

ARRESTED ADOLESCENCE & THE MASTERY OF TOOLS:

STEVE MCQUEEN'S Indiana Legacy

Steve McQueen was born seventy years ago in Beech Grove, Indiana, a little burg on the southeast side of Indianapolis. McQueen has been dead since 1980. If, somehow, his spirit were to return to his birthplace, it would find it almost unrecognizable. Most of the modest, working-class suburban houses lining these streets have been built since the Second World War. The only building that appears to predate 1930 is St. Francis Hospital, a stately brick edifice at the center of town. McQueen may have been born there. But the original structure has only been preserved as a kind of memorial; it's overwhelmed by several gargantuan additions that have turned Beech Grove's town center into the healthcare equivalent of an industrial park.

Were McQueen to revisit Beech Grove about the only thing he might find familiar would be the expression on the face of a pregnant woman I see along the street. She is smoking a cigarette and waiting for a bus. Her face is swollen as if from a beating and she scowls as I pass by.

The world still thinks about Steve McQueen. His image keeps recurring. He is used as a model to sell expensive shoes and sunglasses, even automobiles. Pick up a copy of *Vanity Fair*—there is a two-page spread of photographs from a new art book that's dedicated to him, along with a meditation on his staying power in the collective imagination. During any given week, one or more of his films are likely to be scheduled on TV. In June, when his name appeared on screen at an outdoor showing of *The Magnificent Seven* at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, people in the crowd cheered.

I began watching Steve McQueen when I was a kid. This was in the early 1960s. As John Hiatt, the storytelling songwriter and musician—also from Indianapolis—has said of this time, “Was there anybody who didn't want to be Steve McQueen?” The man was not so much an actor as a presence.

It wasn't until recently that I learned Steve McQueen had roots, albeit of a stricken sort, in Indianapolis. This news, once received, lent a new dimension to the experience of his performance. That face, I realized, is inescapably Hoosier. It's the face of the repairman that messed up my bathroom and tried to blame his carelessness on a female partner. It also belonged to a wildcat

graphic designer I once knew with a penchant for elaborate practical jokes. I've seen it on roofers and mechanics and a few audiovisual geeks. So have you, if you've lived here long enough.

There are apparently no childhood snapshots of Steve McQueen. That was the kind of childhood he had. His father was a barnstorming pilot; his mother was thought of as what they used to call “loose.” Somehow they connected in Indianapolis. The baby, Terrence Steven, was delivered in Beech Grove. “My life was screwed up before I was born,” is how McQueen described these circumstances. The father split before his son could walk. McQueen's mother took the boy back to her hometown, Slater, Missouri, dropped him with his grandparents, and returned to what she considered the fast life in Indianapolis.

This Depression-era trail from Slater to Indianapolis and back again became the rut in which McQueen passed his childhood. Whenever it seemed he was adjusting to life with his grandparents or a great uncle who finally took him in, his mother yanked him back to the Circle City. She was a drunk with a penchant for violent men. McQueen was repeatedly abused and abandoned. By the age of nine, he was a southside street kid in trouble with the law. The best time in his young life came later, when as a teenager he did two years in a California reform school. It was the most stable home he'd known.

No wonder McQueen seems such a solitary presence on screen. Indeed, many of the films that seemed to hit so hard during

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Those interested in revisiting Steve McQueen's look will find ample opportunity in a new art book by photographer William Claxton. *Steve McQueen: Photographs* by William Claxton is a collection of photos Claxton took of McQueen between 1962 and 1964. McQueen was on his way up at this time, doing some of his most interesting work in films like the uncharacteristically tender *Love With the Proper Stranger* (with Natalie Wood), *Baby the Rain Must Fall* (with Lee Remick), and *The Cincinnati Kid* (with Tuesday Weld). Not long after this, McQueen hit it big and, by all accounts, descended into a well of paranoia exacerbated by a heavy cocaine habit and, it's impossible not to guess, a deep insecurity about his craft. But at the point that Claxton entered his life, McQueen was open, focused, and excited about what was happening. He gave the photographer practically unlimited access and Claxton, known for his photojournalism, coverage of the LA jazz scene and fashion work, made the most of the situation. This handsome book reveals what anyone who ever dug McQueen in those days probably inferred from the performances but never actually got to see. It's possibly the best work that McQueen-as-Image ever did. It is also, between the lines, an illuminating detail of a particular period in American cultural history—the early 1960s. McQueen rode the wave of the American postwar empire at its crest and, with everyone else, felt the crash. A particularly strong sequence, taken on the set of *Baby the Rain Must Fall*, shows McQueen, Remick, and the rest of the crew on location as they receive the news that John Kennedy has just been shot.

