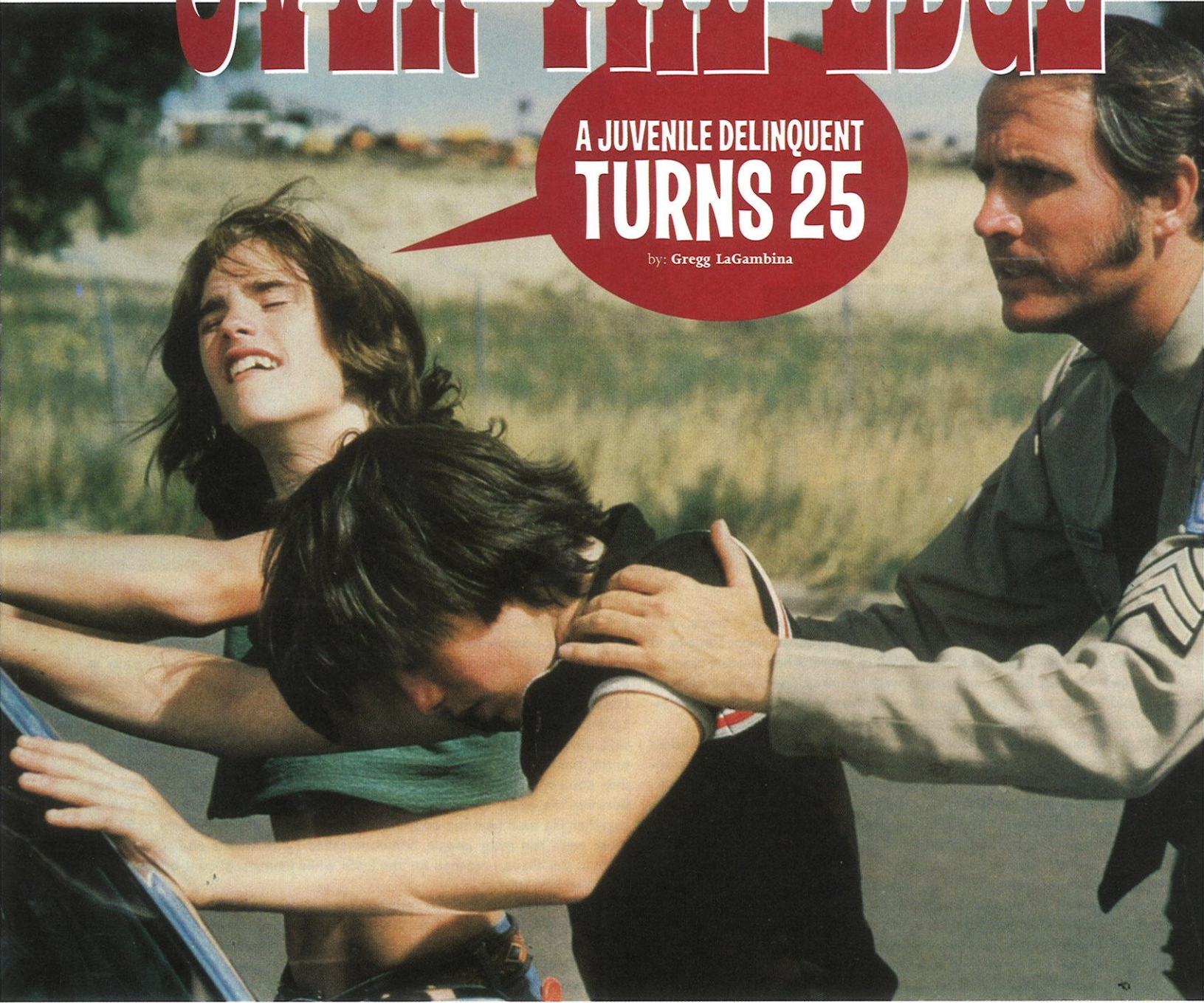


OVER THE EDGE

A JUVENILE DELINQUENT
TURNS 25

by: Gregg LaGambina



JAMES DEAN was a bit too handsome to have been that angry. In fact, the man may have set back the rebel cause for the real thugs, the ones with the zits and the abusive parents and the trailer homes and the shirt you'd wear every day, not because it was cool not to care, but because it was the only shirt you had.

