

# Dazed and Confused

USA | 1993 | 102 minutes

## Credits

**Director** Richard Linklater  
**Screenplay** Richard Linklater  
**Photography** Lee Daniel

## Cast

**Randall 'Pink' Floyd** Jason London  
**Ron Slater** Rory Cochrane  
**Mitch Kramer** Wiley Wiggins  
**Don Dawson** Sasha Jenson  
**Darla Marks** Parker Posey  
**Michelle Burroughs** Milla Jovovich  
**David Wooderson** Matthew McConaughey

## In Brief

Texas, 1976, school's out for summer. Hazing rituals have begun in earnest, end of term blowouts are being planned and everyone is looking to get high, get drunk, get laid or preferably all three. The events of one night in a small town and a mixed bag of students from the self-proclaimed high school intelligentsia to the football stars, juniors to seniors make up the basis of the odyssey of 70's American suburbia.

As with many of Richard Linklater's films, *Dazed and Confused* takes place over the space of 24 hours, he takes a group of characters, focuses on them for a while and moves on, eventually interlinking many of the stories. Among the cast of then unknowns are Parker Posey in her debut feature, Ben Affleck and Renee Zellweger credited as 'Girl in Blue Pickup Truck', but perhaps one of the most memorable roles was filled by a young Matthew McConaughey whose line 'That's what I love about these high school girls, man. I get older, they stay the same age' pretty much sums up his character.

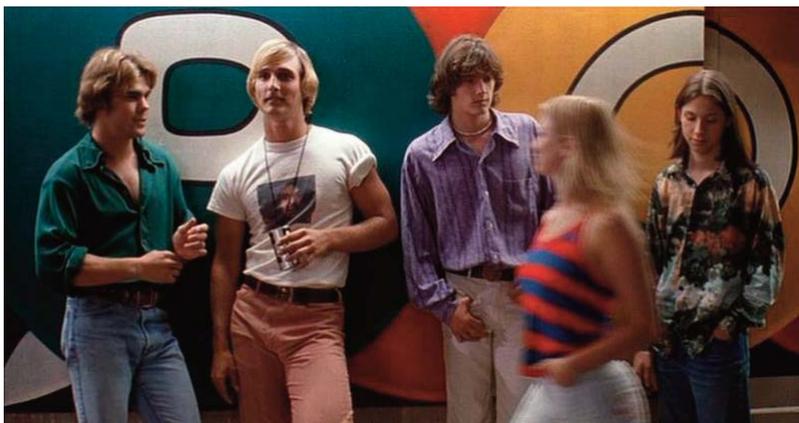
The title of the film, incidentally, is taken from a Led Zeppelin track, which Robert Plant would not let them use. When it came to obtaining the rights for 'The Immigrant Song' for his later film *School of Rock*, he sent the band a video of the cast begging to use the rights... this time Plant relented.

From Ang Lee's urbane but serious-minded portrait of the 1970s, *The Ice Storm*, to Richard Linklater's openly comic and lovingly mocking take on the same, *Dazed & Confused*. Linklater trades the chilly climes of Connecticut for the warmer skies of Texas, and he keeps the movie almost entirely focused on teenagers, but the theme is essentially the same: small towns confine us in roles we feel we can't escape whether we want the part they offer or not, and true freedom comes from shirking the expected for the desired.

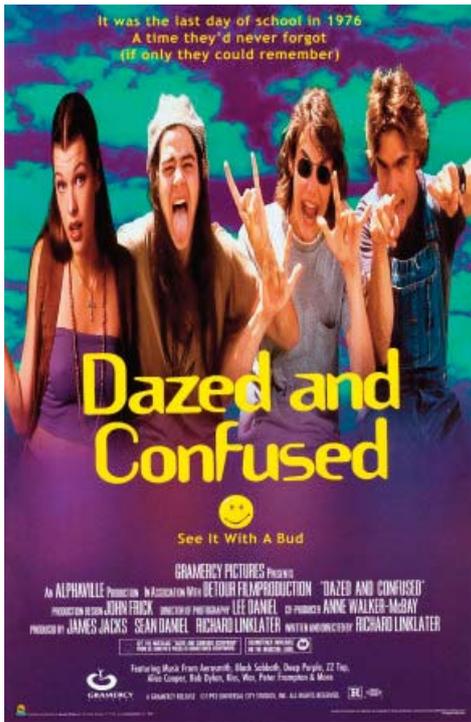
Interestingly enough, both films take place over a life-changing holiday weekend. This time, rather than Thanksgiving, it's a kegger to celebrate the start of summer and the changing of the guard from one senior class to another. Intruding on the situation are the youngsters leaving junior high for the hallowed halls of high school. It's a less stringent young/old dynamic, but it still works. Plus, given the lowered ages of all involved, on top of the fact that this is a comedy, the hopeful, carefree tone that would likely come in *The Ice Storm* only after the final credits is ever-present in *Dazed & Confused*. Some of the teenagers are already pod people, they just don't know it yet.

I posited at the end of my Ang Lee review that there was something of all of us in his characters, and that is doubly true for *Dazed & Confused*. High school is society in microcosm, with the same pecking order and the same personalities that we find in all walks of life. For myself, I like to think I was a cross between the Wiley Wiggins character and one of the kids in Adam Goldberg's crew. I was precocious and funny and able to get away with a lot that my peers couldn't (and often hung with an older crowd), but I was also too smart for my own good. Where I went to high school in the Mojave Desert, we had DPs, a.k.a. Desert Parties. They were no more organized than the big to-do in the movie. Someone would pick a location in the desert, bring a keg, maybe start a bonfire, and then everyone would drive out and park their cars and wait for the cops to chase them away. I maybe lasted five minutes at one DP in my entire high school career. I wasn't willing to jump in and engage. The people were stupid, the party was stupid, I was so out of there!

