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**TOUGH ACT TO FOLLOW**  
Throughout her career, director Andrea Arnold (left) has shown a facility for drawing acute, emotionally vivid performances from the non-professional actors she often works with, and Sasha Lane in *American Honey* (right) is no exception

# WANDERING STAR

After a trio of distinctly British features, Andrea Arnold's *'American Honey'* takes a road trip into the poverty-stricken hinterlands of the US Midwest, following the hard-partying adventures of a young woman who joins a crew of door-to-door magazine subscription sellers

By Simran Hans

There is an early scene in Emma Cline's 2016 novel *The Girls* that sees a grubby-looking gang of teenage girls dive into a dumpster and retrieve a plastic-wrapped chicken that has "a grotesque, foetal quality". In the opening scene of Andrea Arnold's new film *American Honey*, teenage runaway Star (Sasha Lane) also salvages a shrink-wrapped chicken, the viscera of trash squelching audibly beneath her feet. A small boy later attacks the placenta-like plastic sack, stabbing at the chicken's bloody bag with a fork. Though Cline's novel and Arnold's film explore different periods, they share a fascination with the American poor and the found families that are forged outside the structures of traditional society. These are two takes on the no man's land at the fringes of American life, stuck together with sex and sweat and dirt.

From the concrete council estates in *Wasp* (2003), *Red Road* (2006) and *Fish Tank* (2009) to the rolling Yorkshire moors of *Wuthering Heights* (2010), Arnold's filmography is distinctly British. *American Honey* traverses decidedly different geographical terrain, playing out as a cross-country road trip across the poorest pock-

ets of the United States. The plot is loose: during a trip to Walmart, with two young children trailing alongside her, 18-year-old Star locks eyes with boyish, rat-tailed ruffian Jake (Shia LaBeouf). He offers her a job with his 'mag crew', promising that peddling magazine subscriptions door to door by day means partying in motel car parks by night. So she dumps her charges with their mother and hops into Jake's truck, ready for an adventure. Circling themes of existential isolation, social mobility and the powerful pull of sex, it doesn't stray too far from the themes that have always interested Arnold. In scale, however, *American Honey* is an entirely different beast. It is the director's take on the American epic; a long, hot car journey with the music blaring and the windows rolled down.

When I meet Arnold to discuss *American Honey*, it's a sunny August afternoon in central London. I'm her first interviewer of the day, and of this press tour – she admits sheepishly that she's "not done this in a while". In the plush hotel room there are two armchairs and a loveseat, but Arnold chooses to perch on the



◀ windowsill, inviting me to sit beside her. It's an intimate, levelling gesture that hints at one of the reasons for her seemingly magical ability to coax piercingly precise performances from the non-professional actors she often works with. From the jaded belligerence of Katie Jarvis's Mia in *Fish Tank* to Solomon Glave's wrenching, wordless turn as the young Heathcliff in her wind-burned adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, Arnold has a gift for teasing out emotion on screen. In *American Honey*, she coaxes a striking performance from newcomer Sasha Lane as the tough, flirtatious Star, whose mix of vulnerability and spikiness feels genuinely lived in.

Lane was a late addition to the cast – Arnold recalls noticing her on a beach in Panama during spring break, just two weeks before production. “I remember seeing her – I'm not allowed to tell you what she was doing when I saw her – and then she walked off. She stood out.”

Arnold describes Lane as “careful but open” on first meeting – and justifiably so. “The thing about spring break is that there's an awful lot of people preying on the girls down there,” she explains. “There's a lot of people with cameras wanting girls for porn films and things, so they're pretty suspicious of you when you go up to them.” The character Lane plays is similarly careful but open, with a steely intelligence underlining her seemingly reckless decisions. “Yeah, there's a lot of her getting in cars with men, wasn't there?” Arnold says, laughing. “I didn't even know I was doing that. I didn't even realise.”

One scene in *American Honey* sees Star jump in a car with a group of older men, who invite her back to their luxurious villa for some mezcal. In Arnold's films, danger is relative, given the nothing-to-lose situations her characters often find themselves in – and strangers are never quite who they seem to be. Whereas a lorry driver offers fatherly tenderness, a handsome oilfield worker is less trustworthy; Arnold continually rouses the viewer's curiosity and challenges their comfort threshold with Star's seedy encounters, though the ball always remains in her female lead's court. One wonders if the universe is protecting Star, or if she is simply capable of handling herself. Either way, Arnold dares the viewer to trust Star's instincts, even when the laws of logic advise the opposite.

