



Cover Story: The Lost Highway

A pulp tale of pop culture, an unknown highway, Death Week and the future of Americana

BY BRAD KING — AUG 16, 2001 2 PM

A storm is brewing along U.S. Route 127, the old, dusty highway that connects the last great small towns in America.

This weekend, a post-apocalyptic scene straight out of *Road Warrior* a movie about the search for community after a nuclear holocaust will unfold in Covington and down through Appalachia. Tens of thousands of cars, trailers and trucks will speed across the highways of America, taking root in nomadic cities across five states.

And the locals are gearing up for a party.

The Cast Iron Man readies his Griswald Skillets. Miles away, the Watermelon Woman prepares to feed the teeming masses who will jam the roads that link hundreds of quiet hamlets.

On Thursday, the 11th annual World's Longest Outdoor Sale a four-day, white-trash hoocha that runs along U.S. Route 127 from Alabama to Northern Kentucky, lapping up alongside Memphis, Tenn. - begins. Conceived as a way to pull visitors off the main thoroughfares that connect the nation, the sale has taken on a life of its own.

No longer confined to Tennessee, as it was when it first began, the 450-mile journey begins in Covington and winds south through 89 counties, before ending in Gadsden, Ala.

"A gentleman who set up along 127 about three years ago said this is the weekend that time forgot," says Pat Stipes, a spokesman with the Kentucky State Parks. "It's like a science fiction movie.

To me, that said everything."

Even Elvis can't avoid the sale — and he's been dead for 24 years. The annual Memphis festival that commemorates the King's life and death runs right up against the event this weekend.

Vehicles packed with personal belongings — ancient pop culture relics from the late 1950s and '60s — are put out to pasture one last time in hopes of bringing in a little money for the family before their wares are donated to the local Goodwill.



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Brad King and Monte McCarter travel the Lost Highway in search of Americana.

This year's event threatens to create its own garage sale materials thanks to the Kristi Morris Band, who will release a CD featuring the event's theme song, aptly titled "Garage Sale." At the annual kickoff party in Jamestown, Tenn., the band will perform the song live.

In Kentucky, the state department of transportation readies its troops for a weekend where 200,000 refugees will clog its roads.

There's no hiding from the mass of humanity descending on the sale, even huddled in a dark corner of the Warhorse Museum Lounge, a biker bar in Gadsden that sits at the very end of the sale itself, 90 minutes south of the Tennessee border.

Gadsden — a town seemingly untouched by the times and temperaments that bring in hundreds of thousands of visitors from near and abroad — is the end of the road, the end of the lost highway. Here, along the back roads of Appalachia, the last vestiges of American mountain culture survive.

The Sale

The world of the Outdoor Sale exists because Mike Walker wanted people to come home.

Before the Pennsylvania Turnpike was built in the 1940s, people traveled across the country using small state routes strung together like a series of spider webs. Tiny hamlets and villages peppered the frontier, littered these backwoods highways.

Small towns survived and thrived because these roads pumped families and truckers and vacationers through Smallville. State routes were the lifeblood of individual communities across the country.

World War II brought all that to a close. The government needed a quick way to transport troops, parts and equipment across the country, and back roads weren't cutting it.

In 1944, Congress passed the first laws that would lead to the development of the interstate highway system that connects major metropolises together. The Dwight D. Eisenhower System of Interstate and Defense Highways wouldn't receive presidential approval for another 12 years, but the writing was on the wall for Small Town, U.S.A.

The end was coming, and coming soon.

Three hundred twenty-nine billion dollars later, Americans are highway drivers. There aren't any reasons to wander off the beaten path into towns located two hours from the nearest highway. Hell, it's downright inconvenient — we've got places to go these days, and we want to get there in a hurry.

In the 45 years the interstate highway system has been operating, the federal government has estimated a cost savings of \$6 for every \$1 spent on the project. More than 125 billion hours of travel time has been saved, the equivalent of about 12 weeks a year for every American.

The free-flowing interstates have allowed people to move out of the crowded cities and into suburbs and outlying areas without geographically restricting their job opportunities. But they've been devastating for small country towns.

So Walker — who now has a law practice in Jamestown — gave people a reason to come back. The first Outdoor Sale took place in 1990 and spanned 200 miles north from Jamestown into Kentucky.

"The interstates were making everything so commercial and leaving all these small times out of the loop," says Miranda Daniels, director of tourism and membership for Fentress County (Tenn.) Chamber of Commerce — the equivalent of being in charge of entertainment on the Titanic. "Mike said, 'Let's bring them through the counties that used to be the major ways so that people could see our folks and our crafts.' "

The initial sale proved a success, although nobody is sure what that means. There's no way to measure the economic impact, since each county along the sale route works independently. There are no accurate visitor or retail sales numbers.

