

From Bronco Billy Anderson

to the new Sundance Kid:

A history of the Western

How an American Dream has changed

By NICK MARTIN

His name was Bronco Billy Anderson, and little did he realize on that day in 1903 when he gathered together a handful of actors in a secluded section of Brooklyn that he was giving birth to one of the most popular of art forms, the Western movie.

The movie they made, *The Great Train Robbery*, ran about 15 minutes, with the simplest of plots.

A group of bandits stop a train, hold up the passengers, killing a couple of them, and then are gunned down after a posse is gathered at a local square dance. Bronco Billy was the first of the cowboy stars, and as simple as his movie was, it spawned thousands of others to take generations of young and not-so-young galloping across the silver plains on their front row palominos.

The Western endures because it is so much our unique property. The West happened to Canada and the United States; it is something we and no one else in the world can claim. We are young enough as nations to have the frontier fresh in our memories, and we cherish that time, with pride for the frontiers we pushed back and conquered, with regret for the frontiers that are no longer.

Yet the Western is largely an escape from reality, a chance for a society to flee to another time when a man

had room to breathe and space to roam and values were easily defined between good and evil. We yearn for a simpler time, when a man beset by the problems of his world, gathered up his few possessions and pushed off into the wilderness.

But now we have no more frontiers, and values are changing too fast for many of us to understand, so we escape for a few hours into the haven of the Western. We see a time of black and whites, a time where there are no greys to tear a society in half, and for an all too brief time we find a sanctuary from a modern pace we cannot match.

Yet even the Western cannot escape the winds of modern change. For decades the Western was the tall American on his white horse, scouring evil from the world with purity in his heart and a gun in his hand. After the Second World War, that glorious image slowly began to tarnish, until today we seek refuge in the Western but instead are faced with the same questions in the Western that plague us in our own world.

NO MATTER WHAT the purpose of the Western, it has had one eternal feature for 70 years. Whether for good or evil, violence has been the be-all and end-all of the Western since Bronco Billy shot a railway guard and

heaved his body from the moving train. And if the Western is our own personal culture, then violence is just as much a part of the North American persona, and all the hypocritical speeches denouncing violence will not erase the fact that violent Westerns have survived for 70 years because we enjoy watching violence.

In its first 40 years, the Western was a simple affair, a basic clash between good and evil, with good men battling evil men for land and freedom and the honour of a good woman.

In those innocent days, there was no greater hero than Randolph Scott, the goddest of the good. Square-jawed and weatherbeaten, Scott was a man whose word was his bond, a man who put death before dishonour, a man who was everything America liked to think it was.

The underlying theme of these innocent Westerns was no more clearly symbolized than in Scott's Canadian Pacific. After defeating hostile Indians and outlaws to push the railroad through the Rockies, Scott climbs aboard an eastbound train with Jane Wyman, a big-city doctor, leaving his Indian princess behind on the tracks. But as the train slows to round a bend, Scott jumps down from the train, and the picture ends with Randolph and the Indian princess riding off into the wilderness. For a society with no more frontiers, the wilderness was a promised land which civilization and its emerging problems could never hope to match.

In 1938, John Ford created one of the greatest Westerns of all time, as he sent Stagecoach careening across the plains. Later to be imitated in dozens of pictures, Stagecoach presented a set of what would become stock characters of the Western: an alcoholic doctor, a fleeing embezzler, the snobbish city girl who finds the West dirty and disgusting, the hard dancehall girl with a heart of gold who has been run out of town and a sheriff taking a young escaped gunfighter to jail before he can shoot the men who murdered his family.

In the course of the picture they all reveal their true characters and come to grips with life. Thomas Mitchell won an Oscar as the doctor who kicks the bottle to save a life, and when the sheriff released the Ringo Kid and let him ride off into the sunset with the dancehall girl, he released a new superstar, John Wayne.

WITH THE END of the war came new values to replace old ones that could never be the same again. Slowly the Western began to change, and slowly the man in the white hat began to ride a little smaller in the saddle.

The first of the new Westerns was the Ox Bow Incident, with Henry Fonda as a posse member trying in vain to prevent the lynching of three innocent men. It was a stark and simple drama, which questioned for the first time the infallibility of the western hero.

In 1949 came *Red River*, and the Western left its morality play role and became adult drama. John Wayne portrayed a cattle baron with all too readily apparent human foibles, and Montgomery Clift was the son who turned against Wayne as he grew increasingly ruthless. In the final scenes Wayne atones for his sins and father and son were re-united, but Wayne had made the Western hero a mere mortal through the flaws in his character.

Soon after came Gregory Peck as *The Gunfighter*. Peck's gunslinger was not the glamorous figure that Scott and Wayne and Joel McRea and all the previous fast guns had been, but a running man, homeless, friendless, shunned and feared wherever he went, unable to relax for an instant, ever alert for young challengers, a man who finds no peace until Skip Homeier shoots him in the back as he relaxes for an instant to visit the wife who left him and the son he has never seen.