They often mention *Over the Edge* as the gritty descendent of *Rebel Without A Cause*. But to call it gritty sells it short because the term implies it was simply low budget, on the fly, made carelessly and accidentally awkward. After all, low budget, on the fly, careless and awkward was the only way to portray these kids (who were all four of these things trapped in 14-year-old frames)—the ones condemned to this monster adult playground of a planned community called New Granada, where a simple and inflammable thing like boredom ends up in explosions. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

They often mention *Over the Edge* as the inspiration for Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused*. But Linklater's film was a bit too campy and playful, and with the retro-meter pinned on high, you ended up giggling a bit too much at the giant papier-mâché Gene Simmons or Matthew McConaughey's sideburns to really care about the fate of the kids, their future, the arc of their lives.

So, somewhere lost in the valley between 1955 and 1993—relegated to the back of the film school classroom—while *Rebel* and *Dazed* continue to

hold court at the popular table, lies 1979's *Over the Edge*. If you know it, chances are you're obsessed with it. Obscurity tends to breed protective behavior in the few that champion things like these. But for those of you who don't know it, it's not your fault. It has its place in the books for launching the career of a then 14-year-old Matt Dillon and more recently for the discovery that it was the late Kurt Cobain's favorite movie of all time and his original template for the video to "Smells Like Teen Spirit." But, the studio was too scared to release the film. It fell out of theaters in a week. And by the time videocassettes came around, it was ignored and quickly went out of print. Still, you can buy bootleg copies any day of the week on eBay and there are whisperings of an official DVD this spring and maybe, just maybe, *Over the Edge* will finally find the audience it always deserved, 25 years later.

So here, at the tail end of the silver anniversary of *Over the Edge*, we've assembled a small group of the film's central figures to discuss the history of its obscurity, the place it still has in their lives, why it can't seem to find a larger audience, why it won't go away. It's the story of how the film came to be and how it still is, in the words of the people that made it—the ones who care about it almost as much as the people who've played their ratty bootlegs over and over until the tape has stretched, the picture's blurred and you pound on the set wondering why anyone won't help.

JONATHAN KAPLAN (director): I was hired to do a movie with the Sex Pistols in England after Russ Meyer was fired. It was called something like *Who Killed Bambi?* Malcolm McLaren, who was the Pistols' manager, had hired Russ Meyer to make this movie. But after Johnny Rotten saw the dailies from Russ Meyer's first day of shooting—in which they butchered a deer and actually shot it on the Queen's land—well, John's a big animal rights advocate, so he basically said, "We're not doing this movie with this guy."

I went to England and it all came down to having lunch at this trendy Italian restaurant in London with John representing the group and myself and Malcolm and some of the studio guys and we all had it out at this table and the first thing that came out of somebody's mouth, I don't remember who, said, "Now, we're not going to have any of this 'Fuck the Queen' bullshit in this film." And John got up and walked out. That was the end of that.

But having gone to England and seeing the Pistols just before their first album came out—it was completely thrilling to me. I came back and I was exhilarated. I was like a crazy man. No one knew what the fuck I was talking about. And then I got this script and I said, "This is the American punk movie."

CHARLIE HAAS (co-writer): Tim Hunter saw the newspaper story in the *San Francisco Examiner* about the stuff that was going on in Foster City, which is in the Bay Area, near the San Francisco airport. This was an entire master-planned community and they were having big problems with young teenagers and vandalism and petty crime. So, we started going up to Foster City and interviewing the kids and inter-

"I WAS DEFINITELY ON THE WILD SIDE. FOR MY THIRD AUDITION, WHEN I WAS ON MY WAY DOWN THERE, I GOT INTO A BRAWL WITH SOME KID THAT I HAD AN ONGOING BEEF WITH."

-MATT DILLON

viewing the rec center lady. We'd hang out with the kids in the park at night and really just try to soak them up.

TIM HUNTER (co-writer): When we went to Denver to look for kids to play the smaller parts, we gravitated to special high schools and we went looking for the stoners and the bad kids, the misfits. They very much were the kinds of kids that were portrayed in the movie. I remember ferrying a lot of them around. On the bus to Greeley, Colorado where we shot all the school sequences, the bongs came out, which was kind of shocking to me at the time, or even a little scary.

MATT DILLON (actor, portrayed the central misfit Richie White): I was 14 years old. I was definitely on the wild side. I didn't have a criminal

record or anything like that. But, I could relate to it. I related to the character. I liked him. He was a rebel. He was kind of a wild kid. In fact, I think for my third audition, when I was on my way down there, I got into a scrap in a parking lot which was not far from my junior high school. I got into a brawl with some kid that I had an ongoing beef with. I was a kid, you know? I was a little on the cocky side, I must admit now, looking back on it. I was young.

