

Five Easy Pieces (1970) Rafelson

P Michell, May 2018.

Landmark film of the new decade. New American Cinema. Second major film for Jack Nicholson.

Overview:

Nicholson's roustabout dropout, uneasily returning from California (with his pregnant girlfriend in a hotel room) to his dysfunctional family's home on an island in Puget Sound after learning his famous musician father has suffered two strokes, doesn't get much. His conflicts and angers and fears keep him from a committed life. "I move around a lot," he says to the wheelchair-bound father he's not sure he's reaching in a last attempt at bonding. "Not because I'm looking for anything, really, but because I'm getting away from things that get bad if I stay." He ends the film by hitching a ride on a logging truck to Alaska, abandoning his pregnant girlfriend, Karen Black's Tammy Wynette wannabe, Rayette, at a filling station. He ends as he began, betwixt and between, fleeing the pressures of measuring up to his family's rarefied artistic expectations, then fleeing the demands of the working-class life in which he briefly alights. As photographed by the great Laszlo Kovacs -- the eye behind *Easy Rider* (1969) -- landscape, geography, and the road are major characters in **Five Easy Pieces**, too.

Creative talent:

Producers: Bob Rafelson and Richard Wechsler

Director: Bob Rafelson

Screenplay: Carole Eastman (as Adrien Joyce, screenplay) and Bob Rafelson (story)

Cinematography: Laszlo Kovacs

Art Direction: Toby Rafelson (interior designer)

Music: Pearl Kaufman (piano)

Film Editing: Christopher Holmes and Gerald Shepard

Cast: Robert Eroica Dupea (Jack Nicholson), Rayette Dipesto (Karen Black), Elton (Billy 'Green' Bush), Stoney (Fannie Flagg), Betty (Sally Ann Struthers), Twinky (Marlena Macguire), Recording Engineer (Richard Stahl), Partita Dupea (Lois Smith).

C-96m.

Bob Rafelson (Director)

From The Monkees to Angst. (Paul)

Quote: "But your films have something ... They have something, but it's by mistake."

Bob Rafelson & BBS (Bob / Blaumer / Schneider) & Raybert

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (edited for here)

Raybert Productions was a [production company](#) that operated in the 1960s, founded by [Bob Rafelson](#) and [Bert Schneider](#). Its principal works were the wildly successful [situation comedy](#) *The Monkees* (and the [group of the same name](#)), and the

1969 movie *Easy Rider* (co-produced with [Peter Fonda's](#) Pando Company). Raybert was also the predecessor to **BBS Productions**, a [New Hollywood](#) production company founded by Rafelson, Schneider, and Schneider's childhood friend [Stephen Blauner](#).^[1] BBS Productions' best known film is *The Last Picture Show*.

History of Raybert Productions

Wishing to break into movie production, but lacking experience, Rafelson and Schneider used their [Hollywood](#) connections to get the chance to produce a [pilot episode](#) for a television series. Adapting what they saw in the [Beatles'](#) movies *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!*, and throwing in ideas of their own, Schneider and Rafelson developed *The Monkees* as the misadventures of an as-yet undiscovered rock band, with songs by the (originally) fictional band as [soundtrack](#) music, and as a [tie-in](#) for promotion and merchandising.

Schneider and Rafelson distanced themselves from the band even during the shoot (pointedly playing records by other groups around the set), and promptly involved themselves in other projects, including *Easy Rider*.

History of BBS Productions

After producing *Five Easy Pieces* in 1969, the two partners took on a third partner, [Stephen Blauner](#), naming their expanded company **BBS Productions** (for Bert, Bob and Steve). Blauner, who'd also been involved with the Monkees series (even getting a name-check in one episode, as a gangster), later produced *New Monkees* in the 1980s, under the name Straybert Productions. On December 31, 1971, BBS sold all of its outstanding shares of its stocks to Columbia Pictures.^[2]

The Last Picture Show (1971) and *Hearts and Minds* (1974 [Academy Award winner](#) for [Best Documentary Feature](#)) were but two distinctly iconoclastic features from BBS Productions among some of the most influential and enduring classics of the early 1970s [New Hollywood](#) era which anticipated the rise of American [independent film](#) through the 1980s and '90s. [Jack Nicholson](#) starred in three others—*Five Easy Pieces* (1970), *A Safe Place* (1971), and *The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972)—as well as co-wrote *Drive, He Said* (1971), which was his directorial debut.