Once the cops broke up the party, a lot of driving around looking for something else to do followed. Cruising is its own American tradition, also celebrated in George Lucas' *American Graffiti*, which actually adds some credence to the theory of smart girl Cynthia (Marissa Ribisi) in *Dazed & Confused*. She suggests there is an alternating decade pendulum: one decade sucks, the next rules. Though Lucas' film was set in 1962, it was a period of transition. The kids riding up and down those streets didn't know what they were in for, they were still trying to shake off the post-war oppression that had settled in America's streets in the 1950s. (The British streets, as well. Listen sometime to the Who's Pete Townshend talk about the lingering aftershocks of WWII that he was rebelling against, and you'll find one of the most cogent explanations of where the Kitchen Sink filmmaking movement came from.) Coincidentally, *American Graffiti* was made in 1973, the year Rick Moody was wrestling with in *The Ice Storm*. Linklater places *Dazed & Confused* in 1976, when



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the U.S. was celebrating its birthday, an empty moment in time for many, with Nixon being traded for Ford and Vietnam still a fresh sting. Even with the "let's get drunk and party" throughline in the movie, there are still hints of politics in *Dazed & Confused* (and even more on the cutting room floor, as the deleted scenes reveal). The character Kaye (Christine Harnos), the one who sees "Gilligan's Island" as a fascist male pornographic fantasy and who seems to carry a dark cloud with her wherever she goes, is Christina Ricci's Ice Storm character all grown up. Not to mention that the teacher's reminder that the Bicentennial is as much a glorification of a blood-stained history of greed as it is a patriotic marker sounds like an echo of Ricci's Thanksgiving prayer in Ang Lee's picture.

Really, what we see here in the hazing of younger students and the search for substance-induced oblivion is a trade-off for the parlor games of the older generation. If in *The Ice Storm* the adults are trying to act like kids, it appears that they've punted the dysfunction down to the younger folks. As the sun rises on empty kegs, a few find themselves in the arms of another and at least one character (Randy "Pink" Floyd, as played by then It-kid Jason London) finds the opportunity to stand up for himself, but most just wake up hungover, still waiting for that something to happen that will make the 1970s and their own lives have some kind of meaning.

I know, I know. This is all making rather serious work out of what is essentially supposed to be light and fun. It's the nature of this kind of story, it inspires this sort of maudlin, po-faced nostalgia in writers. I think most creative types recycle their adolescence even on into their later years. The mid-life crisis is just a chance to buy those old tales a brand new set of clothes to try to make them look young, and being a senior citizen means you can

make the beleaguered anecdotes more wistful and far, far dirtier than they ever were. My guess is we have to make it mean something greater as an excuse to keep the whole charade going, and a lot of these theories about *Dazed & Confused* are really just confined to the four walls of my head. It wouldn't surprise me if Richard Linklater laughed and cried "Bullshit!" if he ever had an opportunity to read this.

Once you drop all the palaver, *Dazed & Confused* is an insanely funny movie. Its plotless nature makes it endlessly watchable. You could put it on repeat and just let the disc run, and I doubt you'd grow tired of it. It's not necessarily one scene after another of nonstop guffaws, but it's a comedy of behavior, and you're just watching these teens go about their business. What people do in their everyday lives can be pretty amusing. The few times that there is an actual punchline, such as Adam Goldberg insisting he only wants to dance, those are the only moments where *Dazed & Confused* loses some of its humor alongside some of its truth.

Like *The Ice Storm*, *Dazed & Confused* was a flashpoint of talent. Though a lot of folks we expected to be stars from this faded, Adam Goldberg, Matthew McConaughey, Cole Hauser, Joey Lauren Adams, Milla Jovovich, Nicky Katt, and Ben Affleck went on to enjoy longer careers. Rory Cochran surfaced again years later on television as part of the CSI blight, and I only realized today that Christine Harnos was Anthony Edwards' ex-wife on *ER*, the one I always thought he was crazy to let get away. And, of course, Parker Posey. When she cried out, "Lick me! All of you!" I responded with a yearning "Yes, please." The best choice Linklater made for the movie was letting these young actors loose to be themselves. While there was obviously a plan and overall scheme to how the pieces would fit together, there is an atmosphere of freedom that makes me suspect that within the delineated points, the director let the actors move however they felt comfortable. Though the movie wasn't shot in a cinema verite style, it has the natural happenstance of an on-the-street production.

It's funny that *Dazed & Confused* has become a cable perennial. You can see it on E! and I think Comedy Central quite often. The language has been toned down, made safe for the bullshit pact that television networks allegedly have with the public at large. It doesn't have the same resonance when the movie is altered so as not to offend. They should also change the ending so that Pink signs the morality contract for his football coach. Just as the kids in both *Dazed & Confused* and *The Ice Storm* have been let down by an older generation that has sold the ideals of the 1960s down the river, so too do these versions feel like Linklater has defanged his own rebellion. I don't really think that's true or feel betrayed or anything like that, I just stumbled upon the observation as I struggled for an ending to this essay. Call it my last stand, my own standing up to the coach, even though I know I will go on and next time I happen by Ben Affleck winding up with his wooden paddle on basic cable, I'll probably stop and watch until at least the next commercial break.

Sometimes that's the nature of things, and you have to just keep livin'. L-I-V-I-N.

-Jamie S. Rich