PAMELA LUDWIG (actress, portrayed Cory, the girl who dreamed of being a truck driver, a gypsy of the road, the only one who escapes the fate of the rest): They were all much younger than I was. There's a big difference between 15 and 18. I didn't have a guardian and all the other kids did. Matt was 14, he was really young. So, I was kind of segregated from them. I mean, I could drive and everything. They couldn't drive, but I would sometimes drive everybody to the mall [laughs]. But we were out in the middle of nowhere. There wasn't much going on, to tell you the truth. We were out in the middle of Colorado and we were pretty young and they were with guardians, so not much happened.

MATT DILLON: We just basically would ride around on our bikes—we got to use our bikes that we used in the film—and we'd get into trouble. I remember one day, I think it was Vincent Spano, myself and maybe Tommy Fergus—we pulled into a porn movie theater. And there was a guy behind the counter who looked like James Dean. He had a marijuana leaf around his neck and the name of the porn film was *Long Jean Silver*. It was pretty wild. And we said, "Hey, can we go in and check it out?" He just



THE KIDS WE MET IN THAT DENVER AREA, THEY WERE REALLY DRUGGY. THEY WERE WILD KIDS.

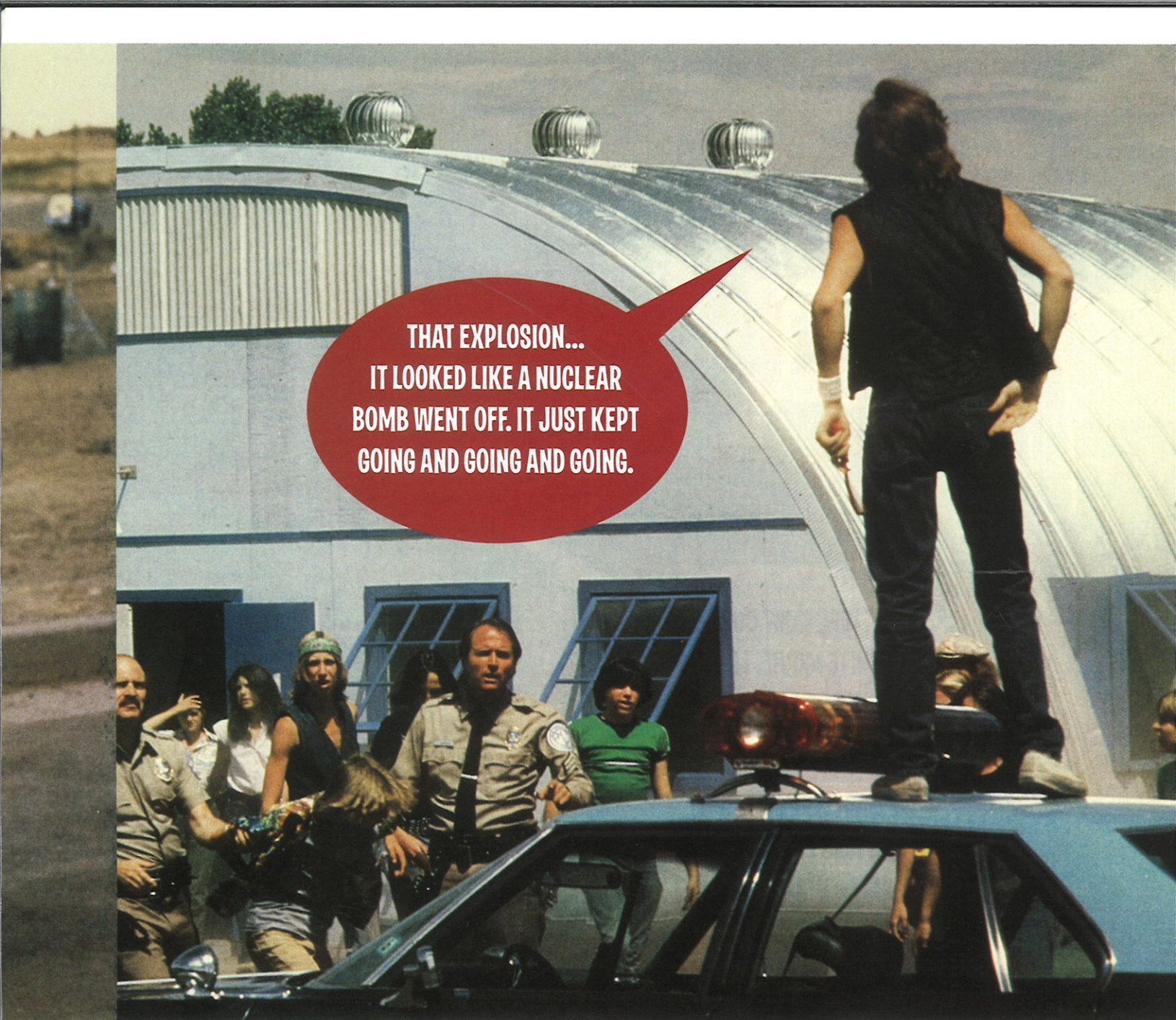
laughed. He said, "Yeah, sure. Just make sure you hide your bikes in the back." He let us slip in [laughs]. From what I remember, that was some pretty out there stuff. One of the porn stars had like a stump leg, you know? It was pretty trippy.