Steve McQueen is 176 pages and includes 100 duotone and 20 four-color plates. It is published by Arena Editions.

the 1960s—movies like *The Cincinnati Kid*, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, *Soldier In the Rain*, even *Bullitt*—are less than satisfying today. McQueen's version of masculinity is so aloof and untouchable, so emotionally unavailable, that he can be difficult to relate to. He's the polar opposite of Indiana's other influential star, James Dean.

America's Hamlet, Dean was an emotional Geiger counter, an actor who used language as a launching pad to get at deeper psychological truths. Dean was fearlessly vulnerable, spontaneous to the point of seeming dangerous. McQueen, on the other hand, actually was dangerous—a man wrapped so tight to protect himself from a world he couldn't control, so careful about maintaining his little piece of personal space, that he was liable to blow over the most seemingly trivial transgression. Kurt Vonnegut, who during the 1960s considered writing about McQueen, was warned not to even approach him.

McQueen was good at playing outcasts because that's what he was. People called him the King of Cool. What they were seeing, whether they knew it or not, was an emotionally battered child trying to hold his own in one alien landscape after another. If what he has to tell us about being a man is no longer that interesting, what McQueen reflects about this part of the Midwest seems enduring. To know the place McQueen comes from and to see him now is to find a new resonance in his work. Indiana cannot claim a legendary landscape. We have no Monument Valley, no Badlands or Everglades. What we have is Steve McQueen.

If you want to understand McQueen, it helps to remember that Indiana was once almost entirely covered with trees. The state consists of 23 million acres. In 1800, all but 3 million of these acres were forest. But by the time Steve McQueen was born in 1930, this great Indiana forest was gone, eaten by farmland and the timber business. Not only were the trees gone, the historical memory of them was remarkably scant. Settlers told the story of this place from the standpoint of how they cleared the land and put it to what they considered its rightful use.

Today it's hard to imagine the Indiana landscape in its natural state. We think of agriculture as the old way, forgetting that just a few generations stand between this imposition on the land and what came before. But

during Steve McQueen's boyhood, large parts of the state were still freshly raw. A town like Beech Grove was torn between the encroaching city and rural countryside. The land was in a violent state of flux.

It still is. Less than two hundred years after the settlers began clearing trees for farmland, we are clearing the farmland for new suburbs. Most Hoosiers have never known anything like an ancient or enduring bond with the land. Real estate in these parts has, as long as white people have lived here, been considered strictly in terms of the living you could make off it. Places that are treated this way tend not to be portrayed on postcards or in travelogues. If the landscape here is forgettable, that's because, like a farm animal bred for slaughter, it's meant to be. One consequence is that our three-dimensional sense of place is diminished. Like young Steve McQueen, we don't know where we belong.

Until we find his image twenty-four feet high, on a silver screen. At that IMA showing of *The Magnificent Seven*, Steve McQueen's creased features were magnified and thrown against the night sky. The situation: a man has died and is due for burial. But that man is Indian; a gang of local yahoos is determined to keep him from being planted on Boot Hill. No one in town has the nerve to go against them—until a cheroot-smoking man in black (played by Yul Brynner) says, Hell, he'll drive the coffin up there. As Brynner climbs aboard the undertaker's coach, another stranger in a weather-beaten Stetson borrows a scattergun from a bystander and climbs up alongside. It's Steve McQueen. "Never rode shotgun on a hearse before," he says, smartly cracking the barrels and checking both chambers: loaded.

Directed by John Sturges, *The Magnificent Seven* is a deftly choreographed ensemble action film, a moral tale told without a trace of irony. McQueen, who had previously played a bounty hunter in the western TV series, "Wanted: Dead or Alive," used this film to become the first actor to successfully vault from television to movie stardom. It was a part his agent was at first reluctant to recommend—there were no more than seven pages of dialogue. "Sure," said Sturges, "but I'll give him the camera."

This played to McQueen's greatest skill, his mastery of tools. No actor has handled inanimate objects with greater focus or finesse. Much has been made of McQueen's passion for engine power. Fast cars and



motorcycles seemed part of his wardrobe. But see the way he taps a basement window shut after a killer has slipped through it in *Bullitt*, how he sights a rifle in *The Sand Pebbles*, or handles explosives in *The Getaway*. He doesn't just trust these things, he honors them.