Script:

Adrien Joyce / Carole Eastman friend of Jack Nicholson and wrote four of his scripts inc (not good film) *Man Trouble* (1992) (Rafelson).

Cinematographer:

Lazlo Kovacs – famous for *Easy Rider* (1969), *Getting Straight* (1970), *Alex in Wonderland* (1970), *King of Marvin Gardens* (1972), *Refelction of Fear* (1972), *Shampoo* (1975), *Copycat* (1995). Worked on *Close Encoutners of Third Kind* (1977).

Trivia

Fannie Flagg (Stoney) wrote *Fried Green Tomatoes at Whistlestop Café* book and movie (1991). “Sincerity is as valuable as radium.” “Remember if people talk behind your back, it only means you are two steps ahead.”

"Five Easy Pieces" refers to a book of piano lessons for beginners.

Jack Nicholson wrote some of his own lines for the monologue Bobby says to his father.

Jack Nicholson wanted Janis Joplin to have the part of Palm Apodaca, but it was never offered to her.

Director cameo: Bob Rafelson: The man going into the elevator at the recording studio.

There was some disagreement between Bob Rafelson and Jack Nicholson as to how to play the climactic scene in which Bobby talks to his father. Rafelson wanted Nicholson to break down in tears, Nicholson did not want to. They decided to just let the scene play out and see what happened, and Nicholson did indeed cry. Only one take of that scene was shot.

Carole Eastman's original ending had Dupea (Jack Nicholson) driving his car off a bridge. Rayette (Karen Black) survives the crash, he does not.

Links:

Interview with Bob Rafelson

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2009/conversations-on-film/bob-rafelson-interview/>

Refelctions by Stuart Fernie

<http://www.stuartfernie.org/five.htm>

Analysis / Reviews:

Auspicious Beginnings: Nicholson's Leitmotif in Five Easy Pieces. Andrew Culbertson. (2007)

Source: <http://brightlightsfilm.com/>

"His characters have tended to be more bewildered by life and disgusted by a world that won't cooperate."

As Jack Nicholson turns 70 (April 2007), he embodies more than ever the cliché that "age is just a number." Indeed, age has always been something of an irrelevancy for Nicholson. Who, other than a handful of Roger Corman fans, actually remembers a youthful Nicholson? By the time he registered in our consciences he was a 30-something with thinning hair who could have easily passed for 40. Since that time, the image he's presented to the public is one of perpetual youth, if not in physical appearance then through a personal life that suggests the emotional development of someone considerably younger. And then there is Nicholson the performer. Like Al Pacino, a contemporary whose reputation also owes much to a series of arresting performances three decades ago, Nicholson has consistently exuded a level of onscreen energy that belies his age. As both actors have watched their legends grow, that energy has occasionally been allowed to assume an existence out of proportion to the movie in which they're appearing. With Pacino, it tends to be self-righteous bombast, individuals who have it all figured out and want to convey that fact to everyone within earshot. If Nicholson is no less feral, then his characters have tended to be more bewildered by life and disgusted by a world that won't cooperate. "Forget it Jake. It's Chinatown," the eponymous final line of one of Nicholson's monumental performances, is apt. Many of his characters have tended to reside, to some degree, in Chinatown.

Nicholson's has been a remarkable career, not merely for its longevity but for his ability to remain successful despite never straying too far from a particular personality type. There has consistently been that edge to his characters. It's a persona that has periodically resulted in the charge that he's "playing Jack Nicholson." Fair or not, what might be said is that once Nicholson was established, he seemingly decided to play only certain characters — and to play them his way. His choice of roles suggests a performer acutely aware not only of his own comfort level, but, as his career has progressed, public expectations. It's a long list of morally ambiguous individuals who are rarely heroic and never a source of inspiration or support for others. Nicholson doesn't do "feel good," "well-adjusted," or, with the notable exception of Jack Torrance in *The Shining* (1980), "family men." Of course, Torrance gets to chase his wife and son with an ax, which may have been a selling point for Nicholson. Yet if anyone ever earned the right to do things his way, perhaps it was Nicholson. Prior to his breakthrough in *Easy Rider* (1969), he'd appeared without acclaim in nearly 20 films, none of them memorable these days save for his appearance.

