

REMEMBERING THE HOLLYWOOD WESTERN

The American Film Institute defines westerns, as 'a genre of films set in the American West that embodies the spirit, the struggle and the demise of the new frontier.' The films speak to the struggle not only between right and wrong, where the bravest of good men are pitted against the vilest of bad men, but also to the pioneering spirit holding strong to overcome challenging circumstances with rugged, yet visually magnificent terrain and unkind forces of nature.

Westerns are about freedom, the pull of un-traversed territories and the promise of a fresh start. The best westerns, it has been said, had the right balance of gun-slinging action and a storyline and characters in which the audience could invest emotionally. The plotlines of traditional westerns drew their inspiration from Arthurian legends, oral tradition, folklore that grew from frontier tales, as well as Wild West pulp fiction novels.

Travelling vaudeville performances such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, which ran from 1883 through 1913, portrayed a romanticised version of America's Old West and were also a source of inspiration for western producers. They were, after all, the most spectacular arena entertainment, probably since the era of the Roman circuses. Indeed, one could possibly compare the 19th Century attendance at such festivals as the forerunner of the popular music rock concerts – they were smash hits not only in America but throughout Europe as well. With time, the Wild West Shows were naturally surpassed by the novelty and shorter duration of motion pictures.

Western films were typically set on the American frontier in the late 19th Century, during and after the Civil War or in the American colonial period. Initially, westerns were shot on the East Coast on location or on a soundstage. However, when the 1906 Biograph production of *A Daring Southern California Hold Up* was produced in California, studios took note and soon westerns were being filmed on location across the western territories. Popular locations included Montana, Arizona and the spectacular Monument Valley on the Colorado Plateau, found along the Arizona-Utah state line. Finding the right locations became hugely important to directors, who required 'authentic' sweeping landscapes to use as backdrops on which the story unfolded: many times it was equally as important as the stars of the movies.

SILENT WESTERNS

The earliest westerns date back to the silent era, to one-minute-long tableaux such as *Cripple Creek Bar Room Scene* (1899) and *Poker at Dawson City* (1899), which, though short, managed to establish some of the archetypes found in the genre today, such as bar-room scenes, crooked poker games and barmaids of dubious moral standards. It was, however, Edwin S Porter's silent short, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), starring Broncho Billy Anderson, Justus D Barnes and Alfred C Abadie, which really launched the genre as we've come to know it today. Other directors from the early days

of western cinema included D. W. Griffith, Lawrence B. McGill, and Cecil B. De Mille. There were many stars of the silent westerns, including William S. Hart who starred in twenty films between 1915 and 1925, Gilbert M. 'Broncho Billy' Anderson (who starred in almost 400 'Broncho Billy' westerns between 1910 and 1919), the wholesome onscreen hero Tom Mix (who was an actual cowboy and performed most of his own stunts) and Buck 'The Red Rider' Jones (the silent western's equivalent of Chuck Norris).

THE SINGING COWBOYS

The thirties saw the advent of many a low-budget western, and brought with it a new twist. No longer silent, thirties westerns boasted sound effects, narrative and singing. *Montana Moon* (1930) was the first of the shorter, more light-hearted and non-violent B-Westerns to introduce singing to the list of cowboys' talents. It wasn't long before Gene Autry (*Tumbling Tumbleweeds*, 1935) became the highest earner of the singing cowboy stars who gained fame and popularity during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Other singing cowboys included Tex Ritter, 'Smiley Burnette', Bob Baker, Herb Jeffries and Bing Crosby. William 'Hopalong Cassidy' Boyd, in his signature black outfits, had great success as a singing cowboy, starring in almost seventy films between 1935 and 1952, and even secured himself a role in a long-running television series. During the early 1940s Roy Rogers, on his horse Trigger, captured the hearts of the audience and he soon surpassed Autry's popularity and success. By the late 1940s and early '50s the singing cowboys left the big screen and made their way to the small screen, with many appearing on television shows.

THE WESTERN'S HEYDAY

From the late 1930s through to the 1950s, the genre's popularity soared. Many of the westerns' stars, who we recall so fondly today, got their start in the late '30s. Legendary actors like Gary Cooper (*The Virginian*, 1929), John Wayne (*Stagecoach*, 1939), and Barbara Stanwyck (*Annie Oakley*, 1935) graced the silver screen, and directors like John Ford and Howard Hawks (*Red River*, 1948) called the shots behind the scenes.

