HIGH SCHOOL HIGHS

FORTY YEARS ON, CAMERON CROWE AND AMY HECKERLING FLASH BACK TO
FAST TIMES AT RIDGEMONT HIGH...
THE FILM THAT BROKE ALL THE RULES, LAUNCHED A CONSTELLATION
OF MOVIE STARS, AND CREATED A WHOLE NEW GENRE

Words Adam Smith Illustration Jacey







Left: Carrots ahoy! Stacy Hamilton (Jennifer Jason Leigh) and Linda Barrett (Phoebe Cates). **Below left, from top:** Leigh with director Amy Heckerling; Writer Cameron Crowe, actor Nancy Wilson and producer Art Linson; Heckerling and Reinhold confer.

IT IS THE early autumn of 1978, Clairemont High School, San Diego, and the first day of the new school year is getting underway. In the parking lot, kids gather next to the smattering of cars paid for with the proceeds of tedious summer jobs. At the food court, last year's tribes re-establish their old territories or try to mark fresh ones. And then there are the new kids, wandering the halls, clutching schedules and notebooks, scoping the social topography while trying all the while to melt into the background.

Among them is Dave Cameron. He's clad in the standard SoCal high-school student uniform of the era: carefully curated T-shirt, jeans, standard-issue footwear — Kickers or Keds. He's a typical kid: quietly spoken, with a soft, oval face and watchful, sympathetic eyes over which his wavy, brown hair occasionally flops.

As the weeks pass he'll become part of the background, woven firmly into the strange, everyday tapestry of high-school life. He's there that time some kid orders a pizza to be delivered to history class; he gossips with the rest of them about the girl who accidentally got pregnant and had to get an abortion; he's a witness to that time one kid *totally loses it* and yells, "You dick!" at a teacher.

And then the school year which has seemed, as they all do, to be endless, is suddenly over. The tribes disband and head to college or work or, for the unlucky few who have failed to graduate, a dismal repeat of the year just passed.

But Dave Cameron, who is not, in fact, 17 years old, but 22, doesn't need a job. He already has one. He clears away the magazines he has subscribed to, their mail wrappers bearing the name Dave Cameron, part of his artfully constructed cover, and sits down in front of his typewriter.

"Stacy Hamilton lay under the covers, still fully dressed, and stared at the ceiling," he writes. "Somewhere in the course of a long and uneventful summer she had come to an important decision. There was no way she was going to start senior high school still a virgin."

Later, on the title page, he types: "Fast Times At Ridgemont High. By Cameron Crowe."

BY THE TIME he began his strange second journey into American high-school life — an odyssey that would birth a movie genre, launch a brace of directorial careers and introduce half a dozen new stars to the Hollywood firmament — Cameron Crowe already had behind him one of the most unusual careers in pop-journalism history. Something of a wunderkind who had skipped multiple school grades, he had graduated early, at the age of 15. Early writing gigs had included rock mags *Creem* and *Circus* before he fell in with legendary writer Lester Bangs and started a career at *Rolling Stone* that saw him interviewing Dylan, Bowie and Clapton while still a teenager. But by the time he hit his early twenties, the majesty of rock was slowly being replaced in his mind by another, even more fascinating subject: people.



Above: A blond-bewigged Sean Penn takes centre stage as surfer Jeff Spicoli. **Right:** Judge Reinhold and Scott Thomson as fast-food workers Brad Hamilton and the surname-free Arnold.







"I had really started to feel the creative call of doing things beyond just rock profiles," Crowe tells *Empire* on a late-night call. "Every once in a while I'd begun to interview fans, and these conversations had been so fun. I remember thinking I was really interested in this guy who told me all about his car and how he had to pay for gas, but how he was the biggest Led Zeppelin fan and paying for gas would have stopped him going [to a gig]. I started to love telling those kinds of stories. I was suddenly just searching for characters."

When, in 1977, *Rolling Stone* moved offices to New York, Crowe stayed in California and continued to freelance for the magazine. But, at some deep level, he was perhaps beginning to mourn the loss of the high-school life he had never really experienced. "I felt like I wanted to look through a window at what my senior year might have been," he recalls. "So *Fast Times* started out as an article idea for *Rolling Stone*, but then a book agent got involved and the result was that I took some time off to write long-form, and in a style that I still use today."

Miraculously, Crowe persuaded the principal of Claremont High, near to his San Diego home, to let him attend the school as a senior. Only half a dozen teachers would know of the plan, or who he really was, and none of the students. "It helped both that my mom was a teacher and the principal was a Kris Kristofferson fan," he smiles. "And I was able to tell him, 'Well, you know, I've interviewed Kris.'"