Easy Rider is a film whose back story is arguably more interesting than the film itself. Nicholson's casting as southern attorney George Hanson was a fortuitous afterthought. His initial involvement in the film was as a troubleshooter for executive producer Bert Schneider. At that point, in fact, Nicholson was transitioning to a career behind the

camera. Hanson is an affable yet troubled individual who doesn't have to befriend protagonists Wyatt (Peter Fonda) and Billy (Dennis Hopper). That he does is a testament to his generosity of spirit and an enlightenment not shared by the film's other southern characters (most of whom are simply stereotypes). Watching Nicholson play this type of character evokes, on a certain level, feelings of what might have been. Nicholson wasn't born to play nice guys, and his most memorable characters aren't. But there's a humanity to Hanson that's lacking in many of Nicholson's subsequent characters.

Nicholson later recalled the moment at the Cannes Film Festival, during a screening of *Easy Rider*, when Hanson came on the screen. "I felt the movie take off in the audience, and I don't think anybody has ever had this storybook thing happen." He realized, "My God, I'm a movie star." Somewhat overlooked in his realization is that he isn't actually the star of *Easy Rider*. Not a large detail, perhaps, but the history of film is filled with memorable performances that didn't lead to greater success. What *Easy Rider* conveyed to Nicholson in the short term was the opportunity to star in a film more mainstream than the standard Corman fare. That film would be a character study devoid of stars directed by a director, Bob Rafelson, with only one other credit. Nicholson, according to biographer Patrick McGilligan, lined up a number of projects in the wake of *Easy Rider*. Nonetheless, it's fair to say that the viability of those projects depended on the extent to which he could carry a film. His first opportunity would see him playing a character not nearly as likeable as Hanson; a man whose strongest traits are his capacities for alienation and self-implosion. Looking back nearly 40 years later, what's apparent is that Nicholson's big coup wasn't *Easy Rider*. It was the leap of faith otherwise known as *Five Easy Pieces* (1970).

Today, *Five Easy Pieces* would be the province of independent film, and it no doubt inspired a generation of such filmmakers. *Easy Rider* remains more famous, yet its merits as a film are secondary to its status as a countercultural period piece. It sought to represent that its protagonists had achieved a kind of freedom that placed them above a bigoted and intolerant society. All it really demonstrated was that long-haired bikers should probably avoid the Deep South. Nonetheless, the film has become the touchstone for the idealized notion of "dropping out of society." What tends to be overlooked is that Wyatt and Billy aren't accountants rejecting the bourgeois establishment. They're drug dealers who, owing to their choice of profession, had effectively "dropped out" long before their motorcycle odyssey across America.

Five Easy Pieces possesses a morality that is absent in *Easy Rider*. It's a film that's stringently honest about the consequences of its protagonist's actions, never manipulating the viewer. In the film's final scene, protagonist Bobby Dupea (Nicholson) abandons his girlfriend Rayette (Karen Black) at a truck stop to head for Alaska. There's no celebratory music rising in the background, no close-up of Bobby with a thoughtful gaze conveying the probity of his decision. The scene, emblematic of Rafelson's restrained directing throughout, is devoid of either close-ups or music (the only music in the film is ambient). The audience is asked to consider the decision for what it is and arrive at its own judgment.

The nature of the film is such that divulging the final scene reveals little. If Bobby has a “character arc,” it resides primarily outside the confines of the film. When the viewer comes in, much of the drama in Bobby’s life has already unfolded. Despite the film’s minimalist plot, it does possess a surprising revelation central to the story’s premise. In the film’s first several scenes, Bobby is observed working as an oil rigger, bowling, cavorting in his underwear with two women and co-worker Elton (Billy Bush), and gambling while visibly inebriated. There is also the ubiquitous presence of country music. By all indications, he is living a blue-collar existence. Bobby is next seen passing a bottle of whiskey with Elton as they’re stuck in a traffic jam. A frustrated Bobby gets out of the car and begins shouting at the other cars. He climbs onto the back of a flatbed truck and notices an upright piano under a blanket. He sits down on a bench and begins to play. Although there’s an earlier statement by Rayette that Bobby “can play the piano,” nothing has prepared the viewer for what Bobby plays — Chopin’s Fantasy in F Minor, accompanied nicely by a random chorus of car horns. Rafelson allows the surrealism of the moment to reach a crescendo as Bobby, oblivious to the fact that the truck begins to move and exits off the highway, continues to pound away.