For the character of Star, it was important for Arnold to cast somebody who could carry the film without the baggage of extreme privilege and wealth. “You have to be incredibly rich to go to college in America, for the most part, so a lot of the teenagers on the beach were not from the sort of demographic I was looking for,” she explains.

With their attention to sometimes sordid detail, Arnold's gritty depictions of contemporary working class lives have earned comparisons with the youth films of Larry Clark and Harmony Korine. Of Korine's filmography, *Spring Breakers* (2012), his neon tableau of hedonistic teenagers and their pilgrimage to the Dirty South, is perhaps *American Honey*'s closest cousin. However, while *Spring Breakers* plunged its middle-class college kids into an underworld of decadence and corrupt cash, watching with complicity as they performed salacious fantasies, *American Honey* searches for something more authentic. Arnold's ragtag mag crew drinks, smokes, dances and fucks, but not because anyone is watching. Her teenagers simply do as teenagers do.

Inspired by a true story she read in the *New York Times*, she describes being struck by their world and “the idea

that these kids coming from these fairly difficult backgrounds made their own families, and found their own way of living their lives”. Yet, like all of Arnold's female characters, Star is too much of a loner to ever fold comfortably into her new family. She tries on the mag crew identity, but Arnold never gives the sense that it's a cosy fit. When I point out that none of her female characters seem to have same-sex companions, she's adamant that the loneliness of being a woman sans sisterhood is not something she tried to actively explore. “Every time I make a film I don't think like that. That's maybe your interpretation, but I don't think that's a general thing that I'm trying to get at. If it is, it's an unconscious one that you've picked up on that I'm not aware of.”

Arnold has a reputation for being a thorny interviewee. Over the course of our conversation she spends a lot of time explaining that when she is directing she doesn't think so much as feel, relying on her instincts and sinking into the journey of the filmmaking. Each time I try to chip away at her intentions, she insists that whatever I have observed was not deliberate. “I never decide ahead of the time – whatever you're telling me is something that's emerged from my journey on the film. People always ask me, ‘When you set off, do you have themes?’ And I'm like, ‘No.’”

#### UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Though in person Arnold is warm and congenial, she is often enigmatic – and incredibly guarded. “Each film is kind of where my psyche is at the time, and often through each film I'm trying to work something out that I don't fully understand,” she tells me, but snaps shut when I press her on what she was trying to figure out while making *American Honey*. “I kind of know the answer to that but it's so personal that I don't know that I can actually say it,” she says, going on to tell me that a friend of hers described it to her as “so full of you and what you've been going through in these last years”. Arnold acknowledges the truth of this observation, adding, “You think by setting something in America, by setting something with completely different people at a completely different age in a place you've never been to before, you're sort of removing yourself, but you're not really.”

Her decision to set the film in America is a curious one, even if *American Honey*'s working-class world isn't exactly a million miles from the tower blocks in *Red Road* or *Fish Tank*. Some of it is incredibly bleak – like a strung-out mother lying supine on an old sofa in a rundown house. Arnold describes the poverty she witnessed in America as more intense than anything she's seen in the UK. “Some of the crew on our film, they'd not been to the dentist. Some were really suffering from toothache and they'd just gotten used to it, because they couldn't afford to go to the dentist. That seemed awful to me,” she says.

It is not just *American Honey*'s exploration of class that is a continuation of the things that mark Arnold as an auteur. Her insect fascination dates back to *Wasp*, so it should be no surprise that *American Honey* also attracts flies: moths swarm a buzzing neon beam, a butterfly scales a linen curtain, a wasp is trapped beneath a glass, a fat bumblebee floats in a swimming pool, a cricket rests on Star's shoulder. It is also Arnold's third consecutive film to be shot in the Academy ratio (*Red Road*, which



