

# Wheels fall off the American Flyers

**American Flyers**  
Warner Bros.  
Varscona

review by John Charles

The title song to *American Flyers* contains the line, "Gotta feeling comin' up inside of me," and by the movie's end you know how the singer feels. He's talking about an uprush of joy, but I'm talking about the dry heaves, and *American Flyers* brings on a violent attack.

The credit sequence is devastatingly accurate in predicting the confusion of this painfully bad Hollywood flick.

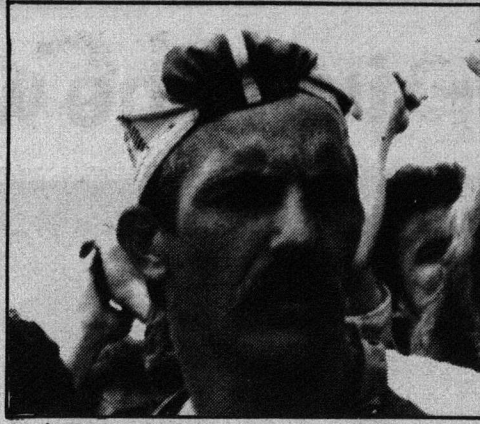
A steamboat on the Mississippi is the first shot, which evokes an old-fashioned Americana feeling. Then we cut to our hero David Sommers (David Grant) on his bike, whizzing past St. Louis landmarks: the Arch, McDonald's, and a huge American flag.

What does all this have to do with a story of family tensions, reconciliation, and a Colorado bike race? Nothing really, except for the movie's fuzzily patriotic idea that there's something deeply American about the idea of winning — as if they'd invented it.

Steve Tesich wrote the screenplay — the same guy that won an Oscar for *Breaking Away*, (1979), that likeable, low-keyed bicycle movie. Tesich seemed to have a good sense for the natural humor inside people in those days, and though, I found the concern for winning marred the final scenes — the movie's concern, not the hero's — it was a good film. That was the same period as *Rocky*, *Chariots of Fire* and other films which suggested that winning one specific event was somehow the answer to life — a slightly simplistic view which nevertheless strongly appealed to millions of people.

Tesich also wrote the flawed but powerful script for Arthur Penn's *Four Friends* (1981), which is a much more personal and risky work, and Tesich's best shot so far.

Now Tesich's written what looks like a Pepsi commercial parody of *Breaking Away*, in which everything's bigger, phonier, and



Kevin Costner

more manipulative.

The Sommers family is riddled with angst and guilt. Mr. Sommers died of an aneurism in the brain, and his wife (Janice Rule) fell apart and couldn't bear to be with him. Marcus (Kevin Costner), the oldest son, now an M.D., can't forgive Mon, and the younger brother David can't forgive Marcus for being so unforgiving.

David reluctantly joins his brother at U. of Wisconsin to get a complete physical, since Mom fears David's listless condition means he's prey to Dad's dread condition. When Marcus suggests they enter Colorado's grueling three-day bicycle competition "Hell of the West" he accepts, since the brothers are learning to get along, and David has overheard something which makes him think he's dying and this is his "last chance."

By movie's end all the Sommers' problems — except for mortality — are solved, because of David's rigorous application to winning the race, which makes the victory movies of five years ago seem ruthlessly realistic in comparison.

*American Flyers* starts off so intensely that it quickly becomes absurd, and one scene, in which the brothers squabble so cruelly that David's blind date bursts into tears, had the entire audience in stitches because it was so miscalculated in effect.

The movie is about working hard to

achieve your goals, yet it's all done so easily. The script obligingly fixes David up with a girlfriend (Alexandra Paul) through no effort of his: Marcus has Rae Dawn Chong, so David ought to have someone. The movie stops dead while this gets set up — then the two couples finish the story.

We're supposed to believe that David beats Soviet champs, U.S. Olympic teams and everyone else just because he wants to vindicate Marcus: brotherly love is more important than training. But the movie's glossy examination of the race (50 minutes of this 114-minute flick) is too detailed to let us believe David is really doing it.

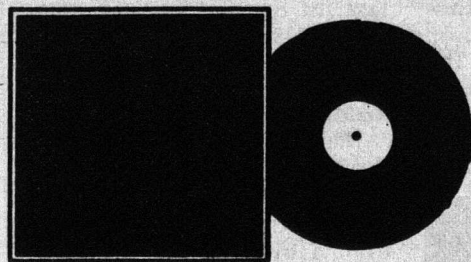
If you're interested in bicycle races the footage is probably worth seeing, with lots of helicopter shots highlighting the Rockies' striking beauty. But as 'drama it's boring because the crises are obvious and predictable. When Marcus has a flat tire, Chong is inches behind him in a truck, and leaps out

to change tires in 60 seconds. But on the final day, when David's on his own, Rae Dawn and Co. whisk off ahead to the finish line, which seems pretty dumb and unlikely.

This is a kind of up-front movie in which the brothers finally get the courage to look each other in the eye and say "I love you." Such emotional nakedness could be moving, but in this film it's totally unearned. It's just the most mawkish example of Tesich trying to grab the Big Moments without creating the little scenes that lead up to them.

