The New Wave

Spurred by social changes in the mid-'60s, a new generation of directors started exploding the content and pushing the boundaries of American filmmaking. It was a brief golden age that produced some of the most provocative and exciting movies since the heyday of Hollywood.

POOL PARTY: (above) Mike Nichols (left) shooting a scene with Dustin Hoffman floating aimlessly in the family pool in The Graduate (1967). Nichols used womb imagery like this throughout the film to suggest the character didn’t know what to do with his life. (opposite) When Bonnie and Clyde came out in 1967, it was attacked for its bloodiness. Arthur Penn, working with Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway, later said, “You had to be an ostrich with a neck two miles long buried in the sand not to see we were living in a violent time.”
photos: (top) warner bros. inc. and gus productions/mptv.net; (bottom) everett collection; (opposite) ampas

ROOM SERVICE: Alan Pakula (center), with Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland, shooting Klute (1971) on a New York soundstage. The set had a working toilet so Fonda could spend the night there. “Once you’ve set your locations and have your sets designed,” he said, “the look of the picture is locked in.”

working class: Bob Rafelson (right), with Jack Nicholson on an oil rig, didn’t move his camera for any exterior shots in Five Easy Pieces (1970). As a disenchanted child prodigy who passes up a career in music for a blue-collar lifestyle, Nicholson’s character fits right in with the rebellious times.

don’t jump: Elaine May made her directing debut in 1971 with the screwball comedy A New Leaf, shot in Manhattan and Queens. The film was a critical success and Roger Ebert called it “one of the handful movies of our unfunny age.”

room service: Alan Pakula (center), with Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland, shooting Klute (1971) on a New York soundstage. The set had a working toilet so Fonda could spend the night there. “Once you’ve set your locations and have your sets designed,” he said, “the look of the picture is locked in.”

Working class: Bob Rafelson (right), with Jack Nicholson on an oil rig, didn’t move his camera for any exterior shots in Five Easy Pieces (1970). As a disenchanted child prodigy who passes up a career in music for a blue-collar lifestyle, Nicholson’s character fits right in with the rebellious times.

don’t jump: Elaine May made her directing debut in 1971 with the screwball comedy A New Leaf, shot in Manhattan and Queens. The film was a critical success and Roger Ebert called it “one of the handful movies of our unfunny age.”
IN THE HOOD: Martin Scorsese, with Robert De Niro (left) and Harvey Keitel, shot Mean Streets (1973) in a handheld, documentary style, partially because the $350,000 budget didn’t allow for laying down lots of tracks. Half of the budget went for clearances on vintage rock ’n’ roll songs.

STREET SCENE: William Friedkin working with Gene Hackman (center) and Roy Scheider on The French Connection (1971). The famous chase scene was shot in the dead of winter in Brooklyn, where it was sometimes so cold the camera equipment froze and the train wouldn’t start.

OLD SCHOOL: Peter Bogdanovich directs Cybill Shepherd in her screen debut on The Last Picture Show (1971). When Bogdanovich consulted with his friend Orson Welles about the viability of shooting in black and white, Welles reportedly told him, “Of course you’ll shoot it in black and white!”

HAPPY DAYS: George Lucas (center), with Ron Howard, encouraged the actors on American Graffiti (1973) to improvise, adding to the documentary feel. Universal gave him total artistic control and final cut as long as he stayed on budget—$777,777.77. He shot the film in 29 days.

ON THE ROAD: As almost a companion piece to Easy Rider, Francis Coppola’s The Rain People (1969) followed a middle-aged woman as she set out to find self-fulfillment in America. It was partially shot in small towns in West Virginia and Nebraska on an estimated budget of $750,000.

NEW TIMES: Made on a budget of about $340,000 (it made $60 million worldwide), Easy Rider (1969) was one of the first films to target a counter-culture audience and helped ignite the New Hollywood. Dennis Hopper shot on locations including Louisiana, Arizona and Monument Valley.
The Wild Bunch (1969), with an estimated budget of $1.3 million, had 1,400 exploding 10,000 squibs, which the director Billy Wilder considered to be the film's most memorable moment.

The idea of what it's like to be an average film then had 600 cuts, but 3,600 cuts were used in The Wild Bunch, in which the director Sam Peckinpah used 12 films, so of course, we need to start with an action scene.

The futuristic sets and costumes caused the picture to run behind schedule, but the final cost was still only $2 million.

You've only got to say, ‘I've done James Bond,’ and they go practically barmy. All the films I got Academy nominations for, nobody mentions them. But James Bond—that's your entry on a director's resume.

The director knows that while you can bring some of your own ideas to the screen in Dr. No, six actors have played the role in what is now a huge audience that's out there, and you have to deliver certain elements. Those elements include the style of the film, the swagger of Bond, the girls, the one-liners, the gadgets.

What makes the job trickier, says DGA president Michael Apted, looking to the future of an enterprise that has always been a singular entry on a director's resume.