Cultural Daily

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Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch, 50 Years Later

Garner Simmons · Wednesday, July 31st, 2019

We are proud to feature this excerpt from Next Echo/Cultural Weekly contributor and community member Garner Simmons' *Peckinpah: A Portrait in Montage – The Definitive Edition* (this summer's hottest film industry trade paperback release, available on Amazon).

From the moment of its release, Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* polarized audiences everywhere. At issue was the film's troubling depiction of violence employing a relatively new technology—the use of blood packs and electronically triggered simulated bullet hits (known in the movie business as squibs). Two scenes in particular—the blood-soaked opening shootout on the streets of Starbuck and the cathartic ending in which the Bunch confront and decimate a Mexican army as they meet their deaths in Agua Verde—dominated the conversation. Either you accepted the film's depiction of violence as valid or reviled it. There was simply no middle ground.

As a result, Peckinpah's creation of screen mayhem has had many imitators, and the director himself has frequently been both exalted and pilloried for inspiring so much cinema bloodletting. Even today, labels like "Master of Violence" and "Bloody Sam" continue to be attached to his name. The irony, of course, is that Peckinpah himself despised such epithets recognizing full well that they undermined any true understanding of what he was attempting to create.

Nevertheless, fifty years after its release (and nearly thirty-five years after the director's death at 59 in 1984), the fact that the cinematic power of *The Wild Bunch* still resonates with audiences prompting legitimate discussions on the part violence plays in both art and life suggests that there is something much deeper at work. Indeed, *The Wild Bunch* can legitimately be seen as a watershed moment in American cinema. As a consequence, to fully appreciate what Peckinpah was able to achieve requires something more than a cursory examination of his demanding directorial style.

In April 2004, a group collectively known as the "Dog Brothers"—Peckinpah historian/editor/filmmaker Paul Seydor, writer/producer David Weddle, writer Jesse Graham, documentary filmmaker and preservationist Nick Redman and myself—returned to the Mexican town of Parras in the state of Coahuila along with Sam Peckinpah's youngest daughter, Lupita and Nick's brother, cinematographer Jonathan Redman. Our purpose was two-fold: to take part in a documentary Nick was making to be titled *A Simple Adventure Story: Sam Peckinpah, Mexico, and The Wild Bunch* (2005) and to experience firsthand the locations of a film that had so profoundly touched us all.

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David Samuel Peckinpah was 42 in 1967, a controversial writer-director whose small body of work—just four short years writing and directing television followed by three feature films in quick succession: *The Deadly Companions, Ride the High Country* and *Major Dundee*—was seen by a number of critics to announce the emergence of a major, if somewhat quixotic, talent. His open conflicts during the shooting and editing of *Major Dundee,* primarily with the film's producer, Jerry Bresler, had created such a schism that Bresler eventually had him barred from the cutting room and blacklisted in Hollywood as a director. This in turn would lead to his being fired off of his next film *The Cincinnati Kid* only a week into production followed by more than two years of virtual unemployment the details of which can be found elsewhere. His feature directorial career seemed to be over almost before it had begun.

Finally, after several seasons in hell, Peckinpah got lucky. Hired by producer Daniel Melnick to adapt and direct a television version of Katherine Anne Porter's *Noon Wine,* he was able to once again demonstrate his unique gifts as a filmmaker. This in turn brought him to the attention of two men who would change his destiny: Ken Hyman, newly appointed head of Warner Bros./Seven Arts and producer Phil Feldman. Peckinpah had met Hyman in Europe at Cannes in 1965 following a screening of a film Hyman had produced called The Hill directed by Sidney Lumet and starring Sean Connery. Impressed by the young director, Hyman remembered him two years later when he assumed the reins at Warners.

Having come out of the world of independent filmmaking, Hyman was looking for young producers and directors who shared his passion for off-beat iconoclastic filmmaking. With only one credit as producer, (Francis Ford Coppola's *You're a Big Boy Now*), Feldman was brought in to oversee the development of a project titled T*he Diamond Story,* an action adventure set in Africa. As a result, Hyman sent Feldman to approach Peckinpah about rewriting the script for *The Diamond Story* with a promise to direct if the script he delivered received a green light. Clearly looking for a way back in, Peckinpah accepted.

