Sam Peckinpah going to Mexico
by Paul Schrader
“The Wild Bunch is simply,” says director Sam Peckinpah, “what happens when killers go to Mexico.” And in the beleaguered career of Sam Peckinpah Mexico has become increasingly the place to go. It is a land perhaps more savage, simple, or desolate, but definitely more romantic. Sam Peckinpah’s Mexico is a spiritual country similar to Ernest Hemingway’s Spain, John London’s Alaska, and Robert Louis Stevenson’s South Seas. It is a place where you go to “get yourself straightened out.”

The Wild Bunch is Peckinpah’s first unhampered directorial effort since Ride the High Country in 1962. The line’s keening seven years had brought personal bickerings, thwarted projects, blacklisting—and belated critical acclaim. Critics called Ride the High Country an “American classic,” and Peckinpah wrangled for TV writing assignments. When Peckinpah finally regained his voice he found it had changed. The violence had lost its code, becoming instead something deeper and more deadly. The new violence responded to the years fresh in Peckinpah’s memory, the new mood of the country, but, more importantly, to a feature of his personality which had previously worn more polite guises.

After working for director Don Siegel and on “The Westerner” TV series, Peckinpah’s first film was a small-budget Western, Deadly Companions (later called Trigger Happy). “I always felt like an outsider,” he says. It was in the strong Biblical sense of the Puckabees that Peckinpah justified his characters and himself—and it is the desire to justify himself in his own way that has informed his early work. In High Country McCrea, Scott, and a farmer wearing a religious garb swap Biblical texts, each trying to make his point. McCrea loses the battle of the text, but wins justification in the battle of the gun. He dies at the hand of his daughter, but only one went to his home justified. Peckinpah has no qualms about adding the second half of the Biblical injunction regarding justification: “Whom he justified, them also he glorified.” McCrea’s glorification was explicit, unshaded, and shattering.

Honesty and purity of intent (and thereby justification) no longer come naturally to the Westerner (as they did to the Virginian); they must be fought for and defended. Peckinpah’s characters are ruthlessly cynical about ways to protect the Westerner’s code against the corrosive influence of civilization. This code is not a game, but must be defended in every way possible, even unorthodox ways. In “Jeff,” Peckinpah’s favorite episode of “The Westerner” series, a bare-knuckled boxer-implc complaints that the Peckinpah hero, David Blasingame (Brian Keith), isn’t being a good sportsman. “You’re a bad loser, Mr. Blasingame,” the heavy says, “I sure am,” replies Blasingame. “This isn’t a game.”

As in all Westerns, the gun is immediately behind the code. Sooner or later it comes down to killing. The gun is not a playing thing. In another “Westerner” episode, “Hand on the Gun,” Blasingame tells a cocky Westerner that unless you plan to shoot, and you don’t shoot unless you plan to kill.” Implicated in that logical progression is the fact that you don’t kill unless you have to, or you don’t kill without a purpose. In his early work Peckinpah clung tenaciously to the Western code. Ride the High Country is a great as a Western—so at heart it funcioned the way Westerns were supposed to function. But there was also a strong sense of expectation. Sam Peckinpah was young and strong. The code was old and weak. Something had to give.

But nothing had a chance to give. After High Country came Sam Peckinpah’s seven
lean years. Peckinpah underwent a series of reputation-damaging producer clashes. And as Orson Welles learned so well, once a film-maker's reputation is damaged in Holly-
woy nothing short of a miracle can re-
trieve it. No longer is the bum script, the me-
dding producer, the restrictive budget to blame, but the fault always falls on "that"
director, the kiss of death.