In the hands of many actors, tools, especially weapons, amplify their projection of power or potency. McQueen is different. Ego seems to disappear once he has something he can assemble, shoot, or steer. Tools are his collaborators. Going to a hardware store with McQueen must have been like visiting a Zen rock garden. "Men are cheaper than guns," McQueen, the unemployed gunfighter, observes ruefully in *The Magnificent Seven*. And, he might have added, less trustworthy.

The loner cool that McQueen projected fit the early 1960's zeitgeist like a driving glove. Audiences, burdened by Cold War conformity, saw a damaged child on screen—an arrested adolescent—and found his alienation hip. If McQueen's persona had an uncanny ability to become one with inanimate objects, he seemed at constant odds with his fellow human beings. The typical McQueen character is a man who needs to be in control, but for whom control is usually denied. At the time of his Hollywood ascendancy, this conflict was often seen as man against the "system," a catch-all term for everything constraining, including most women. McQueen was a rebel. If he was obstinate, temperamental, confrontational, or misogynistic,

these were all manifestations of his masculine integrity.

One wishes that, somehow, McQueen's veneer of masculine cool might, occasionally, have cracked. This is why his work can seem sadly dated, making McQueen look more like a supermodel than an actor, more a face than a body of work. There are touching moments, particularly in the early films—when a dog dies in *Soldier in the Rain* and, falteringly, opposite Natalie Wood in the sweetly uncharacteristic *Love With the Proper Stranger*. But McQueen is finally less about feelings than sensations. He is a constant, blue-eyed stranger.

None of his films so thoroughly exemplifies McQueen's yin and yang, his mastery of tools and arrested adolescence, as the cop thriller, *Bullitt*. Directed by Englishman Peter Yates (who would later direct the Bloomington coming-of-age story, *Breaking Away*), *Bullitt* is about an incorruptible detective who defies a power-hungry politician in order to solve a mob-related murder case and avenge the shooting of one of his partners. The film is famous for its car chase through San Francisco—the first exhilarating example of what would become a turgid crime movie convention. McQueen, just as famously, did his own driving.

This is impressive. But McQueen packs this performance with a wonderful array of elegantly conceived bits of physical business. These actions define Frank Bullitt as a man intent on navigating his way through a danger-

ously squalid material world with as much precision and economy as possible. It's clear this is Bullitt's only way of retaining some sense of soul-saving cleanliness.

For all the depravity that comes with his job, Bullitt also has the good fortune to have the gorgeous Jacqueline Bissett impossibly smitten with him. This love interest is designed not just to show us that Bullitt is human, but a guy whose dirty work props up and protects an effeminate world of art, music, and beauty. Though the filmmakers do their best to make Bissett's character as shallow as possible, the actress somehow manages to convey a modicum of intelligence and compassion. This makes things hard for McQueen. He is cold, unyielding, and remote. What is intended as stoicism reads as an almost pathologically flat affect. You fear for Bissett for wanting to be close to this guy. She may be out of her depth, but she is surely not intended to be a masochist. The shallow frigidity of McQueen's performance makes it hard, in a post-feminist world, not to read her this way.

Steve McQueen died of cancer at the age of 50. Pictures taken of him toward the end of his life show the kind of Hoosier you might expect to find at the next gas pump or in line with a six-pack one night at the Village Pantry: bearded, wearing a ball cap and drugstore sunglasses. At the end, as he tried to find himself, it was almost as if he became one of us again. He died in bed, with a Bible in his hands. Lord knows, Indiana was probably the last thing on his mind.

If he never claimed this place, it's because he was sure he was never wanted. The poor bastard spent years trying to find his father and never did; he gave his mother money but never forgave her for his traumatic upbringing. His is an intense and troubled story about how a man, cut off from the sources of his self, went into the world, became a star, and helped define his time. McQueen was ambitious, he knew he had a power. But he understood these things about as well as most Hoosiers understand their history and sense of place.

Images remain. Given where he came from, McQueen must have understood that pictures can be as real as any landscape. Some pictures, including many of those moments when McQueen and a camera became one, will last as long as Yellowstone. "I really zapped you with my look, didn't I?" the young actor once knowingly asked the photographer William Claxton. In the end, this is Steve McQueen's unsentimental legacy.