At the same time, Peckinpah possessed a slim, edgy screenplay titled *The Wild Bunch* by a writer named Walon Green based on a story from stuntman-aspiring producer Roy N. Sickner. Sickner had originally approached Peckinpah with a rough treatment of the project during the shooting of *Major Dundee.* Now with a finished screenplay and Lee Marvin—the same actor Hyman was courting to play the lead in Diamond Story—tentatively attached to play Pike Bishop, Peckinpah saw *The Wild Bunch* as a possible second project at Warners should the first one actually come to fruition. As a result he began reworking the screenplay for *The Wild Bunch* as well.

Several months later after Peckinpah had rewritten the Green-Sickner script adding depth to the characters and substance to the story, Lee Marvin jumped ship signing to star in Paramount's adaptation of the stage musical Paint Your Wagon. But to Hyman's credit, he felt so strongly about Peckinpah's newly revised screenplay for *The Wild Bunch* as well as his vision for the film that he decided to go with it instead of *Diamond Story* recasting William Holden to replace Marvin as Pike Bishop…

At the same time, given the debacle of *Major Dundee* and the years without work that had followed, Sam Peckinpah was acutely aware that his talent as a screenwriter had simply provided him with the opportunity to save whatever was left of his floundering directorial career. It is not surprising that Peckinpah's rewrite of *The Wild Bunch* solidified Hyman's faith in his abilities to capture his creative vision on the page. The newly revised screenplay was rife with fast paced action scenes and memorable lines of dialogue. However, it would be his ability to transmogrify

those words into images on film that would make or break him…

Haunted by the photos from the period, Peckinpah insisted to Feldman that the film's location needed to reflect that same look. Feldman agreed. But while both favored shooting the picture in Mexico, Feldman preferred the town of Durango, a frequent backdrop for many Hollywood Westerns. However, having shot portions of *Major Dundee* there, Peckinpah wanted something fresh, something that would more accurately reflect the look of revolutionary Mexico. As a result, he bypassed the Warner Bros. location department insisting the studio hire someone he personally trusted to do a preliminary reconnaissance.

Chalo Gonzalez had met the director on Major Dundee (he was, in fact, the uncle of Peckinpah's former wife, the Mexican actress Begonia Palacios who appears in that film). After sharing the photographic research and going over the script in significant detail, Peckinpah sent Gonzalez south. Over the next two weeks he traveled across Mexico's arid northern plain. In the state of Coahuila, he found the small Mexican village of Parras. Situated halfway between Saltillo and Torreon, it had the authentic Mexican look Peckinpah had been searching for. In fact, it was so far off the beaten path that in 1967 the town still lacked electricity. Further, in 1913, it had served as the site for several battles between Pancho Villa and the forces of Mexican President Victoriano Huerta. Given that The Wild Bunch would be set against this same historical backdrop, the photographs Gonzalez returned with from Parras fired Peckinpah's imagination. Preproduction now began in earnest.

On February 21, 1968 (coincidentally Peckinpah's 43rd birthday), Warners shipped the necessary production equipment to begin filming *The Wild Bunch* to Mexico. The Bill of Lading ran 144 pages involving 1184 shipping containers weighing 210,103 lbs. at a total cost of $304,139.46. And this was just the beginning. Aside from cameras, lights and sound equipment, the shipment listed five pages of weaponry including 35 Winchester rifles and 75 Springfields plus assorted shotguns and pistols plus 60,000 rounds of blank ammunition. By April 2, just one week into filming, Feldman was forced to requisition an additional 138 boxes of blank ammo followed by 20,000 electric squibs. By the time the company moved on to Torreon at the end of May, Warners would have to ship an additional 16,500 rounds of blank ammo as well. As the studio soon realized, Sam Peckinpah was not your average journeyman director, and *The Wild Bunch* was not going to be just another run-of-the-mill Western. Read the entire story here.

Image from The Wild Bunch. Courtesy Warner Bros.

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