The only measure for success comes around Aug. 16 as hundreds of thousands of people continually return for the event. For a brief moment, Jamestown transforms into a thriving metropolis.

"This sale has helped out our community in so many ways, because all our hotels and bed and breakfasts are booked," Daniels says. "People make reservations a year in advance. Everyone says the vendors don't charge taxes, but all of these people are buying our gas and our food and our hotels."

This year, the city of Jamestown will loop off its town square for an opening party. Bluegrass and Country music will spill out from the center of town, led by the Kristi Morris Band. The local junior and senior high schools will get the day off, and over the next four days the town will celebrate the sale.

"This is huge," Daniels says. "Nobody believes that the high schools and grade schools let out for the sale, but the buses couldn't get through the traffic."

Death Week

Two hundred miles west of Jamestown, tens of thousands of worshippers will gather on the grassy mall sitting across from their temple. It's "Death Week" in Memphis, Tenn. Modern pop culture's 24th birthday.

Some 50,000 people are expected to descend upon the town to celebrate the life — and death — of Elvis Aaron Presley. It's the deep, dark South, and legions of wood-paneled station wagons, El Dorados and pick-up trucks will travel to Dixieland to celebrate the death of the singer.

It's a time of rejoicing and celebration. A time of fire and brimstone. Fear and fury. Sermons on the mount. Contemplation and contempt. Joy and sorrow. Pain and pleasure.

Every year at this time, an aging pop culture resurrects itself under the watchful eyes of the King's minions.

From a distance, the weeklong celebrations in Memphis have little to do with the Outdoor Sale. The yearly ritual overlaps the flea market only by coincidence, yet the two events are linked by a commonality of Appalachian regionalism and the continuing search by mountain people to find their identity in a world that's largely passed them by.

The sale is the perfect celebration of the life of a man who nearly spawned the pop culture trinkets that now scatter the outdoor sale. But there's a greater connection between the sale and the celebration in Memphis that goes beyond simple coincidence.

Forget the fact that people gather from around the world for a candlelight vigil that pays respects to a man who died 24 years ago, before some of the mourners were even born. Forget that for three hours a day, a broadcaster conducts interviews from the King's gravesite. Forget that the vigil and the interviews are then streamed across the Internet so people who couldn't make the event can still watch what's unfolding.

What links these two events together are the people. The people who come to Graceland aren't looking for Elvis — they're looking for companionship, a familiar face they can relate to. They're looking for kin.

It's a yearly celebration of culture for country folk.

"People come to check this out, and then every year they come back because they start to make friends and they hook up here," says Scott Williams, manager of marketing and communications at Elvis Presley Enterprises. "People make friends here. It's a nine-day tailgate party. There's a JumboTron on the lawn that runs Elvis movies for the entire time. There's a tent that has entertainment for nine days. It's a festival."

The vigil has turned so popular, the community so great, that the Elvis.com Web site now nurtures its growth. Along with webcasting the vigil and selected events from the tribute week, Williams says 50,000 people receive his group's semi-regular e-mail newsletter about upcoming events.

That's 50,000 people who receive a newsletter about a dead Rock & Roll singer, and the numbers continue to grow.

Graceland itself gets 700,000 visitors per year. It would be easy to assume that a large chunk of the number would consist of beer drinking, drug-addled lunatics.

That isn't the case. Standing in the ticket line that runs up to the King's home, Williams says the demographic mostly skews toward young families. On a good day, he says, it's not unusual to catch four or five languages bouncing about.

The End of the Road

The search for country culture hasn't always ended in success. Along the Route 127 corridor, the heart of mountain culture, the missteps have been turned into American lore.

The image of the ignorant hillbilly permeates the national mentality from the sodomizing mountain man in *Deliverance* to the more lovable *Simpsons* character Cletus, the slack-jawed yokel. Comedian Jeff Foxworthy built his career on the celebration of the redneck.

There's a certain truth to the myths, and Gadsden, Ala., embodies both the celebration of mountain culture and the mistakes that have been made.

This is the perfect last stop for the sale. This is the end of the road, the final oasis before city life begins.

Gadsden is the cousin who leaves the farm, heads out to a four-year university and never quite finds a way to fit into the ivory towers — yet never regains his connection to the old hometown.

The city has an expanding downtown, a tiny riverfront and a large city point where families can hang out. But this isn't the big city. Not even close.