**24-HOUR PARTY PEOPLE** *American Honey* (above) is a distant cousin of *Spring Breakers* (2012), but Andrea Arnold's crew of magazine sellers have an authenticity lacking in Harmony Korine's salacious neon fantasy of teens running wild in Florida

was made under specific rules devised by Sigma Films and Zentropa for a proposed trilogy of films about the same set of characters, is the exception). Working with her regular cinematographer Robbie Ryan, Arnold crops the Midwestern landscapes, framing sunset-hued vistas as Instagram squares. She recalls visiting London's Tate Modern art gallery with Ryan when they were first discussing *Fish Tank*, and being struck by a collection of 4:3 Polaroids. “I remember both of us looking at them – I think that's the moment when we thought, that's interesting,” she says. “The reason I really like it is because I'm always telling stories about one person, and it's the perfect frame for that. It puts them very nicely in the frame when you're following them around and looking at them, and it doesn't give a lot of space on either side. A lot of the 16:9 or the wider frames, that's great for having a two-shot or your big wides and things, but for one person they'd be a little lost in there. Maybe I'm looking after the person a little bit by getting rid of some of the surroundings. I'm trying to home in on the person.”

Her radical embrace of Academy ratio is never more perfect for inhabiting one person's perspective than in *American Honey*'s three sex scenes, which put Star squarely in the centre of the frame. The tightness of the framing and the deftness of the editing make for some of the most truthful, intimate and, importantly, erotic depictions of female sexuality that I've seen on screen in a long time, all the while eschewing voyeurism. I ask Arnold if we can talk about the film's love scenes. “It's part of being human, isn't it?” she says. “It's an important part of life. Whenever I'm thinking about a character, I don't like to leave [it out]. I don't like to not think about sex. It's a part of everything we do.” She refuses to indulge me further, stating that she doesn't like talking about sex in her films. “It's private to them. Perhaps like it is in real life, I view it that way. It's kind of personal.”

The film's music is also kind of personal, she says. When Jake catches Star's eye across a Walmart check-out counter, it's Rihanna's Calvin Harris collaboration ‘We Found Love’ that blares out. A fizzing

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Even the grimmest and most Spartan of locales are given a jewel-like sheen, highlighting the genuine joy that shines through all of Arnold's films about young people

electronic dance track released five years ago, it's a bizarrely literal choice that dates the film. But Arnold tells me that the song, which was being played on the radio a lot while she was drafting the film, is "reminiscent of a very certain time in life, when I started writing" and was "very much part of my beginning of that journey". The rest of the soundtrack – a selection of trap, Southern hip-hop and country – came from the crew. "Chris [Wright] who plays Riley in the film, suggested Kevin Gates and I just love that song ['Out the Mud'], and I love Kevin Gates now," she says, chuckling. "Choices' by E-40, they were always playing that. It became part of our journey, that song. We were always partying in car parks all the way along. When we weren't filming, we were doing that. We'd take over motels and have car park parties, basically, almost every Friday night, wherever we were. Some of those songs became part of the fabric of what we were doing, and they just felt very truthful to then."

While *American Honey's* soundtrack sets the film firmly in the present day, the characters remain largely detached from modern technology. This creates a sense of timelessness, putting the characters face to face with one another without the constant buffer of screens or telephones. Arnold spent around two years road-tripping (alone and with a real-life mag crew) across America and observed this reality firsthand. "A lot of them didn't have phones, even. I think now that would probably be unlikely, and they had really, the lowest rent phones, not smartphones, so they were not actually that hooked up to technology. And that struck me because we're all completely hooked up, aren't we?"

The relative lack of phones, combined with Arnold's depiction of the antiquated art of door-to-door sales makes for an oddly retro exploration of human inter-

action – something which is sometimes exploited for its comic potential. When Jake manages to sweet-talk his way into an expensive-looking suburban household during door-to-door duties, he is rewarded by a music video-style dance routine (garden hoses and all) by its pre-teen residents. It's hard not to be charmed by LaBeouf, all wounded masculinity and lopsided smile. "He was being quite tough at the beginning, but I was kind of like, 'Come on. Smile. Honestly, you've got a great smile,'" says Arnold. When I suggest that LaBeouf's Jake rides a delicate line between being a boy and a man throughout the film, she nods. "I hadn't thought about it that way, but I think you're right."