Stagecoach (1939) was Ford's first sound western and starred John Wayne, Claire Trevor, George Bancroft, Andy Devine, John Carradine and Donald Meek. The screenplay, about a group of strangers journeying across Apache country, was written by Dudley Nichols and was based on the original story *The Stage to Lordsburg* (1937) by Ernest Haycox. While the film was filled with the expected B-picture action scenes, it was the development of the characters and mood through intelligent conversations that helped to launch it into A-grade status. This was the first time Ford filmed in Monument Valley (which would become his favoured location) and he blended these takes with those shot at Iverson Movie Ranch in Chatsworth, California and other locations. *Stagecoach* was the film that influenced all future westerns and it made a star of John Wayne. Wayne would take the lead in four films directed and produced by Howard Hawks, the most notable of which was *Red River* (1948). This black and white cinematic beauty told the dramatic tale of a cattle drive on the Chisholm Trail from Texas to Abilene and the struggles between father (Wayne) and son (Montgomery Clift). The Hawks-Wayne partnership continued with *Rio Bravo* (1959), *El Dorado* (1967) and *Rio Lobo* (1970).

THE DARKER WESTERNS

Post-war westerns were more dark and brooding, and characters became more cynical and complex, with the clear-demarcation between good and evil eventually fading as characters that inhabited the screen gradually, and more realistically, contained a measure of both.

Gary Cooper's portrayal of lawman Marshall Will Cane, in Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952) won him an Academy Award. Cane was a former lawman, about to leave town with his new wife to set up shop and start afresh when his past, in the form of pardoned criminal Frank Miller and his posse, comes back intent on revenge. Abandoned by the townsfolk, Cane is forced to face Miller and his gang alone. The film took home four Academy Awards, including Cooper's Best Actor and four Golden Globes. *Shane* (1953) was an accurate portrayal of pioneer life and also highlighted the quintessential struggle between good and evil, and civilisation versus lawlessness. Directed by George Stevens, the film starred Alan Ladd as a mysterious drifter who joins homesteaders in a battle against cattlemen. While he helps to return the area to normalcy, he is forever branded a killer.





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MASTER DIRECTOR

Ford was undoubtedly the master of westerns during the sound era. Other notable directors of the time included King Vidor (*Northwest Passage*, 1940), David Miller (*Billy the Kid*, 1941), Michael Curtiz (*Sante Fe Trail*, 1940), and John Sturges (*The Magnificent Seven*, 1960).

After the Second World War, Ford returned to the iconic Monument Valley to film *My Darling Clementine* (1946), his sentimental take of the OK Corral shootout between the Earps and the Clantons. The subject matter wasn't new, there were at least five other sound-films based upon Wyatt Earp's time in Tombstone, yet it was Ford's adaptation, starring Henry Fonda as Wyatt Earp and Victor Mature as Doc Holliday, that proved the seminal version. (The screenplay adaption, written by Samuel G Engel, Sam Hellman and Winston Miller, was based upon the book *Wyatt Earp, Frontier Marshal* by Stuart N. Lake.)

Ford's trilogy of western cavalry films also boasted the sweeping vistas of Monument Valley; *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949) and *Rio Grande* (1950) shared a military perspective on how the west was won.

It was Ford's film *The Searchers* (1956), starring John Wayne, that would be hailed by critics and continue to win praise by many legendary contemporary directors such as Martin Scorsese. In total, John Ford directed fifteen sound westerns in addition to his many silent ones. Of Henry Fonda's 21 westerns, eight were under Ford's direction.

AN ITALIAN INFLUENCE

It would be impossible to discuss westerns without mentioning Sergio Leone, Clint Eastwood and the 'spaghetti westerns' that emerged in the mid-1960s. The term was used by film critics in the United States and other countries to denote westerns that were produced and directed by Italians, had an Italian-Spanish technical staff and mix of Italian, Spanish, German and American cast members. These films were filmed in Europe, predominantly in Italy and Spain.

Spaghetti westerns typically had an impressive visual style with numerous wide-screen close-ups, and depicted frontier life in a more harsh and violent manner than traditional westerns. That line between good and bad characters was also blurred, with complex leading men (the 'good guys'), often being cynical, detached, even amoral, yet with some redeeming character. The 'bad guys' had no redeeming features.

Sergio Leone's 'Dollars' trilogy – *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966) earned him the title of king of the spaghetti westerns. With a young Clint Eastwood playing the lead in all three, and a memorable and haunting score by Ennio Morricone, the trilogy is consistently ranked in the top ten spaghetti western ratings. Leone did borrow the plot for *A Fistful of Dollars* from Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961), as John Sturges did with Kurosawa's 1954 film *Seven Samurai* for his successful *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), but managed to create an independent film, which served as a template on which many westerns were based going forward.

Leone's epic *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), starring Henry Fonda, Charles Bronson, Jason Robards and Claudia Cardinale, is widely acknowledged as his magnum opus. He was renowned for his brooding characters, precise framing and the juxtaposition of extreme close-ups and lengthy long shots. So whether you're watching those made in the United States or those made in Europe, and whether you like your good guys good or a little dark, there are many sub-genres of westerns to suit all tastes. Besides the traditional or classic western, styles include, amongst others, revisionist, noir, horror, sci-fi, outlaw, romance, comedy and contemporary. Whatever your favourite style of western, get out the popcorn and put your feet up for a veritable feast of action-packed entertainment. ■ Clint Cascar and Lindsay Grubb