But the idea that the book might be adapted for the big screen never occurred to him. "I had no idea it could possibly be a film," he says. "For a start, people told me that kids don't go and see movies about kids. It was a nostalgic thing for adults to do a high-school story. And it's a very episodic book. It's kind of snapshots of these people, and their sense of yearning, really. But then *Animal House* came out and kind of changed things because it proved that there *was* a young audience."

Over at Universal Studios, a young producer called Art Linson had watched the success of *Animal House* and began to think the same thing.

"I knew Cameron because he had done an article about *American Hot Wax*," Linson, who would go on to produce *The Untouchables* and *Fight Club*, tells *Empire*. "We continued to talk once in a while. Then he said he's writing this book about high school. I got hold of it and you didn't have to be a terrific producer to realise that, 'God, this is amazing.' He'd unlocked this authenticity. It was really audacious. I'd done a couple of movies for Universal and I took it to [Universal head] Ned Tanen. I don't know if he ever read it. He was just, 'Yeah, yeah, we've done a car-wash movie, let's do a high-school movie.' If he'd really read the book, I don't think he would have done it."

Crowe's book did indeed contain explicit depictions of subject matter that 'youth movies' had traditionally steered clear of. Concerned that Hollywood might de-fang his story, and run scared from the frank treatment of adolescent sex and abortion, Crowe was relieved when Linson urged him to preserve the book's picaresque, authentic tone. "The whole thing felt like a big gamble," he says. "The huge decision from Art, and then [director] Amy Heckerling, was not to make this into a sexploitation comedy. We did kind of sneak our movie through on the gust of wind from *Animal House*. But Amy gave it its personality. It's quietly humorous, sarcastic and soulful. What she brought to it was so much heart."

For Heckerling, Linson's eventual call couldn't have come at a better time. The then 27-year-old had just seen her debut feature put into turnaround, then bought, then cancelled because of an actors' strike. "I was trying to be an up-and-coming producer, she was trying to be an up-and-coming director," Linson says. "I called her, she's got this Brooklyn accent, and she says, 'Well, I'll do it, but I don't know anything about *soiyfers*.' And that's ironic, because it was a surfer who saved our bacon."

JEFF SPICOLI, THE lank-haired, permanently stoned surfer, was the key to the movie, and Linson, Heckerling and Crowe all knew it. Casting had been a drawn-out process, mainly because of the plethora of young talent that the movie had to draw on. "There just didn't seem to be many good parts for young actors back then," remembers Crowe. "The blood just rushed to ›







Left: Teacher Mr Hand (Ray Walston) with Spicoli. **Below, from top:** Horsing around between takes; Leigh and Heckerling; And with Cates on set.

any movie where there were good parts for young people. I think we looked at everybody apart from Matthew Broderick." (In fact, Broderick did audition, as did Ralph Macchio, Carrie Fisher, Ally Sheedy and Michelle Pfeiffer.)

The result was a movie that became an incubator for Hollywood's aristocracy of the 1980s and beyond: Phoebe Cates, Anthony Edwards, Nicolas Cage, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Forest Whitaker, Judge Reinhold and Eric Stoltz either made their film debuts or took early roles on *Fast Times*. (Cage, then acting under his family name Coppola, later reported having a miserable time on set. "I was surrounded by actors, whose names I won't mention, who were not very open to the idea of a guy named 'Coppola' being an actor," he said, also recalling the kids gathering around his trailer and loudly reciting lines from *Apocalypse Now*. Months later he changed his name to Cage.)

But Spicoli was a problem. Nobody seemed to be quite able to nail the amiable stoner. "A Ridgemont legend since third grade," as Crowe had described him, "his long, dirty-blond hair was parted exactly in the middle. He spoke thickly, like molasses pouring from a jar."

"Cameron and Art had a very strong vision of him, and they knew that his character was really going to emerge from the movie," Heckerling remembers. "Art originally described the movie to me as being 'ten girls and Spicoli, who will be stoned'."

"Sean Penn had done this movie called *Taps* for Harold Becker which hadn't been released yet," says Linson. "He was with Timothy Hutton and Tom Cruise and the word was the kids were really great. So we went to the editing room and saw a cut. And he *was* very good. But he had this military buzz-cut. We couldn't quite see it."

Penn subsequently wigged-up and auditioned, but the first impressions weren't promising. "He was awful, just godawful," casting director Don Phillips later said. "He gave us no sense of the stoner image whatsoever." Linson and Heckerling politely kicked him out of the room. But Phillips, convinced Penn was the man for the job, turned him around and brought him right back in for a second run at it. This time Penn pulled his T-shirt over his head and half rapped the scene. "He was brilliant," remembers Linson. "We were very lucky. I mean, you can do this 20 times and Sean Penn doesn't walk in the door. At least we were smart enough to say, 'Yeah, you're hired.'"

