

Born to Run

Roll down your windows, crank up the radio, sit back and enjoy the ride as we take to the open road

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Photograph courtesy Magnum Photos

From Bruce Springsteen's broken heroes looking for their last-chance power drive in *Born to Run* (1975), to Jack Kerouac's restless Beat Generation seeking salvation in *On the Road* (1957), in the mythology of the great American highway, all paths lead to freedom.

Historically and fictionally, the Great American Road Trip symbolises man's quest to explore, to journey into the unknown. Long-distance driving gives you the space to experience the vast expanse of America's heartland. With endless vistas and unbroken horizons, it's just you and your thoughts on a highway of possibility – the wind in your hair, the sun on your face, and the thrum of the engine under your feet.

With no track to follow or schedule to keep, the lure of the open road has been paved with promises of adventure, risk and reward since the poet Walt Whitman first paid tribute to his country's unique infrastructure in 1856. When he wrote *Song of the Open Road*, there were no highways or cars to navigate, much less hitchhikers, gas stations, roadside diners or motels. What interested Whitman was the idea of the journey as the destination: 'Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road / Healthy, free, the world before me / The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose,' he wrote.

The poem inspired Kerouac's heroes, who were said to be chasing down Whitman's path – looking to rediscover that sense of excitement, adventure and freedom on their trip. They had 'embarked on a tremendous journey through post-Whitman America to find that America', wrote Kerouac in *Selected Letters: 1957-1969*.

Post-Whitman, the road trip gained traction, giving way to a nation on the move. A relatively modern phenomenon, the first American cross-country car journey was completed in 1903 by two men... and a dog. Driving a cherry red

two-seat, two-cylinder, 20-horsepower Winton touring car, Doctor Horatio Nelson Jackson enlisted a mechanic, Sewall K. Crocker, to accompany him on his record-breaking road trip, bringing a stray bulldog, Bud, along for the ride.

The unlikely trio traversed San Francisco to New York with less than 150 miles of paved road under their tyres. They were looking to collect a \$50 bet that it would take them three months to reach their destination – it took them 63 days. The stunt made both the threesome and the Great American Road Trip famous, inspiring a new generation of drivers to get behind the wheel, and giving novelists, musicians, filmmakers and artists licence to romanticise what could otherwise have been another long, boring drive.

Perhaps the most famous of destinations for riders and writers alike is Route 66. Immortalised in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the author was the first to give the highway its affectionate moniker – 'the Mother Road'. With a supporting role in too many movies to mention, Route 66 is synonymous with Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda hitting the road on their Harleys in *Easy Rider* (1969),

or Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis racing their 1966 Ford Thunderbird down the highway in *Thelma & Louise* (1991). Decommissioned in 1985, it remains very much alive in popular culture, cemented by the Rolling Stones, Nat King Cole and Depeche Mode, who have all recorded their own versions of Bobby Troup's tribute to the Mother Road, singing, 'Well if you ever plan to motor west / Travel my way / Take the highway that's the best / Get your kicks on Route 66.'

Far from being a part of America's nostalgic past, the road trip continues to inspire today. Last year, the actor and performance artist Shia LaBeouf set out on his own version of the Great American Road Trip, inviting members of the public to join him on his journey. Tweeting his co-ordinates with the hashtag #TAKEMEANYWHERE, he documented the places and the people he encountered along the way.

Out on the road for a month, he was headed for destination nowhere. His 21st-century approach of allowing the public to track him on his travels might be at odds with the open road's promise of untethered freedom, but his goal of 'making friends' and 'finding meaning' makes him – and the others who took part – true road trippers. ■