*American Honey* is not a perfect film. It's long and occasionally listless, stretching out like the endless summer experienced by the travelling mag crew. And the dialogue is often unnaturally expositional, especially in the scenes that explicitly explore the invisibility of the underclass and their otherwise unspoken American dreams – to have "a family" or "a trailer", "to see the ocean". Yet the script's lack of subtlety is brashly, authentically American.

"I saw so much; America's obviously a huge, great, complicated place, and I've grown up with a sort of version of America that's via Hollywood," she says. "This film is a lot about me going and looking and finding out a bit more." With the help of Ryan's photography, even the grimmest and most Spartan of locales are given a jewel-like sheen, highlighting the genuine joy that shines through all of Arnold's films about young people. Instead of gazing at this unwieldy world from behind glass, *American Honey* winds the window down and invites its onlookers inside. **i**

**i** *American Honey* is released in UK cinemas on 14 October and will be reviewed in our next issue

## DRIVE, SHE SAID

The road movie is generally associated with men, but the cinema is also full of women who take to the road, whether in pursuit of escape, adventure, crime or just that high-speed thrill ride

By Kim Morgan

As Tom Neal asks, wryly, in Edgar G. Ulmer's *Detour* (1945): "What kind of dames thumb rides? Sunday school teachers?" The answer? Or, what *should* be the answer. Yes, of course Sunday school teachers, why not? And waitresses. And writers. And runaway heiresses. And teenagers. Lana. Goldie. Bibi. Bonnie (you know which Bonnie). But Neal was voicing clearly what audiences and anyone, even now, driving through America or anywhere would think seeing a lone woman standing by the side of the road, thumb in the air: what is her story? Or, what in the hell is wrong with that woman? Neal avoids the warning signs and picks up a vicious yet vulnerable Ann Savage anyway, sealing his fate by accidentally strangling her with a phone cord in a hotel room. Whoops. This is not Claudette Colbert, big guy, and you are most definitely not Clark Gable. You're in Ulmerville, remember?

Well, Savage, as Vera, didn't exactly deserve to die (not that anyone really does), an intriguing element to *Detour* as we both feel for Neal sitting in the car with that terrifying woman, and feel for Savage as she... back to this: what is her story? Beyond the man she fended off, who Neal happened to kill (why is Neal always just happening to kill someone?). She is so much more than a stock femme fatale (most femme fatales are), a skinny drifter so bitter and exhausted she nearly saps herself of sex appeal, even as she's attractive, never down-shifting to the sweet spot by using any of her charm or lustful eyes, all those pretty distractions that kick in for a woman's survival or manipulation. She's too damn pissed off and road weary. Promises of sex, soft skin smoothing out the edges and dusting off the dirt? Sure, it's possible, but just what is Neal going to do with her in that hotel room? Jesus Christ. We actually didn't expect that. Not in that way. Poor Vera.

So, taking on the genre, or sub-genre of women-on-the-road movies, and thinking of Savage, an agent of fate, it's hard to not think of all women in road movies, an expansive genre I can't cover entirely within this space – there are just too many. Because going through road movies, women play an integral part within them, a genre generally associated with men,



Road to nowhere: Ann Savage and Tom Neal in Edgar G. Ulmer's *Detour* (1945)

Even now, seeing a lone woman standing by the road, thumb in the air, anyone would think: what is her story?



Sandrine Bonnaire in *Vagabond* (1985)

save for the distinct and obvious movies – such as Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise* (1991), Herbert Ross's *Boys on the Side* (1995), Gus Van Sant's *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1993), Agnès Varda's *Vagabond* (1985), Barbara Loden's *Wanda* (1970), Tamra Davis's *Crossroads* (yes, the 2002 one with Britney Spears – a terrifically fun road trip melodrama), Todd Haynes's sublime *Carol* (2015) and, most recently, Andrea Arnold's *American Honey*.