The shoot was fast and, for a first feature, efficient. Heckerling and Crowe had relocated much of the action to the Sherman Oaks Galleria mall, where filming happened mostly at night. "It was a blast," remembers Heckerling. "Even today I can see and smell those fast-food places at the mall. I kind of wish I was [still] running around with my second AD, picking extras to be in a scene. I remember how the cast were such babies. When you're doing what you love and working with wonderful people, there's nothing better."

The good mood wouldn't last. A few weeks after Heckerling wrapped, Universal finally viewed the film they had paid for. And when the lights went up, the news wasn't so much bad as catastrophic.

They hated it.



Above: The wrecked Chevrolet Camaro of star football player Charles Jefferson (Forest Whitaker). **Right:** Brad's buds, played by Michael Wyle and Nicolas Cage — then Nicolas Coppola.

Alamy; Criterion Collection; MPTV







"IT WAS WORSE than when Fincher and I showed *Fight Club* to Fox," recalls Linson. "It was *repulsive* to them. I kept thinking, 'Did nobody fucking read this?' There's nothing in the movie that isn't on the fucking page. But they just decided to minimise their risk and hope the stench finally went away."

The studio's objections to the film were difficult to quantify and mostly impossible to fix. A brief shot of Robert Romanus' penis during the film's awkward sex scene, included in the name of genital equality by Heckerling, was swiftly cropped out. But the real problem was the tone, the honesty and pointed absence of adult lecturing — of neat *consequences* — that was Crowe's book's strength. "The outrage was crazy," remembers Linson.

"There was this memo that went up the studio chain saying that the movie was near-porno and if they released it, it was going to wreck the studio," says Crowe. Heckerling, meanwhile, remembers them screening the film in the most conservative areas of California. "We got these cards that said 'really pissed me off' and 'how dare you!'" she says. The studio responded by cancelling the entire East Coast release, pulling all advertising and limiting the West Coast rollout to 200 theatres.

"There were no TV ads. I think we had flyers on building sites like we were some underground band," says Heckerling.

But slowly, *Fast Times* found its audience — kids who had never seen their lives rendered so sympathetically on the big screen began to flock to the movie. "The weird thing was that now it was a successful movie, but Universal were still kind of disgusted by it," says Linson. "The fact is that Cameron had done a brilliant job. He captured the essence of what a high-school experience was like so perfectly, people are still watching it. I don't know anyone who hasn't seen *Fast Times*."

In the decades that followed, it wasn't in the cottage industry of teen movies that sprung up post-*Ridgemont* that the film's oddly enduring influence has been most powerfully felt. *Fast Times*' DNA snakes through modern film in stranger, more unexpected ways. There's Spicoli, for a start. Bill and Ted, *Lebowski*'s The Dude, Brad Pitt mumbling from a couch in *True Romance*. All unimaginable without Penn's *echt*-stoner. Echoes of its unique tone — funny, human, young, real — are unmistakably there in Richard Linklater's loose, joyful comedies and romances. They ripple through Paul Thomas Anderson's Valley movies, nodded to most recently, and obviously, in *Licorice Pizza*. Even *Stranger Things* paid tribute in its most recent season, through numerous references ("Do you know who pauses *Fast Times* at 53 minutes, five seconds?" asked Joe Keery's Steve. "People who like boobies, Robin! BOOBIES!")

Long-time Crowe disciple Judd Apatow is one among the host of contemporary directors for whom the film acted as a lodestar. "I first saw it when I was in high school," Apatow tells *Empire*. "We all went nuts. It felt like someone made a movie about *us*. It was the first time I realised that you could make a movie with both a deeply emotional, credible storyline and also include riotous comedy about the madness of growing up."

For Apatow, it's that crackling live third rail — the sense of teen lives lived, as opposed to recreated, *packaged* — that gives it its unexpected power. "It's so much more than a comedy. It captured life," he says. "When we made movies like *Knocked Up* and *Superbad*, we were trying to catch that spirit. I thought about this film the entire time we made *Freaks And Geeks*. I always say I have spent my entire career copying Cameron Crowe. I have never gotten close and I still have done okay. That's how good he is. You can be half as good as he is and still have a career."

Rewatching *Fast Times At Ridgemont High* today, it remains thrilling to witness how it still connects more than almost any other movie about being young. Even now, with the malls closed and teenage life, like almost everything else, having migrated online, it thrums with a realism, a truthfulness, that reaches back 40 years to Dave Cameron wandering the hallways and classrooms of Clairemont High in the fall of '78.

Where the kids, it turns out, were alright.

***FAST TIMES AT RIDGEMONT HIGH* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**