

Many years ago, Peter Fonda gleaned some wisdom from a colleague of his movie-star dad, Henry Fonda.

“At 14,” the younger Fonda recalled, “I heard Gary Cooper say, ‘If I know what I’m doing, I don’t have to act.’”

“I’ve never forgotten that.”

Fonda became a movie star in his own right, and applied this know-your-character philosophy to his best remembered role of Wyatt, the laid-back biker in the American-flag getup in “Easy Rider” (1969).

“I wrote it and I talked it over with people. By the time it came for us to film it, I knew everything about this character,” New York City native Fonda (born 1940) told me in 2013.

“It was the first time I realized that it’s better when you *don’t* act. Wow! It’s so easy to do if you know the character.”

Fonda used another acting technique — internalization — in observing “Easy Rider” director/co-star Dennis Hopper in action. (The two sometimes clashed during filming, and by all accounts, Hopper could occasionally be something of a manic, especially during “trial” filming in New Orleans.)

“We shot the stuff at Mardi Gras first,” Fonda recalled, “then we came back and finished the script, so we could break it down and make a schedule. It’s just what happens.

“During that time, I realized this is going to be a lot of fun. And I was thinking, ‘Gee, Dennis is being an a**hole.’ But I kept that for myself. I took that as an actor, and wore an enigmatic look on my face, being that person on that bike.”

It was a lot of fun for Fonda, but filming “Easy Rider” was not without its downsides. Like their characters, Fonda and Hopper were occasionally hassled by “hawks” along the way. There were some physical side effects as well.

“On the first day of riding, we shot while crossing the Colorado River,” Fonda recalled. “We rode 55 miles from Kingman (Arizona) to Needles (California). Dennis was all into different lenses and camera angles and stuff, which is kinda cool, but it can be overdone. Every time we’d do a (riding) scene, we’d go back and he’d change the lens size and do different camera angles. We must have crossed that bridge a dozen times.

“It had been a long day, and it was hot on the road. I just wanted to get in the (hotel) pool with the crew. I peeled off my leathers, and my legs were purple from the leather dye! I thought, ‘I’m skinny enough. I don’t wanna go down to that pool with purple legs.’”

Instead, Fonda put on jeans and repaired to the hotel bar.

He recalled: “I said, ‘I want the coldest, tallest beer you got.’ They weren’t quite sure who I was, but they put this tall, frosty stein full of beer in front of me.

“I slapped down my money. I’m left-handed, so I picked up the stein with my left hand, but I could not move it to my mouth. Then I picked it up with my right hand, and I still could not move it to my face.”

Thankfully, this too was a temporary condition. Fonda concluded that it resulted from a day of slow riding while holding his arms high to accommodate the chopper.

“All day, I had been riding at 25 miles per hour with soft tires, so the camera could focus on the background going by,” Fonda said. “Otherwise, it would just be a blur. That’s the trick. Nobody’s ever commented on that, and you can imagine how many questions I’ve been asked about the film.

“But I had no idea what would happen to my arms. I was confident about the character, but not about my arms holding down that bloody bike.”

After the film wrapped, Fonda and Hopper realized they needed to shoot one more sequence, a campfire scene that sets up the climax. Hopper had a lot of dialogue for Fonda, which Fonda basically boiled down to three words — again, in the interest of keeping his character enigmatic.

“I knew the strongest line in ‘Easy Rider,’” Fonda said. “In ‘Easy Rider,’ it was: ‘We blew it.’ No matter what else was said, ‘We blew it’ was the stunner. That was the real bag that captured everyone with, ‘What?’ and left them without an answer.”



Fonda as Wyatt