Major Dundee was Charlton Heston's idea. He had seen High Country, loved it, and pro-
posed Harry Julian Fink's script to Peck-
inpah. Major Dundee was Peckinpah's first
big budget film (costing $2.2 million) com-
pared with $813,000 for High Country). Pro-
ducer Jerry Bresler (The Vikings, Diamond
Head, Love Has Many Faces) was described
by a member of the cast as "wall-to-wall
worry." In a power play with the studio, Co-
lumbia, Heston and Peckinpah won the right
to shoot the entire film on location in Mex-
ico, and also, supposedly, final cut privi-
leges. But after the film was shot Heston and
Peckinpah's influence began to wane. Peck-
inpah's final cut ran three hours. Columbia
wanted it shortened, and Peckinpah cut it
to 2 hours and 40 minutes, suggesting that
ten minutes should go back in. But Bresler
got nervous, Peckinpah assumes, and cut
the film to under two hours. Peckinpah
asked that his name be left off the credits,
contending that the film was neither the long
powerful film he intended, nor the short ac-
tion film it could have been. Peckinpah still
regards his 2 hour 40 minute version as an
excellent film, but there are few to verify his
opinion. Against contractual obligations
either of Peckinpah's cuts was ever pre-
viewed. Heston was one of the few who saw it,
and liked it so much that he offered to
turn back his salary if the picture were left
untouched. Peckinpah also offered to defer
most of his salary, but Columbia won the day
and Major Dundee premiered as a double-
bill feature in multiple situations. The an-
onymous Newsweek reviewer knew where to
set the blame for the Dundee fiasco. His review
began, "Think of Yosemite Falls, or sui-
cides from the top of the Empire State Build-
ing, or the stripping of meteors down-
ward toward the earth, and you get some
idea of the decline in the career of Sam
Peckinpah. Like Welles after the Journey
into Fear debacle, Peckinpah saw his reputa-
tion plummet without being able to do a
thing about it.

Another Hollywood producer played the
next part in the decline of Peckinpah's ca-
reer. He accused Peckinpah of being a
"perfectionist," adding that Peckinpah wanted
to make a dirty movie (sex is a remark-
ably minor factor in Peckinpah's films, and
whatever there is is far from titillating). Peck-
inpa found himself on the street. A pro-
jected film for MGM and another for He-
ston failed to materialize. "I got angry and
named names," Peckinpah says. "Then I
spent three and a half years without shoot-
ing a camera. That's what you call black-
listing," Peckinpah says. "I made a living,
but for a director there can be nothing but
making a film. It was a slow death." During
those three and a half years he wrote a
western called The Glory Guys, which was
filmed by Arnold Laven in 1965, and Villa
Rides, which was written by Robert Towne
and directed by Buzz Kulik. Peckinpah's only
minor triumph during this period came when
he filmed Katherine Ann Porter's Noon Wine
for ABC's "Stage 67" program. Peckinpah's
adaptation starred Jason Robards, Olivia
De Havilland, Per Oscarsson, and Theodore
Kellie, and won the praise of critics as well
as Miss Porter. That year, the Screen Di-
rector's Guild ironically selected Peck-
inpa one of the ten best television directors.

In late 1967 producer Phil Feldman se-
lected Sam Peckinpah to direct The Wild
Bunch. Feldman's second producing effort
(the first was Francis Ford Coppola's You're
a Big Boy Now). "It was nice to get picked
off the street and given a $5 million picture," Peckinpah reflects. "This picture came about
only because of two wonderful reasons: Phil
Feldman and Ken Hymon." Although Peck-
inpa didn't have final cut rights, The Wild
Bunch was shot and edited the way he
wished. "A good picture is usually 70% of your
intentions. Ride the High Country was 80% for
me, I'd say The Wild Bunch was about 98%. I'm very satisfied.

Peckinpah's original cut of The Wild
Bunch ran over three hours. Warner Bros.
was understandably queasy about many of
the graphic scenes of killing. Two disaster-
previews (one in Kansas City, and the other
in Hollywood) had indicated some degree of
audience revulsion. "I hope you don't see
a pool of Max Factor Technicolor blood," one
UCLA graduate film student told Peckin-
pah. Warner Bros. stuck with Peckinpah,
however, letting him cut the film down to
its present 2 hours and 23 minutes. There
was never danger of the 'X' rating for vio-
ence," Peckinpah says, "We had an 'R'
right from the beginning. I actually cut out
more than Warners requested. There were
certain things Warner's would cut, but I
didn't want to do. I had to make it play better.
To make the film play better Peckinpah ex-
cised much of the explicit violence in the
initial fight scene, particularly the dismember-
ments, letting the violence come at the
audience more gradually. Included in the
4% Peckinpah regretted losing was a flash-
back of William Holden (in addition to the
two present flashbacks of Robert Ryan
and Holden). The flashback, which is curi-
ously included in the international print, revealed
how Holden had received a leg wound.