The film’s original opening title sequence was to have shown a young Bobby playing piano. It would have also revealed that Bobby had a book of piano music titled “Five Easy Pieces.” Leaving this sequence out proved fortuitous. It allowed Rafelson to reveal Bobby’s past in a manner that was both surprising and inspired. It also wed Bobby’s past and present in simultaneous fashion. Considerations of the film have tended not to question the remarkable nature of the disparity between the two occupations (try to imagine Van Cliburn in jeans and a hard hat). It’s a premise that teeters on the brink of unbelievability. Were the film made today, one envisions all the overt explanations that would push it over that edge, highlighted by the obligatory flashback of the younger Bobby’s epiphany. Seeing Bobby play Chopin on an upright piano in work clothes, however startling, seems more believable than a flashback of him performing in a tuxedo at a grand piano.

Five Easy Pieces, like other character studies, has a heightened sense of realism. It plays like moments in a person’s life, not scenes from a film. Information is not, for the most part, strategically revealed through dialogue. We learn more about Bobby through his reactions than through anything that is said. Consequently, a number of questions remain unanswered. How long Bobby has worked as an oil rigger is unknown. The viewer does witness the moment Bobby has had enough of the job and quits. It’s the first indication of Bobby’s recklessly impulsive nature. The decision comes in the aftermath of an argument with Elton, during which Bobby has learned that Rayette is pregnant. Bobby takes offense that Elton, whom he calls a “cracker asshole who lives in a trailer park,” dares to compare his life to Bobby’s. In the next scene, Bobby visits his sister Partita (Lois Smith), also a classical pianist, at a recording studio in Los Angeles. Although the impetus for the visit is unclear, there’s the sense that he is gravitating back to his roots.

When Bobby learns from Partita that their father is near death, he embarks on the road trip that serves as the film’s bridge between the two disparate worlds. The family residence is on an island off the coast of Washington, accessible only by ferry. It’s an offbeat, pristine setting whose aesthetic appeal reflects the pretensions of the family

itself. It also signifies, both literally and figuratively, how removed the family is from conventional society. The father's role as erstwhile patriarch is enhanced by the fact that there's never a single reference to the dead mother (the original title sequence referenced her funeral).

Complicating Bobby's plans is Rayette. Karen Black's performance as the clinging, dimwitted waitress aspiring to be a country singer is as good as any in the film. Rayette serves as a lightning rod for Bobby's internal conflict, and his emotional reactions to her are diverse to the point of contradiction. He proves himself capable of simultaneously lauding her background and being embarrassed by her lack of social graces. Bobby begrudgingly takes Rayette with him and then, upon their arrival in Washington, treats her shabbily. While he stays at his family's residence, she is kept in a motel on the mainland.

Nicholson's manic side was not on display in *Easy Rider*, presumably because the part of Hanson didn't call for it. Also, *Easy Rider* was not his film. That side of Nicholson emerged in *Five Easy Pieces*. Bobby's eruptions aren't merely entertaining; they tend to provide increments of insight into Bobby's character. One such scene is Bobby's performance on the highway, with its revelation of his former life. Why Bobby abandoned that life, although never articulated, actually seems fairly obvious. We learn enough to infer that life as a pianist in the sterile confines of his upbringing was not, in his estimation, a life. He not only left, he opted for an existence that's antithetical to what was expected. It's obviously an act of rebellion. But it's also an attempt, though not a seemingly satisfactory one, to "feel" something. Bobby has opted for a world in which people sweat, carouse, yell, and gamble. A world far removed from that of Partita and their brother Carl (Ralph Waite), a fatuous violinist.

As different as the two worlds are, the one constant is Bobby's dissatisfaction in both. There are aspects of his chosen life with which he identifies, but others that conflict with values that are innate. Bobby's rejection of Elton isn't premised on an actual dislike for Elton or his lifestyle. On a certain level, he relates to both. It's in response to Elton's suggestion, in the context of Rayette's pregnancy, that he might enjoy this life on a more permanent basis (i.e., tied down with a wife and kid). The suggestion awakens Bobby's sense of who he actually is, a gifted musician from an upper class background who was not raised in a trailer park. The values that have been instilled, whatever Bobby may think of the world in which they were conferred, simply won't allow him to embrace wholly a life among the rabble. Bobby's views on music, classical or otherwise, are also emblematic of this conflict. When Bobby is asked by Carl's fiancée, Catherine (Susan Anspach), why he no longer plays the piano, he reveals that he spent time in Las Vegas as a rehearsal pianist for a musical revue. She asks, incredulously, "You don't call that music?" Bobby responds, "Oh yes I do. It's music." If Bobby's populist sentiment is admirable, less so is his subsequent exchange with Catherine after he plays for her Chopin's Prelude in E Minor. She is visibly moved, and tells him that it was beautiful. His response is dismissive. "I picked the easiest piece that I could think of. I first played it when I was eight, and I played it better then." When Catherine explains that it's not his technique, but the feeling she was affected by, he replies, "I didn't have any." He ultimately remarks, "I faked a little Chopin. You faked a big response."