If the acting is insufferable, the script is partly to blame. Costner was so much fun as Scott Glenn's raucous kid brother is Silverado. Here he's a shallow, narcissistic pill, and Grant is not much better. Chong is OK in one of those "I'm here if you need me" roles, but the acting honors — and the viewer's heart — are carried off by Doi Johnson, as the couch-potato son of a black sports medicine prof, who hates sports.

## X's latest is predictable



**ROUNDOABOUT**

by Nate LaRoi

X  
*Ain't Love Grand*  
\*\*\*½

"We're locked out of the public eye/Some smooth chords/On the car radio/No hard chords/On the car radio"

—X, "The Unheard Music", 1980

In the beginning, there was this terrific punk band called X who were offered Y amount of money to record for major label Z. This of course was the beginning of the end, but with *Under The Big Black Sun* and *More Fun In The New World*, X achieved a beautiful transition: the music was accessible, even exhilarating, without sacrificing the war-torn integrity of *Los Angeles* and *Wild Gift*. Unfortunately, while each successive album has done a little better than its immediate predecessor, X have yet to sell more than, say, 200 thousand copies of any one record. To WEA Records, the General Motors of the industry, that's very small time, so with "commercialization phase II", X have been drawn into further and more drastic compromises.

Produced by German heavy-metal technician Michael Wagener, *Ain't Love Grand* is daringly commercial, a radical departure from albums one through four, all produced by ex-Doors keyboardist Ray Manzarek. Chalk full of fuzzed-out power chords, laced with industrial-strength drum crashes, *Ain't Love Grand* dramatically streamlines the X approach, reducing its scope (what no punk-ably country western?) in order to meet the

formal requirement of AOR "rock radio".

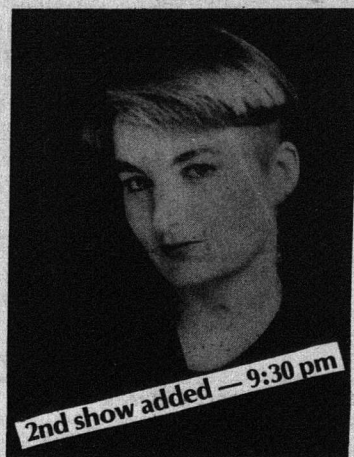
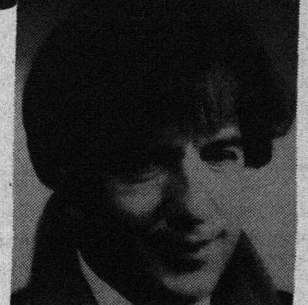

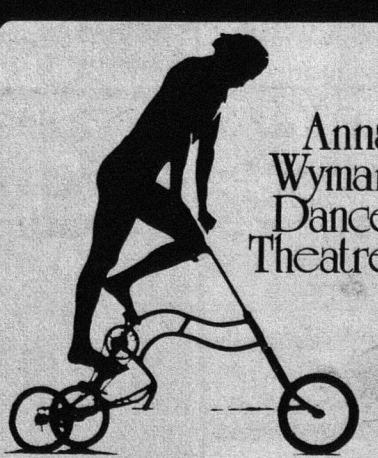
In "Burning House of Love", X come on strong with a bigger, fatter sound, all slicked-up and presentable, right down to the sleek synthesizers, the smooth vocal harmonies. Pruned down to a sensible two and a half minutes, it might have been a super 7" single, maybe even a classic: the riff, the passion, the imagery, it's all there. But X dwell upon the chorus, stick with it, repeat it over and over, as if the listener needed to be hit over the head. In the end, it's too obvious, too transparent in its intentions, as much so as '84's "Wild Thing".

Guitarist Billy Zoom, with his freewheeling solos, is made to order for radio land, but John Doe and Exene Cervenka ain't exactly pop singers just yet (for a brief stretch in "Love Shack" and again in "Supercharged" X sounds like bad Go-Go's).

It would be easy to blame everything on the production, but in fact the new songs are bitter and cynical (love as black snakes in the red roses!?!), artlessly direct, enormously simplified, with few chord changes: the perfectly conventional verse/chorus structure of Ronnie Lane's "All or Nothing" fits right in. The hooks are here, the songs stick in your head (and then when you least expect it, a turn of phrases, a snatch of melody, will make itself known, as if by spontaneous combustion). But even the best compositions ("What's Wrong with Me", "I'll Stand Up for You", "Burning House of Love") are like a roller-coaster love affair: the highs are very high and the lows are very low.

Nothing even comes close to the peaks of *Wild Gift* or *More Fun in the New World* or even to "Someone Like You" from X's folk and country album (recorded with Blasters guitarist Dave Alvin and released as "the Knitters"). X has never sounded so formulaized, so predictable, so tired, so used-up, as on *Ain't Love Grand*: it's all heart and no art, it's *Foreigner 4* when it should have been *Zeppelin II*. X are one of the great bands of the 80's, but *Ain't Love Grand* makes you wonder why.

\*\*\*\*\*=excellent; \*\*\*\*=very good; \*\*\*=good; \*\*=fair; \*=poor

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