"On July 18, 1968 Warner Bros. cut five minutes from the
domestic print of The Wild Bunch. The original idea was
Peckinpah's, but Warners thought there were too many
theaters. Instead three scenes were excised in 400 the-
aters. The flashback of Ryan's capture and Hold-
's escape in a brothel was cut out, as was the
flashback of the death of Syke's nephew Crazy Lee
(Don Hooper). Columbia wanted to use the action to
show off their new color process. Warners thought
that they were too much of a distraction from the story.
Without the sequence, Mapache is only a comic relief,
a drunken fool. The reason for the July 16 cut, the New
York Times News Service reported, was to shorten the
picture, thereby allowing the distributors more
screening times per day. One theater, however, the
Pacific North West, ran the extra 25 minutes in instead
to insert a 'Tom and Jerry' cartoon. Peckinpah is no longer
very satisfied.

At one point in the pre-release intrigue of
The Wild Bunch Peckinpah feared that it
would receive the inadequate distribution of
his earlier films. "It was a funny thing," he
says. "The European distributor saw it, and
said, 'Roadshow.' The domestic distributor
saw it and said, 'Double-bill.' This time
Peckinpah won the battle and The Wild
Bunch came to be regarded as Warner Bros.'
picture of the summer and received a
massive publicity campaign.

The Wild Bunch is again about old West-
erners and killing. Like McCarren in Scott,
The Wild Bunch are battle-wary veterans of
many movie Westerns: William Holden (8
westerns), Robert Ryan (14), Ernest Borgi-
n (10), Edmund O'Brien (10), Ben John-
son (18) and Warren Oates (8). Warner Bros.
wanted to cast a "young leading man" in
the role of Holden's sidekick, but Peckin-
pah balked. "Someone said what about old
Ernie Borinone and I said, Go to it." The
year is 1914, the pickings are slim, and the
killers are tired. "This is about what Bill
Holden is today," Peckinpah says. "Fifty,
middle-aged, wrinkled, no longer the glamor
boy." Holden talks wistfully about giving up
the Bunch's outlaw existence. "We're get-
ing old. We've got to think beyond our
guns." "I'd like to make one more film and
break off," he tells Borgnine. "Back off to
what?" Borgnine replies.

On the action level, The Wild Bunch is
the most entertaining American picture in
several years. The pace flows evenly and
quickly, and the highlights seem to pile on
top of each other. The editing (by Lou Lom-
bardo, assisted by Peckinpah) is superb, if
only for its unostentationsness. Although The
Wild Bunch has more cuts than any other
picture in Technicolor, 3643, it flows natu-
raly and smoothly. Lombardo skillfully
intercuts slow motion shots (taken at 25, 28,
The Wild Bunch is a very commercial picture. Thank God, Peckinpah says, "I just happened to put some of myself into it." It is important to Peckinpah that The Wild Bunch be a "commercial" picture and play to as many people as possible. He wanted to recover its large budget (approaching, by common estimate, $8 million). Peckinpah's film speaks in common, proletarian themes and seems much more accessible to contemporary audiences. Its first appeal is to the vulgar sensibility: callous killings, bawdy jokes, boyish horse-play. The Wild Bunch flaunts its graphic violence and the viewer can hardly escape it. The best of American films of violence, The Wild Bunch has its own rhythm; it uses violence to excite and then applies more violence to its own ends, much like the Far East. Peckinpah himself, who assembles such indigenous, murderous American masterpieces as Underworld, Scarlet Street, Bonnie and Clyde, The Wild Bunch puts the violence in the film to work. Violence moves beyond itself, becoming something much more virulent, articulate.

Peckinpah carefully manages his violence, bargaining between the audience and the violence he is prepared to give. Peckinpah uses violence the way every dramatist has, to make the plot turn. Then he applies violence to the audience. The only way we really care whether it's logical if-and-so-what is killed; we need more blood to satisfy our appetite. Most "serious" war films are concerned with the process of violence, we simply want to see our heroes win. We want to see our heroes win and violence. Violence can then be either gratuitous or transcend itself. Peckinpah enjoys walking the thin line between the two. Violence is a very dangerous business. Much of the film allows the violence to occur in non-violent situations. When the violence occurs during the Italian War of Independence stand-off at Mepache's Aquad Verda encampment, Holden educates the audience about how the violence was used. The violence takes on a deeper meaning. Violence is no longer an issue of good or evil, but a tool to be used for political ends. Violence is a means to an end, and ends to an end. Violence is a tool to be used for political ends.