Bobby's suggestion that he doesn't "feel" music appears disingenuous. We've witnessed his performance on the truck, during which he became lost in the piece he was playing. What we can surmise is that Bobby didn't leave home because of classical music itself, but because, at least in part, of the pretension assigned to it by individuals like Carl and presumably their father. Bobby's rejection of that attitude, and "intellectuals" in general, will not allow him to accept that Catherine, whose views on the significance of classical music vis-à-vis other genres are not dissimilar to Carl's, can actually be moved by it. His rejection of her is short-lived, however, and there is a brief tryst. This is one of the few sequences in the film where Bobby appears genuinely happy. So much so that there is the sense Catherine could be his salvation. Although Bobby actively pursues the relationship, Catherine sees Bobby for what he is. Someone, as she describes it, who is incapable of loving himself or others and, consequently, someone not entitled to ask for love in return.

Perhaps Nicholson, as he says, became a star in Cannes. But it was in playing Bobby Dupea that he became "Jack Nicholson." The precise moment was arguably in the film's most famous scene, one that remains a staple of every Nicholson highlight reel. During the drive to Washington, Bobby's disposition is tested by the presence of hitchhikers Palm (Helena Kallianiotes) and Terry (Toni Basil), who are en route to Alaska. They stop at a diner, where Bobby is informed by the waitress (Lorna Thayer) that he can't have a side order of wheat toast with his omelet. Bobby creatively devises a method to get the toast. "Okay, I'll make it as easy for you as I can. I'd like an omelet, plain, and a chicken salad sandwich on wheat toast, no mayonnaise, no butter, no lettuce . . . now all you have to do is hold the chicken, bring me the toast, give me a check for the chicken salad sandwich, and you haven't broken any rules." When the waitress asks, "You want me to hold the chicken?," her skeptical tone suggests that Bobby's contrivance is doomed. Presumably sensing this, Bobby snarls, "I want you to hold it between your knees." The party is ordered to leave and Bobby, with a swipe of his arm, clears the table. One reason the scene continues to resonate is because of Nicholson's measured delivery. He strikes an effective balance between the thoughtfulness necessary to get the toast and the intensity that reflects Bobby's growing annoyance with both the waitress and her adherence to a nonsensical rule.

Upon returning to the car, Palm compliments Bobby on his cleverness and describes his ability to improvise as "fantastic." Bobby replies, "Yeah, well I didn't get it, did I?" The metaphor is unmistakable. Bobby is a talented, intelligent individual unable to get what he wants out of life. Of course, the larger problem is that he can't determine what that is. Bobby's aimlessness is such that, when he attempts to articulate his life choices to his father, he really can't. The scene is essentially a monologue, as his wheelchair-bound father is unable to communicate. The father's silence is symbolically apt, as it can be viewed as representing the disapproval he would no doubt register were he able to communicate. The speech is highlighted by Bobby's statement that he moves around a lot. "Not because I'm looking for anything really, but . . . 'cause I'm getting away from things that get bad if I stay. Auspicious beginnings, you know what I mean?" Bobby's visit home in no exception. When Rayette unexpectedly appears on the island, Bobby's behavior becomes more volatile, highlighted by a physical confrontation with his father's male nurse. He tells Partita, "I think I overstayed myself."

By this point in the film, Bobby's boorishness has made it increasingly difficult to muster sympathy for him. We can certainly imagine, however, how his childhood was an oppressive combination of stuffy recitals and sunny days spent in dusty music rooms. There is also a feeling of melancholy, particularly in Bobby's exchanges with Partita, which seems to encompass more than simply their father's deterioration. There is much that has occurred in the past to which the viewer is not privy, including their mother's death when they were children. The fact that this is not evident from the film itself raises interesting questions concerning to what degree it should even be considered. Suffice it to say that, had it been made manifest, it likely would have been mitigating in our assessment of Bobby's behavior.

