



TCM BREAKFAST CLUB SCREENING

Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid | 1973

Directed by Sam Peckinpah

Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid gave director Sam Peckinpah the chance to explore a favourite theme – the death of the old West and the struggle of the characters who helped define it to confront changing times. The two protagonists were once frontier buddies, but the aging Garrett (James Coburn) has now swapped sides by becoming a lawman with a mission to get rid of freewheeling gunslinger Billy (Kris Kristofferson), a serious threat to the burgeoning New Mexico cattle barons growing all-powerful in the area. Determined to put his stamp on one of the most cherished of Wild West fables, “Bloody Sam” feuded with studio bosses behind the scenes about control of the movie, as TCM writer David Humphrey reveals.

First, the facts: Billy, born plain Henry McCarty in New York, was said to have killed 21 men, one for every year of his life, but

historians reckon the actual total was probably closer to nine. New Mexico Governor Lew Wallace had personally put a \$500 reward on the 21-year-old’s capture, and the movie dwells on the last few weeks of his life in 1881. Garrett locks up his one-time pal for an old murder and Billy is due to hang in three days. Garrett emerges as a typical Peckinpah hero – a loner who strives to be honourable but is forced to compromise in order to survive in a world of nihilism and brutality. Garrett’s turnaround, a treacherous volte-face in Billy’s eyes, is brilliantly summed up in this piece of dialogue between the pair:

Billy: Old Pat...Sheriff Pat Garrett. Sold out to the Santa Fe ring. How does it feel?

Pat: It feels like...that times have changed.

Billy: Times maybe. Not me.

Elsewhere, Garrett maintains: "This country's getting older and I aim to grow old with it ... there's an age in a man's life when he has to consider what's going to happen next." But Billy won't compromise, a fact underlined by Bob Dylan in his theme song – "Billy, they don't like you to be so free!"

In trademark fashion, Billy blasts his way out of jail, goes on the run, and Garrett puts together a posse and pursues the kid through the territory before a dramatic showdown takes place at Fort Sumner, a flyblown cattle trail town in eastern New Mexico.

This tale of doomed friendship against the backdrop of the end of a chapter in America's history has death as its keynote – the death of ideas, a way of life, comradeship and of course people themselves. Peckinpah coaxes memorable performances out of Kristofferson, as Billy, and Dylan, as the Kid's chum known simply as "Alias". They receive solid support from a roll-call of familiar Western regulars including Slim Pickens, R.G. Armstrong, L.Q. Jones, Katy Jurado, Paul Fix, Chill Wills, Jack Elam, Harry Dean Stanton and Richard Jaeckel. Along the way, Peckinpah shows why his reputation for hard-drinking oafishness is unfair: In one passage of almost unbearable poignancy, Slim Pickens stumbles, wounded and mortally bleeding, to a riverside so that he can die peacefully. Peckinpah also illustrates the sheer mindlessness of the violence that characterised the era when Garrett and a stranger on a river board accidentally begin a meaningless exchange of shots. In another evocative scene that sets this film apart from other Westerns, Garrett waits on a porch swing for

Billy to finish making love before he kills him. Throughout, Dylan's melancholy score adds to the sombre, fatalistic tone of the film.

As filming took place in Durango, Mexico, rumours began to reach the studio suits that Sam Peckinpah was unable to work owing to his fondness for the bottle. As a joke, a photo was taken which showed him on a stretcher being fed whisky through an intravenous drip while cast members carried him. Peckinpah certainly fell out with MGM over the final form of the film. An indication of this is the fact that no fewer than six editors are credited, something of a modern-day record. In the end, Peckinpah was so disgusted with the studio cut of the movie that he tried to have his name removed from the credits, but many see this as a very superior work indeed and one with a sound claim to being among his finest achievements.

Further reading: "If They Move...Kill 'Em!": The Life and Times of Sam Peckinpah by David Weddle (Grove Press); Billy the Kid-The Endless Ride by Michael Wallis (Norton).

ESCAPE TO A WORLD OF FILMS THIS NOVEMBER WITH TCM

TCM's annual Classic Shorts Competition reaches new heights this year as it welcomes films from the whole of Europe, the Middle East and Africa for the first time. In a special treat, viewers can enjoy the winning entry and the five runners-up, each introduced by the director. Meanwhile, to mark the DVD launch of **It's A Wonderful Life** (1946) starring James Stewart, TCM screens a week of films honouring an American icon who once said of himself: "I'm the inarticulate man who tries". Elsewhere, Myleene Klass focuses on British film in another lively edition of CNN's The Screening Room with all the ingredients that make this programme essential viewing for cinema buffs. November's Must-Sees are **The Bridges of Madison County** (1995), a tender love story starring Clint Eastwood and Meryl Streep; **The Long Kiss Goodnight** (1996), a thriller partnering Geena Davis and Samuel L Jackson; gripping prison drama **Cool Hand Luke** (1967), with an Oscar-nominated performance by Paul Newman, and **10, Rillington Place** (1971) starring Richard Attenborough in a mesmerising portrayal of the mass murderer John Christie.