Robert Warshow wrote that the Western was a "Western" in the sense of "Ride the High Country." (Peckinpah's classic The Wild Bunch begins similarly.) The Western has a basic flaw: it does not mind being labeled "Western." Holdens' "I have never made a Western." I have made a lot of films about Mexico, I have made a lot of films about Mexico's history, its culture, its people, its land, its people. There are people who do not want to see the Western, who do not want to see the violence, who do not want to see the culture. They are not interested in the Western, they are interested in the culture.

The metaphor for the old men of The Wild Bunch becomes, ironically, children. Peckinpah does not emphasize their honor, but their humanity. The old men become the children of the village. They are brave, they are naive, they are innocent. They are children who have been taken advantage of. They are children who have been shut out. They are children who have been forgotten. The old men become the children of the village. They are brave, they are naive, they are innocent. They are children who have been taken advantage of. They are children who have been shut out. They are children who have been forgotten. They are children who have been taken advantage of. They are children who have been shut out. They are children who have been forgotten.

The new psychopaths in the best of recent American films - Bonnie and Clyde, Point Blank, Pretty Poison - have had a strong environmental context in which to make their killings. The term "delinquent" was coined in the Depression era, garish new Los Angeles, or the polluted Massachusetts countryside. Codless, Sam Peckinpah goes to the land he loves best to recreate and
nderstand his violence: Mexico. Peckinpah has lived in Mexico off and on during the past few years (a refuge from the Hollywood ordeal) and is a student of Mexican culture and history. “Mexico is the greatest place,” Peckinpah says. “You have to go there, just to sit back and rest. You have to go there to get yourself straightened out.”

Peckinpah thinks of The Wild Bunch as a Mexican film. “It is what really happens when killers go to Mexico. It is my comment on Richard Brooks and The Professionals. Brooks’ 1966 south-of-the-border adventure story treated Mexico as factually as did it the Americans who went there; John Huston’s 1949 Treasure of the Sierra Madre is much more to Peckinpah’s liking. “Treasure of the Sierra Madre is one of my favorite films. In fact, The Wild Bunch is sort of early Huston. Even since I saw that film I’ve been the story. I was impressed with Huston.” It was not so much Huston’s moralistic story which impressed Peckinpah, but his expressive use of the Mexican milieu (of Treasure the late James Agee wrote, “I doubt we shall ever see a finer portrait of Mexico and Mexicans.”). Mexico had lent a depth to Treasure, a depth Peckinpah wanted to pursue in The Wild Bunch.

Agee to the contrary, Huston’s characterization of Mexicans was not so much inclusive as it was stereotyped—a fault which Peckinpah unfortunately shares. Mexicans fit into pre-existing categories: federalistas, rurales, caudillos. Like Huston’s Mexican bandito, Peckinpah’s bandoleros speak broken English, have bad breath, and possess a charm in the sense of humor. Alfonso Bedoya’s Gold Hat in Treasure (“Boudes? We don’t need no stinking badges!”) is the prototype of Jorge Russek’s Lt. Zamora in The Wild Bunch (I “want to conduct myself with great bravery you have done”). Peckinpah wanted to show that the Mexicans (all varieties) were no less psychopathic than the Americans, but compared to the Bunch of Mexicans (with a few notable exceptions like Angel’s girl Teresa and the old Urueta) seem colonial subjects.

But The Wild Bunch is only secondarily about the individual psychology of the Mexicans; it is primarily concerned with the mood of their country. Peckinpah’s film is not about Mexicans, but murderous Americans who go to Mexico. Peckinpah’s Mexico is much more powerfully drawn than Huston’s and more accurately resembles the Mexico of Luis Buñuel’s films. Although Peckinpah does not achieve the individual Mexican psychology of films like Los Olvidados, Subida al Cielo, Ensayo de un Crimen, Nazarin, he is able to capture the irrationally savage mood of Buñuel’s Mexico. The comparison would please Peckinpah. “I loved Los Olvidados,” he says. “I know that territory well. I’ve lived there. I would like to make Children of Sanchez one day. The Wild Bunch is only a beginning.” The opening shot of the stung scorpion in The Wild Bunch is almost identical to the opening shot of Buñuel’s 1930 L’Age d’Or, although Peckinpah says he has never seen the Buñuel film (the idea for the anti-scorpion battle in The Wild Bunch originated with actor-director Emilio Fernandez, who plays Machete). Peckinpah’s Mexico, like Buñuel’s, is a place where violence is not only plausible, but inescapable.