Arnold's much-buzzed picture, her first American movie, features a girl named Star (Sasha Lane), who takes off from an abusive Oklahoma home to sell magazines on the road, a retro-sounding endeavour, but something Arnold had read about. There's a boy and girl on the trip – Jake (Shia LaBeouf) and Krystal (Riley Keough) – and they all rumble through the Midwest packed up in a van, enjoying and enduring the expedition. But this is a female story, **i**

something Arnold has a wonderful sensitivity and acumen for. The young woman's journey is at the heart of all Arnold's movies, even without a highway to be rolled down (*Fish Tank*, the most powerful), but Arnold wanted to chronicle the specificity of the American road – so much so that she took a road trip herself. As she said in Cannes: "The West is very dramatic. I had some quite difficult times being by myself travelling in that open wilderness... a mix of the America I grew up with – that I saw through Hollywood, romanticised – and contemporary America that I saw when I did my trips."

Make note, this is the America Arnold grew up with – in movies. The road has always been a place for cinematic escape, discovery and freedom, or some kind of inert existential crisis (Monte Hellman's 1971 masterpiece *Two-Lane Blacktop* is the best example, and also features a crucial, evocative 'girl' played by Laurie Bird), but one we associate with McQueen, Gibson, Oates and Fonda (and Oates and Fonda together: see *Race with the Devil* from 1975). That road Jack Kerouac wrote about, a place for "crazy, illuminated hipsters suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, bumming and hitchhiking everywhere, ragged, beatific, beautiful in an ugly graceful new way". That's for men. The women stayed home.

Actually they didn't: not in cinema, anyway. Just think of them: Veronica Lake in *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), dressing as the cutest little boy you've ever seen, tramping along with Joel McCrea's 'O Brother, Where Art Thou' tour; Peggy Cummins driving John Dall (and backing the hell up, beautifully) in *Gun Crazy* (1950), the travelling carnival sharp shooter who drags Dall's butt into this enormous mess in the first place; Ellen Burstyn in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), manning the station wagon to T.Rex's 'Jeepster', enduring her son's absurdly long gorilla joke, getting the hell out of town after Harvey Keitel goes bat-shit crazy in her hotel room; Lizabeth Scott, turning full sociopath, abandoning wifehood for dough in *Too Late for Tears* (1949); Bibi Andersson hitching a ride in, yep, Ingmar Bergman's road movie, *Wild Strawberries* (1957); Bonnie Parker living and dying in that car in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967); Uma Thurman rolling all over the world for her "roaring rampage of revenge" in *Kill Bill: 1 & 2* (2003-04); Goldie Hawn busting her husband out of the slammer in *The Sugarland Express* (1974), resulting in one of the most entertaining and ludicrous police pursuits in movies; Barbara Stanwyck taking on her captor, sexy, smirky Ralph Meeker as he eats all her crackers and confesses his love for cheap perfume ("It doesn't last as long, but it hits harder"), and doing anything for her husband (anything!) in *Jeopardy* (1952);



Have gun will travel: Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis in *Thelma & Louise* (1992)

Charlize Theron's Furiosa taking over for Tom Hardy in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) to become the actual hero/heroine of the story; sad, troubled Janet Leigh driving to her doom in *Psycho* (1959); and on and on and on...

These women often motivated the action or were simply driving to save themselves, to escape their lives – but within these stories are passages to self-discovery, both positive and negative. The perils of the path are part of it. You obviously see this in horror movies like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and *The Hitcher* (1986): the road can ravage you; it's not easy for a woman out there, wherever she may travel. This is also clearly detailed in Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise*, perhaps the most iconic women-on-the-road movie (can we think of another?) and certainly scary



Faye Dunaway as Bonnie in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)

in terms of just how dangerous this trip can get. An unhappy housewife, the ravishing, goofy-faced, gorgeous, loveable Thelma (Geena Davis), and her exacting, organised waitress best friend Louise (Susan Sarandon) could not be more different. But they head off together on a road trip, Thelma escaping the obnoxious demands and criticism of her ridiculous husband, Louise for her own reasons. They yearn to have a good time and bond, with Thelma feeling the pull of sex, dancing and playing along in a country club. But then that innocent flirtation turns into a sexual assault and attempted rape in a parking lot, leading to Louise killing the offender with a gun. Did she need to do that? That's one of the picture's questions. Louise's extreme action is deeper rooted and angry – something she'll get to later in the movie – giving this poignant moment, at least in part, a feminist undercurrent. By placing two women in this predicament – first on the run from their lives, just a happy escape, and then, literally, on the run for their lives – all sorts of beauty and experience and empowerment occurs. Thelma even enjoys a night of good sex (Brad Pitt, who can forget?), even if the sweet cowboy turns out to be a scoundrel and hauls off with their loot. Thelma regrets it, a man has loused it up again, but then... should she regret it?