Bobby's most controversial act is his decision to abandon Rayette without a word. One suspects that audiences today would take a harsher view than those of 1970, an era in which the act's symbolic overtones transcended its consequences. It's the final movement in this particular piece of Bobby's life, presumably as uneasy as any of the former. He leaves everything behind, including his wallet, effectively becoming a man without an identity as he heads for a remote locale that's conducive to finding a new one.

Five Easy Pieces was not merely a successful film. It was a successful "test run" of sorts of the prototype that would thereafter serve Nicholson well. His manic side was on display, certainly, but there is also the bewildered cynicism and difficulty relating to both other individuals and the world at large. The film launched an impressive five-year run that included *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), *The Last Detail* (1973), *Chinatown* (1974), and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975). Had Nicholson retired after *Cuckoo's Nest*, he'd arguably still enjoy the same critical reputation. That is more a testament to the quality of his performances from that period than it is a criticism of his later work. Much of it has been good, yet Nicholson often reduces himself to a caricature of what he once was. Too frequently, particularly in what have become signature moments (e.g., *The Shining*'s "Heeeeere's Johnny!!!" and *A Few Good Men*'s "You can't handle the truth!"), he's chewing scenery and all but winking at the camera.

Cuckoo's Nest proved to be the end of Nicholson's "golden era," and the rest of the 1970s was not creatively successful for him. It's interesting to imagine what Nicholson's subsequent body of work might have been had mainstream film not taken a turn for the worse in the 1980s and beyond. Nicholson's roles became considerably more commercial, as did those of contemporaries like Pacino, Dustin Hoffman, Robert De Niro, and Gene Hackman. Each of those individuals, like Nicholson, enjoyed his greatest critical success between the late 1960s and early 1980s. They played a plethora of characters not merely memorable, but compelling enough to leave viewers wanting to hear more of their stories. Bobby Dupea, whatever his shortcomings, is no exception. We're curious about what happened in Alaska, and whether there, or someplace thereafter, he found a life that was satisfying. Or at least a diner that allows side orders of wheat toast.

Andrew Culbertson is a Supervisory Administrative Judge with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in Washington, D.C. His work has also appeared in *The Film Journal*.

Noel Murray:

source: <https://thedissolve.com/reviews> (2015)

The most famous scene in *Five Easy Pieces* reveals very little of *what* the movie is actually about, but everything about *who*. Even film buffs who've never seen *Five Easy Pieces* are likely familiar with the image of Jack Nicholson as Bobby Dupea, sitting in a diner and snapping at an unhelpful waitress, telling her to bring him a chicken-salad sandwich with no chicken, so he can have the toast. ("You want me to hold the chicken, huh?" "I want you to hold it between your knees.") Out of context, the scene is deceptive. The rest of *Five Easy Pieces* isn't as comedic or as full of overt conflict, and two of the women eating with Bobby only showed up in the movie five minutes earlier, and will be gone five minutes later. Besides, the most important part of this tantrum is what happens after, in a follow-up scene that never makes it into the New Hollywood clip-reels. Back in the car, one of the women applauds Bobby for standing up for himself, and he mumbles, "But I didn't get my toast, did I?"

Five Easy Pieces is the very definition of a character study, and one of the best American cinema has produced. Nicholson's Dupea embodies the self-destructive dissatisfaction that was common to a lot of movie characters in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but his unhappiness resonates more, because he isn't the kind of person that usually gets movies made about him. He's no moody youngster or lovesick fool, or anyone's deconstructed idea of a pulp hero. Bobby starts out working in the California oil fields by day and spending his nights getting drunk with a redneck co-worker—that is, when he's not fooling around with any woman who isn't his needy, baby-talking girlfriend Rayette (Karen Black). But then Bobby goes to see his classical-pianist sister Partita (Lois Smith), who tells him their father is ill. So he and Rayette drive up to his family estate in Washington, where it becomes obvious that Bobby's upbringing was hardly blue-collar.