JONATHAN KAPLAN: I was aware the whole time we were shooting the movie and tried to prepare the kids in the cast for what I assumed could be the eventual non-release of the movie. Because it didn't have any stars, it was a low-budget picture, it was a brand new company and I knew that the picture was not going to compromise because I wasn't gonna let it compromise on its point of view. And I knew that it would make adults uncomfortable. And...it did [laughs].

CHARLIE HAAS: Obviously that movie is about

adolescence, authority and rebellion and all that stuff. And boredom and kids just being bored and pissed off the way they are at that age. But to me, it was also always a movie about architecture and real estate. What they did in Foster City and what they did in a lot of places then, was to build these things all at once—this instant community—and they'd have these condo developments that were called things like "Whaler's Cove." They'd have these themes. It was like Disneyland, except you were supposed to live there. I thought there was something really creepy about building the thing overnight. As a 14-year-old, you are sort of alienated and bored and angry enough as it is, but I think living in a place where there's nothing that you can turn around and see that's older than you are and the whole thing has this appearance of being totally disposable—I think it just kicks it up another level.

MATT DILLON: We shot most of the film in Aurora, Colorado and in the Denver area. For me, it was like another planet, surrounded by all those mountains. The west—I hadn't been out west. I hadn't even been on an airplane up until that point. I was 14 years old and I get shipped off to do this film. I grew up in the suburbs of New York, which was a very different landscape. Out there were all these brand new condominiums. There were prairie dogs in these fields—it was really kind of wild. Then we went out to Greeley, which is where...it was more like a rancher town. And that's where the high school was. And the kids we met in that Denver area, I mean, they were really druggy. I mean, it really was like that. It was a different time. There was just a lot of drug-taking going on as I recall. They were wild kids. There might have just been a lot of posturing too, but some of the kids that were cast were



THAT EXPLOSION...
IT LOOKED LIKE A NUCLEAR
BOMB WENT OFF. IT JUST KEPT
GOING AND GOING AND GOING.

right out of juvenile hall in that Denver area. It was an interesting experience [laughs].

CHARLIE HAAS: I can't remember exactly what Kurt Cobain said, but it's just a few lines about going to see the movie and I think the last thing he says, and I'm paraphrasing, "Over the Edge was a movie about real estate development." He was a smart guy [laughs]. Not everyone got that, but he did. Jonathan's assistant came to him one day and I guess this was early in the life of Nirvana and said, "You know, I got a call from some company in Seattle called Nirvana and they want to get copies of *Over the Edge*." [laughs]

JONATHAN KAPLAN: It was Kurt Cobain's favorite movie. I had never heard of Nirvana. I was just told that there was this band from Seattle that

wanted to get a copy of *Over the Edge* and I didn't blow them off, but I just said, "Well, if you know where to get a copy, let me know." They'd seen it on one of those off-cable channels and they tracked me down. They wanted to get a copy. Then later, a friend of mine—she was a big Nirvana fan—she sent me a whole bunch of emails, stuff from chat rooms where Kurt Cobain was just saying how *Over the Edge* was like his life when he was growing up and all those kids were just like his friends. It was really cool. But I didn't have Pamela Ludwig around anymore to keep me hip, so I didn't know who they were [laughs]. You know, if there was a music supervisor for *Over the Edge*, it should go to Pamela Ludwig.

PAMELA LUDWIG: It was purely by accident. I was 18. I was the oldest of all the kids in the movie. I was

really into music then, so on the way to the set every day I would bring my boom box. I would just blast music in the mini-van, whatever I was listening to. It sort of became a thing that we would ride and listen to music on the way to the set. I was really into Cheap Trick at the time and other bands too. And all the kids just clicked right into it and really liked it. So, when it came time to do the music, well, Jonathan was always really into music. He was listening to what we were listening to. So, that's kind of how that transpired. The same goes for the Cars. We were listening to the Cars at the time. I'm not sure who liked Van Halen, but it wasn't me [laughs].

MATT DILLON: The one thing I remember was the explosions. There was this guy named "Boom Boom" Johnson, who got his nickname for blowing things up too much. He got his nickname from, like, a John