handling

at length on the issue of first contact with *Goin’ Down the Road*, as his introduction to the now out-of-print 1977 Canadian Film Institute volume *The Films of Don Shebib*, while not exactly contemporary, does set the typical context for the movie’s enthusiastic reception among Toronto opinioners. Recalling seeing the film in the summer of 1970, Handling wrote “...there it was: a truly entertaining film full of gutsy energy and a raw power that impressed through its grimy veracity. But I don’t remember it for that – it was more because for the first time, here was a reflection of something that lay just around the corner – the Yonge St. strip at night, Sam the Record Man open until all hours, Toronto Island, and those gaudy and rudimentary taverns where they were all drinking Canadian beer – Molson’s, Labatt’s! This was what we all reacted to in a large part, something immediately identifiable, a type of visual short-hand and we filled in the gaps because we knew it all so well. That was what it was like – that was what we were like. It wasn’t Los Angeles, New York, Paris or London; it was unmistakably Toronto.”

Such hometown epiphanies are common among contemporary Toronto reviews and columns on the film (see also the accounts of Fulford, Harcourt and John Hofsess) as is Handling’s implicit praise of the film’s docu-dramatic rawness – a low-budget formal practice which would subsequently be

widely cited as a standard of distinct national expression – and his praising of the film on the basis of its obvious non-Hollywoodness. Of course, this last point would easily segue into the thematic designation of “losers” as being distinctly Canadian, which in turn would elicit its own backlash by the middle of the decade. At that time, articles begin to appear which not surprisingly refuse the bleak determinism of the loser model as a national ideal (see, among others, Robert Fothergill’s “Coward, Bully or Clown: The Dream Life of an Older Brother” from the original *Take One*, Sept. ’73), and lament the very same absence of “positive role models” that Hollywood movie stars, for all their unCanadianness, tend to promote. In other words, the terms which designated positive Canadianism, as they inevitably do, had begun to shift. Within four years, *Goin’ Down the Road* devolved from a paragon of pure national expression to an irksome reminder that (to borrow the title of another Fothergill essay from 1974) being Canadian always



meant having to say you're sorry. By mid-decade, after three films (*Goin' Down the Road*, *Rip-Off* [1971], and *Between Friends* [1973]) that traded heavily in distinctly Canadian despair rendered in docu-dramatic fashion, Shebib's sheen had just about worn off, his usefulness as the embodiment of an ideal cultural expression spent, his reputation now crippled by the same characteristics that once made it worthy of praise.

So, as the model for what was distinctly and desirably Canadian shifted, Shebib no longer fit, and he, Pete and Joey suddenly found themselves left on the shoulder, outstretched thumbs attracting fewer and fewer takers. By 1976, when he made the almost universally panned *Second Wind*, seeing Toronto in a movie was no longer an occasion for national celebration. By the early '80s, when Shebib was primarily preoccupied with television, Pete and Joey themselves would be eclipsed by impersonators on TV. This is it boys. Out you get. End of the road ●

"Goin' Down the Road was a reflection of something that lay just around the corner – the Yonge St. strip at night, Sam the Record Man, Toronto Island, and those gaudy



and rudimentary taverns where they were all drinking Canadian beer – it wasn't Los Angeles, New York, Paris or London; it was unmistakably Toronto"

**Piers Handling,
from *The Films of
Don Shebib***

Goin' Down the Road opened commercially July 20, 1970, at the New Yorker cinema in Toronto and 25 years later STILL EXERTS A RAW, PROPULSIVE CHARGE