One of the reasons *Five Easy Pieces*' diner scene is so misleading is because there's no one stretch of this movie that fairly represents the whole. Director Bob Rafelson—who also conceived the story, and hired his friend Carole Eastman to write the script—attempts something unusual here, making a film that's subtle about its meaning without ever ranging into the pretentiously oblique or merely ambiguous. Every minute of *Five Easy Pieces* is entertaining. Nicholson's tightly wound performance is absorbing even when it's unclear where it's headed, and there's an enjoyable musicality to Eastman's dialogue, which captures both the priggishness of the Dupea family (whose Partita delivers pronouncements like, "This piano has absolutely no objectionable idiosyncrasies") and the inventive vulgarity of Bobby (who snarls lines like, "Where the hell do you get the ass to tell anybody anything about class... you pompous celibate?"). Meanwhile, cinematographer László Kovács shifts the lighting to capture the contrast between the grubby plainness of Bobby's life in California and the dark, stifling

tastefulness of his Washington home, helping establish why he feels out of place in both. Yet Rafelson never overreaches for any emotional impact or thematic clarification. Even the moment where Bobby's real roots are revealed isn't treated as a big surprise.

Rafelson and his producing partner Bert Schneider first made their mark in Hollywood with the absurdist rock 'n' roll sitcom *The Monkees*, then decided to make good use of any clout they'd built up with their Raybert Productions (later renamed BBS after Stephen Blauner joined the team). They figured American cinema lacked a legitimate New Wave, with writers, directors, actors, and craftspeople working outside the conventional Hollywood genres and styles, in the way foreign filmmakers like Michelangelo Antonioni, Agnès Varda, and Ingmar Bergman already were. *Five Easy Pieces* is the best example of what BBS meant to do about that. It's a profoundly American story, rooted in distinct personalities and locations, and though it has the gradually unfolding quality of a great novel, it's still highly cinematic. (And not an adaptation.)

It all works because Rafelson, Eastman, and Nicholson make the obvious but all-too-rare assumption that their viewers aren't idiots. Look again at Bobby in the diner, and note how the waitress gestures toward a blurry sign about her right to refuse him service—a sign Rafelson doesn't include in an insert shot, because he trusts the viewer will get what she's saying. Also note what goes unsaid in the scene, which is that Bobby may be snapping at this woman because she's a surrogate for Rayette, who's also a waitress. This is what *Five Easy Pieces* does so well, keeping its connections and explanations muted. That extends to the title, which refers to a book of piano music Bobby memorized as a boy, which he uses to impress a family friend—whom he then mocks for thinking he can really play. This is what Bobby does even when slumming with the working-class crowd. He finds everything beneath him, and he treats everybody with mild condescension because those notes are a cinch to hit, and he knows they make him look cooler. *Five Easy Pieces* doesn't have any big speeches to make that point, because it doesn't have to. That's what the rest of the movie is for.

Peter Bradshaw (2010) The Guardian

The narrative trajectory of Bob Rafelson's newly restored 1970 tragicomedy is from New America to Old Europe. Jack Nicholson plays the poignantly named Robert Eroica Dupea, an angry, insubordinate smartmouth precariously employed as an oil-rigger out west, and trapped in a toxic relationship with Rayette (Karen Black), a diner waitress and would-be country singer. It is only when we learn that his father is dying, and Robert must travel back to the family home in Washington state for a last goodbye, that we learn that Robert is in retreat from his poisoned vocation: once a brilliantly promising classical pianist, he has angrily given up music, having failed to reach the standards set by his father and by himself. So Robert and poor, uncomprehending Rayette are guests in his ramshackle family home chock-full of decaying and defeated musical talent, like something from Dickens or Chekhov. His pianist sister Partita, played by Lois Smith, is

sabotaging her own career with a bad habit of humming along to her own performance in the recording studio, like Glenn Gould. Robert attempts to seduce his brother's girlfriend Catherine (Susan Anspach) by playing her an easy piece by Chopin, and angrily declares he played it better, more valuably and with more integrity when he was eight years old.

The dark comedy of these later scenes is the more potent for being unexpected: Anspach was to play Woody Allen's discontented wife in *Play It Again, Sam* two years later, and Rafelson and Allen are somehow breathing the same comic atmosphere. Yet to see the younger, vulnerable Nicholson crying in his encounter with his silent father is powerful and moving: a glimpse of the human face behind the "devil" mask that would grow in Nicholson's later career. Individual scenes and moments have the improvised feel of things chosen at random from life, a serendipitous, invisibly crafted fragment mosaic. Each constituent part is a gem: the bowling-alley scene, the hitchhiker sequence, the moment in which Robert gleefully jumps up on a flatbed truck in a freeway traffic jam, and starts playing the upright piano strapped on top of it, while the truck chaotically accelerates off in the wrong direction – an apparently impetuous piece of craziness which actually demonstrates his heaviness and self-hate. This superbly composed film comes as close to perfection as it gets.