Despite their character flaws, these imperfect heroes remained fearless. One critic has said that the downfall of the Western hero came in 1952, when Gary Cooper broke into tears while writing his will in *High Noon*.

High Noon stands as not only a great Western, but one of the great films of all time. Gary Cooper played the marshal who hangs up his guns to marry a Quaker, Grace Kelly. No sooner is he married than word comes that a man he sent to prison is returning on the noon train to meet three friends and exact his revenge. Cooper stays to

face him, but finds that all his friends he has protected for years will not help him in his greatest hour of need. But despite his fear, Cooper does the only thing a Western hero can do when faced by evil; he straps on his guns, and goes out alone to meet his enemies.

THE CLASSIC WESTERN was made in 1953. Seeing Shane for the first time, said reviewer Judith Crist, was like seeing Hamlet and finding it full of quotations. Shane was an original, a movie that created the cliches of a hundred pictures to follow. Filmed in the incredibly beautiful hills of Wyoming, it was the familiar story of the cattle barons against the homesteaders, but so powerful were the performances of Van Heflin, Jean Arthur, and Brandon de Wilde as the peaceful settlers, Jack Palance as the definitive gunfighter in black, and Alan Ladd as Shane, the man who tried to forget his guns and become a peaceful farmer, as well as a dozen others in supporting roles, that Shane must stand as the best Western ever made.

Surely no Western ever had a more moving scene than the one in which Shane, after being given supper by the farmers, goes with Heflin to clear a giant tree stump from the farmyard. They work for hours, until finally Arthur suggests they use the horses to pull the stump. "No," says Heflin. "I've been fighting this stump for a year and a half, and if I use the horses on it now, it'll have beaten me." All through the night they work with just their own bare hands and muscles, but they beat the stump. It is the American Dream, summed up in one short scene as no super-patriotic film has ever been able to achieve.

In the classic showdown of cattlemen and farmers, Shane must take up his guns again and face Palance. In the final scene, his dreams of peace and a new life shattered, Shane rides out of the valley, as the young de Wilde plaintively calls "Shane! Come back!" until his cries are lost in the night. It is probably clearer today than it was to audiences in 1953, but director George Stevens was among the first to profess that the American Dream belongs not to the man with a gun, but the man with a plow.

The Fifties was a period of many superior Westerns: Glen Ford in *Jubal* and *The Fastest Gun Alive*, John Wayne in *Hondo*, Gregory Peck in *The Big Country*, Gary Cooper and Burt Lancaster in *Vera Cruz*, and Paul Newman in *The Left-Handed Gun*. But in 1960 came a Western that would establish the gunfighter as anti-hero and set the pattern for the Western of the Sixties.

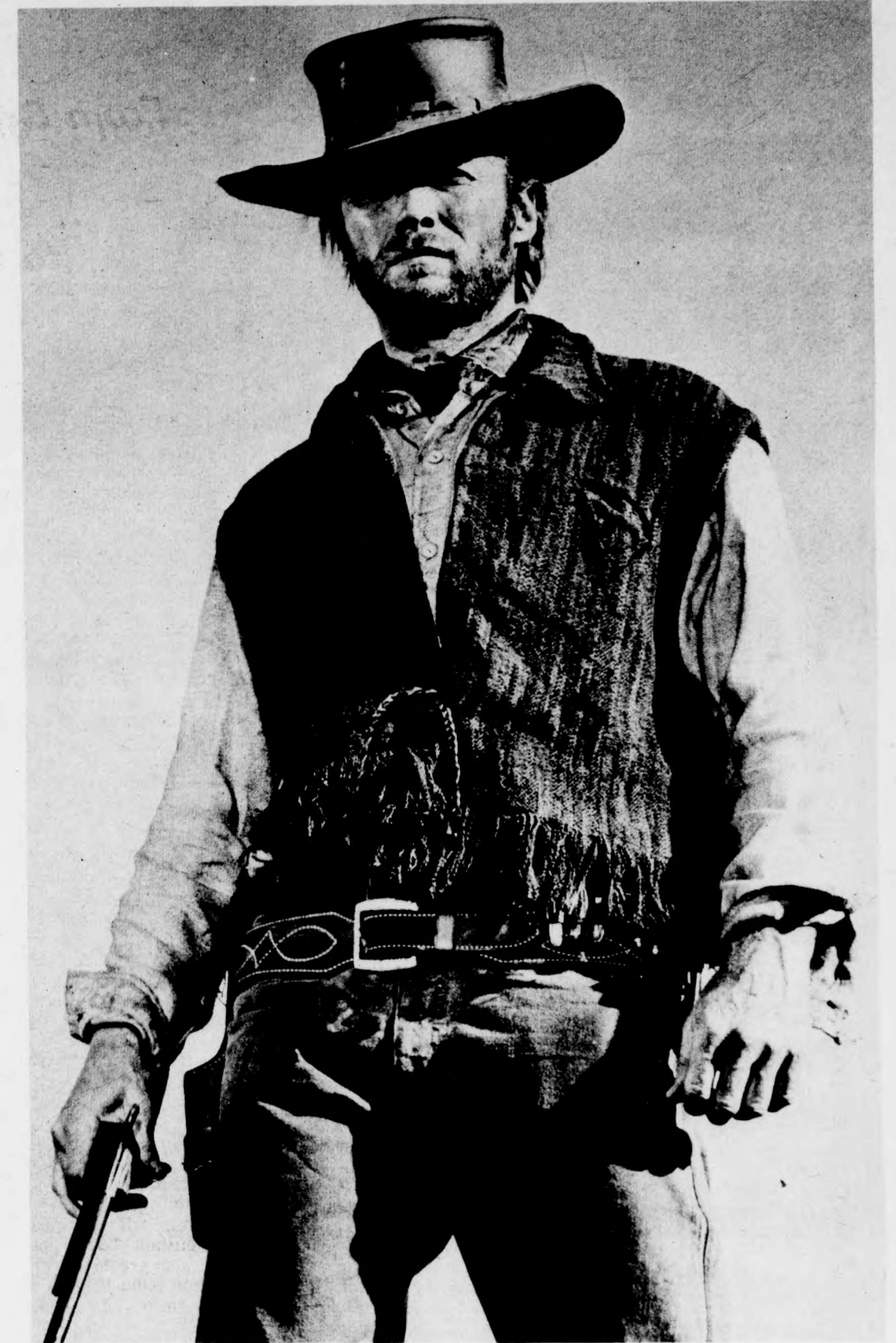
The Magnificent Seven, if made today, would probably be condemned as right-wing propaganda to justify the war in Southeast Asia. A small Mexican village is robbed of all its supplies each year by a roving bandit gang. The villagers, unable to defend themselves, bring in seven American gunfighters, who wipe out the bandits in a climax that rivals *The Longest Day* in the extent of its violence.

THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN was the culmination of the postwar trend. The gunfighters were not heroes in white hats, but lonely men, with no homes, no families, no past, no future, some hunted, some haunted, all with no assets but their guns, and civilization closing in rapidly. They envied peaceful men the homes and families they could never share.

The surviving gunfighters are invited to stay in the Mexican village. But they know there is no place for them. Yul Brynner sadly says, "the farmers always win," and he and Steve McQueen ride off in search of dreams that they can never own. It was a far cry from the days when Randolph Scott, Joel McRea, and Bob Steele were revered for their killing exploits.

In the Sixties violence and its role in our society were seriously questioned. There were people who attacked violence, but there were others who saw that violence was not shunned but hungrily gobbled up by the movie-goers of the Western world. Sergio Leone created the Man With No Name, a super-cool killing machine played by Clint Eastwood in a series of violent Italian westerns; a character strongly resembling that played by James Coburn in *The Magnificent Seven*.

Leone was simply an exploiter of violence. But in *Hang 'Em High* and *True Grit*, others made their case by advocating violence in the hallowed name of law and order. As great as John Wayne was in *True Grit*, and as good as



Clint Eastwood was a super-cool killing machine.

John Wayne was a new superstar.



the movie was as a straight Western, it was regrettably apparent that the Western has become politically-oriented.

The opposite viewpoint was expressed by Sam Peckinpah in *The Wild Bunch*. Going a few years beyond *The Magnificent Seven*, Peckinpah set a group of gunfighters in Texas in 1916 trying to pull off one last job in Mexico before admitting that civilization had made them obsolete.

Peckinpah had two purposes: to present gunfighters as dirty, illiterate, vile characters as thoroughly despicable as white mercenaries, and to splash the screen with so much blood that the audience would be revolted with violence.

Peckinpah failed on his first count because he made the pursuing posse even worse than the wild bunch, thus forcing the audience to choose between the two rather than to dislike both. And in the scene before the final bloodbath, when the wild bunch walk down the Mexican street to rescue a comrade knowing they will surely die in the process, they become such noble heroic figures in the Cooper mold that Peckinpah cannot regain his original purpose even with the bloody climax.

Peckinpah's anti-violence plea fails because his violence is the same as any other Western's: no one is shot anywhere but in the arm, leg, or the heart; death is instantaneous and painless, and men fight on seemingly oblivious to the bullets tearing the flesh from their bodies. He perpetuates the movie myth that bullets don't hurt.

Only once does Peckinpah come close to his purpose. One of the wild bunch clutches his face, the blood streaming through his fingers. There is a tenseness throughout the audience, but the man dies without revealing his face, and Peckinpah blows his chance to really revolt the audience.

The Western hero is a new man, a Butch Cassidy and a Sundance Kid totally unlike Randolph Scott or John Wayne. We question our world everywhere, and if we question our modern morals then we cannot spare that short era that we pretend represented everything good in our society, that gave us all those qualities we question today.

The days of innocence are gone, when we could slip into a theatre for a brief respite in a slower and less complicated time, and in some ways that is good yet is still a sad loss. But when it all gets too much for us, those easier days still await us on the late show, when the darkness hides our traces of civilization and the eternal wind blows across the plains and valleys, and in the moonlit distance you can almost see Randolph Scott and his Indian Princess riding to the tall pines.