Peckinpah was recently asked which films stood out best in his memory. He started to reply, “Breaking Point, Rashomon, My Darling Clementine, Ace in the Hole,” and then abruptly added: “If you really want to know about The Wild Bunch you should read a book by Camilo José Cela called La Familia del Pascual Duarte.” It is from the sensibility of Pascual Duarte, a seminal book in modern Spanish literature, that Peckinpah draws the frame in which to make the violence of The Wild Bunch meaningful. On the most immediate level there is an instant meeting of the minds between Cela and Peckinpah. Cela’s dedication to Pascual Duarte could serve as the front piece for The Wild Bunch: “I dedicate this 13th and definitive edition of my Pascual Duarte to my enemies who have been of such help to me in my career.” The Wild Bunch shares themes and sentiments with Pascual Duarte which do not figure in Peckinpah’s earlier films. “I’m not made to philosophize,” Pascual writes in his diary. “I don’t have the heart for it. My heart is more like a machine for making blood to be split in a knife fight...” McCreight and Scott were philosophers first, killers second; Holden and Borgnine are assassins first, philosophers second.

Peckinpah’s wife says to him, “Blood seems a kind of fertilizer in your life.” Pascual dedicates his diary to “The memory of the distinguished padre, Don Lazaro Gonzalez de la Ovaria, Count of Torremelza, who, at the moment when the author of this chronicle came to know him, called him Pascualillo, and smiled.” Peckinpah would like to have met a wonder man in Mexico. He was the most trustworthy man I have ever met. I would have done anything for him; I would have put my family in his charge. He took me for every cent. A true friend is one who is really able to screw you.”

Like Pascual the Wild Bunch disguise their barbarity in boyish innocence. Whenever Pascual meets an honest lay he adds (“begging your pardon”) and then goes on to describe the most savage acts.

Just before the initial massacre in The Wild Bunch the Bunch stroll insouciantly down the main street, helping an old woman across the street. Like the scorpion-torturing children of The Wild Bunch, the children of Pascual Duarte tease injured dogs, put them in a cage, and drown kittens in the watering-trough, lifting them out of the water from time to time “to prevent their getting out of their misery too quickly.” Like Pascual the Wild Bunch are picaros, men who roam the country in a never-ending war, spawing a rich heritage of death and suffering. It is into this tradition of Spanish suffering, the tradition of Cela, that Peckinpah thrusts his battle-weather Westerners.

Mexico represents an older, more primitive culture, a place whose violence can still have meaning on the functional level. As the works of Oscar Lewis indicate, the Mexican peasant still regards the macho—the Mexican Westerner as a practical prototpe, and just a mythological figure. Mexico is the ideal place for an old Westerner to go to give his violence meaning. The American frontier has been superceded by the more sophisticated mayhem of the city, but in Mexico there is an on-going tradition of significant violence. There you can fill a hero’s final day; it is shallow grave. In Mexico you can extend the external frontier, and postpone the conquest of the internal frontier. The Mexico of 1914 was The Wild Bunch’s Vietnam, a place where the last traces of the old fascism go to wear the sheepskin of purpose.

Mexico cannot justify the Westerner’s fascist vision—it goes to his gut and brings it to an honorable end. If Holden, Borgnine, Oates and Johnson do enter their homes justified it is not because of any intrinsic virtue, but because of the dying of the old. If it is deprived of both the mythical and functional qualities of his character, Peckinpah dies the only way he knows how— with his boots on. But Peckinpah has the sensitivity, self-awareness, and feeling for America and Mexico to give his death poignancy and art.

The Wild Bunch is a powerful film because it comes from the gut of America, and from a man who is a master of America’s gut. The trauma of expatriotism is a common theme in American art, but now the song there is the dying of the old in the life of Sam Peckinpah. The Wild Bunch became an agony of a Westerner who stayed too long, and it is the agony of America.