Rather than judge Thelma, the picture

shows how these normal, healthy attempts to enjoy her sexuality and liberty spin into the unexpected adventure/nightmare of the road, one they don't deserve. My god, Thelma just wanted to get laid, like any man would. Why do they need to suffer so much for this? And so the story ends up tragic (or inspiring) when they take that controversial suicide jump. But what is the spirit of the picture? That they kamikazed off that cliff, or that they found themselves during those long, colourful drives? I think most would agree they found themselves, which makes their deaths all the more upsetting and moving. Can you be a woman and make it through without patriarchy pulling you down? As Louise yells when Thelma suggests going to the police after the man is shot: "Thelma, we don't live in that kind of world."

Indeed we do not. But, you know what? Some women do have fun and don't suffer the consequences. Interesting that the woman who has perhaps the best time on the road, full of pleasure and sex and self-discovery, did so, not in 1994 or 2004 or even 2014, but in 1934, in Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*, one of the first and greatest road movies – and really a movie about a woman on the road. Yes, runaway heiress Claudette Colbert is accompanied by the brash and manly newspaperman Clark Gable, but she's the one who started it all. Jumping off a boat to abandon unwanted upcoming nuptials, she is not just being a bratty little rich girl, she is asserting her independence, subverting the role designated by her gender and class. Stuck with Gable (if you call that stuck), she'll enjoy lots of sniping sexual tension, coach riding, open breeze hitching and some interesting sleeping arrangements – those hot "walls of Jericho". Gable spies a plum opportunity in Colbert with an exclusive story, but feelings will deepen between the high-class broad and the dreamy doughnut dunker, and they'll not only gaze at each other, but at America, understanding for a time what it means to be hungry or how, in a lovely scene, singing on a bus ride can be one of the most strangely enjoyable activities. And then, of course, hitchhiking – something Gable lords over Colbert in one of the picture's most famous scenes, with Colbert swiftly halting a car by a mere glimpse of her leg. Is that too much? No way, it's not. It's sexy as hell – she's being clever, using her feminine wiles, but also enjoying herself and her beauty, her newly developed street smarts and the romance of the road. She's to be celebrated. One could say she is damn lucky (if you've seen William Wellman's *Wild Boys of the Road*, the road isn't as easy as all that) and this is a screwball comedy: she's not going to die for this. She got what she wanted, she did not take the detour Neal and Savage took.



Cars and girls: Quentin Tarantino's *Death Proof* (2007)

*The women in 'Death Proof' enact revenge on, not just the stuntman, but symbolically, all the creeps on the streets*

Not so lucky as Colbert, but enduring, and challenging both the danger of men and the actual road at high speed, are three women who won't wind up in death or having a romance but, instead, with the *Vanishing Point* car, being pursued by homicidal stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell). That's Quentin Tarantino's *Death Proof* (2007), one of the most pro-woman road movies ever made (it also has the rare distinction of showing women who actually want to look at a cool car, without their boyfriends dragging them along to do so). The picture's set of likeable, down-to-earth

women enact *Thelma & Louise*-style revenge on, not just Mike, but symbolically, all the creeps on the streets who want to ram them – in this case, in a psychosexual act of vehicular rape. It's inspiring – almost overwhelmingly so – when we see real-life stuntwoman Zoë Bell actually strap herself to that Challenger (she is really on that thing, taking away the fantasy of it all...), at what looks to be about 80-90 miles per hour, and then unstrapped, clinging to – and climbing on – that car for dear life. The movie ends with the three stomping Mike to April March's 'Chick Habit' – these women are not jumping off a cliff. With that, *Death Proof*'s a feminist rebel yell: "No, you are not going to ruin our time! No, you are not going to hurt us! No, you cannot drive!" This one's for Vera, Thelma, Louise, Claudette and all the sisters of the road. Faster pussycats! And better yet: drive, she said. ☺



Without a hitch: Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert try to thumb a ride in *It Happened One Night* (1934)