You'll never meet nicer people. James, a large motorcycle man who runs the Warhorse Museum Lounge, but would rather not give me his last name, pulls me aside to offer some advice on parts of Alabama we might visit.

There's the grandma, sitting among her tables full of memories and memorabilia, who offers an invitation to graphic designer Monte McCarter and me even as we walk by her table with hardly a glance at her wares.

"Now, you all come back," she says cheerfully. "We'll be here again next year in the same place."

A general buzz of excitement and pleasure grips the town. It's a simple life, with simple pleasures and simple rewards. They ask nothing other than an ear, a little conversation and some genuine hospitality.

It's a place of beauty and love that the purveyors of the culture these folks are now selling never truly achieved.

The feeling — one expressed by everyone involved in the Outdoor Sale — is that if you returned in 20 years, the sons and daughters of the folks alongside this road would still be there.

But something is missing at the end of the road.

The age of affirmative action, desegregation and cross-town bussing have missed this part of 127. As our green Ford rumbles through the Alabama night, city limits are recognizable without road signs. The most telling feature comes by the color of the faces in the cars around us.

Black faces mean we're on the outskirts of the towns, maybe 15 or 20 miles from their city limits. White faces mean we're in the city.

The whole procession somehow makes me feel comfortable and at home, surrounded by others who at the very least look just like me. The feelings aren't disturbing until much later, sifting through my notes in the confines of my office, typing under the halogen lamp to the dim buzz of my monitor.

Where Bull Conner failed, where George Wallace failed and where the KKK failed, silently and almost without a clamor, "those" people have been shoved off to the side where the white folk can't find them and where, seemingly, the black folk don't want to be found.

That's no small feat when you consider that nearly a quarter of Alabama's four million residents are black. All along the road, from Kentucky to Alabama, 15 percent of the population just up and disappeared. A final message from both sides: Gone, and good riddance.

Postscript: Americana

Times are changing along U.S. Route 127.

It's unfair to leave the last impression of the Outdoor Sale as the legacy of a culture split along racial lines. The event is about more than just flea markets and Elvis.

The biggest problem looming over the sale isn't race relations or cultural stereotypes — those can change only with time and effort. But the almighty dollar that first lured people to America's highway systems have now started to encroach on the sale.

The success of the Coen brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and the subsequent success of its soundtrack, which has sold more than two million copies and is the year's 15th best-selling album, has spurred a renaissance of hillbilly culture.

Nowadays, the Watermelon Woman and the Cast Iron Man have new neighbors.

Vendors are becoming just that: vendors. Corporations and home-spun businesses now set up shop next to the grandma stands with watermelons and Dodge Darts crammed with paperback books.

In Tennessee, Avon sets up roving tables with makeup products. Craft makers now prepare all year for the sale, producing handmade dolls and quilts.

Americana is going mainstream. The sale seems to be on track to mirror the very high-speed mentality that Walker hoped to avoid when he originally conceived the event.

"I saw fewer baseball cards and lamps and a whole lot more handcrafted items," says the Kentucky State Parks' Stipes. "It's a hell of an opportunity for the hand crafters in Kentucky to put some of things that they have made, their merchandise, to get out into the public eye. A lot of the craft people set up and consider themselves store fronts, and now there are high end antiques."

The enduring part of the sale — what ultimately brings people back every year — is the spirit that embodies Appalachia, the spirit that's been lost in the big cities that the highway system helped build.

The saving grace for this part of the country is the spirit that survives along the country back roads connecting small-town America. The spirit that allows people to drag out their old bicycles and Elvis lamps and set up a table alongside a two-lane highway.

Along U.S. Route 127, the people have a need for each other, and not because they want to sell their old books. In this world, "neighbor" means more than the person living next door. Here, in the burned-out ruins of a time that's passed by, people are the most important commodity.

"You would think this would have petered out because of online auctions and all that," Stipes says. "But I think it's thrived because of that. Here, you get a handshake and you have a chance to talk to people to get the story behind the cookie jar you're buying.

"I saw people writing out on index card, a faux-authenticity card, for what they were selling. I saw a guy sell a unique piece of pottery, and he wrote out a little history along with his phone number and address."

WORLD'S LONGEST OUTDOOR SALE WHEN: Thursday-Sunday, 7 a.m.-6 p.m. WHERE: All along U.S. Route 127 from Covington to Gadsden, Ala., covering 450 miles and 89 counties in three states; the Covington event begins at MainStrasse Village CONTACT: Information on the sale is available from the MainStrasse Village folks at [859-491-0458](tel:859-491-0458)

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