

westerns



IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT KILLING AND WHISKY DRINKING. THE BEST OF THE GENRE HAD LARGER MESSAGES, TOO **BY MARK LUCE**

Stock Westerns still have the most hackneyed conventions — good guy and bad guy duke it out for gold or a girl. However, the classic Westerns always strove for something more.

So, how was the West won, at least on the silver screen? These films — what I call the Magnificent Eight — give complex, often disturbing answers to that common question. While I eagerly await the e-mails telling me I'm an idiot for what I left off, here are the ones that have left their mark on me.

8. *War Wagon* (1967) While certainly the least deserving of any film on the list, this John Wayne-Kirk Douglas vehicle showed seemingly every summer at the free movies in my hometown of Salina, Kan. My brother and I simply loved the gatling gun and our action-packed introduction to the Western.

7. *The Long Riders* (1980) — An extremely violent, somewhat sympathetic look at a quartet of outlaw siblings — Jameses, Youngers, Millers and Fords — as they tear through Missouri shooting darn near everything. Superior gunfights and a great period soundtrack by Ry Cooder makes this often neglected film worth checking out.

6. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) — “Rules?! In a knife fight?!” The great buddy flick with Robert Redford and Paul New-

man as two outlaws on the lam to Bolivia features one of cinema’s most memorable leaps.

5. *The Wild Bunch* (1969) — Martin Scorsese and John Woo learned plenty about slow-motion depictions of violence from this Sam Peckinpah blood bath. The film, when released, carried unmistakable contemporary echoes of the carnage in Vietnam.

4. *Unforgiven* (1992) — Hard to get better than Clint Eastwood’s Oscar-winning masterpiece. A gunslinger reluctantly comes out of retirement and faces a slew of bad guys, including Richard Harris and Gene Hackman. The film critiques the conventions of the Western, placing the existential question of killing right up front.

3. *High Noon* (1952) — A scathing indictment of the Hollywood blacklisting, *High Noon* features Gary Cooper as a sheriff suddenly abandoned by everyone as the dastardly Miller gang prepares to exact revenge on the lawman.

2. *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*

(1966) — Eastwood’s *Man With No Name* must work with the Bad (Lee Van Cleef) and the Ugly (Eli Wallach) to recover \$200,000 in Confederate gold. It’s a wonderful story of (dis)honor amongst thieves and the epitome of director Sergio Leone’s Spaghetti Westerns.

1. *Shane* (1953) — While Alan Ladd was a very short fellow, he rides tall in the saddle in this fabulous psychological Western pitting family homesteaders against an increasingly violent cattle baron. A young Jack Palance stars as Wilson, the hired gun and Shane’s ultimate nemesis. My father and grandfather’s favorite Western, has, over time, become mine as well.

And here’s wishing the serious Western, like *Shane*, would please come back.

Mark Luce, a freelance writer in Lawrence, Kan., secretly wishes he was a saloon keeper in the Old West. You can dog his picks by sending him an e-mail at mluce@earthlink.net

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