



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# Rio Bravo

Hawks' acclaimed chamber western is at once defiantly idiosyncratic (complete with wordless prologue and musical interlude), leisurely in pace, and engrossing throughout, peppered with suspenseful set-pieces and an exhilarating finale. The story – about a sheriff helped by a motley band of misfits in defending his jail from a murderous gang – is less important than the generous characterisation and meticulous balancing of drama and comedy.

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## Howard Hawks on 'Rio Bravo'

*Could you explain how Rio Bravo was made as a reaction against High Noon?*

I saw *High Noon* at about the same time I saw another Western picture, and we were talking about Western pictures and they asked me if I liked it and I said, 'Not particularly.' I didn't think a good sheriff was going to go running around town like a chicken with his head off asking for help. I said that a good sheriff would turn around and say, 'How good are you? Are you good enough to take the best man they've got?' And the fellow would probably say 'No' and he'd say, 'Well, then I'd just have to take care of you.' And that scene was in *Rio Bravo*. Then I saw another picture where the sheriff caught a prisoner and the prisoner taunted him and made him perspire and worry and everything by saying, 'Wait till my friends catch up with you.' And I said, 'That's a lot of nonsense, the sheriff would say, 'You better hope your friends don't catch up with you, 'cause you'll be the first man to die.' While we were doing all this, they said, 'Why don't you make a picture the other way?' And I said 'O.K.', and we made *Rio Bravo* the exact opposite from *High Noon* and this other picture – I think it was called *3:10 to Yuma*.

**Interview by Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1971**

'I don't think I've ever seen you like this before,' says Ward Bond's not-long-for-this-earth Pat Wheeler, early in Howard Hawks' 1959 masterpiece, *Rio Bravo*. He's talking to Dude, the one they call 'Borachón' ('It means drunk'), the same deputy sheriff we've just seen beaten and humiliated in the film's opening scene. We've not seen the actor playing Dude like this before either. The Dean Martin that sidles into that wordless opening with a thirst and a sweat on, his skin scorched by the Texas sun, is a world away from 'the coolest man who ever walked the earth,' as more than one YouTube hagiography of Martin would have it.

The erstwhile crooner's cinematic career was a curious one. Some 16 films as straight-man to Jerry Lewis's manic whirlwind preceded the Rat Pack's tabloid highs, before a descent towards the Bond-lamprooning lows of the Matt Helm spy series. Yet three films in the late 1950s suggested a different story. If *The Young Lions* (1958) and *Some Came Running* (1958) proved the adaptability of Dino's movie star charisma, it was *Rio Bravo* that gave him the against-type role of his career.

If saying that *Rio Bravo* is ultimately Dude's story ignores the importance of the film's group dynamic, it's safe to say that his arc provides its central

theme (one central to the whole Hawksian mode): that acceptance in said group is dependent on one's ability to perform the tasks at hand – on being 'good enough'. Dude may be the character most obviously singled-out as in need of salvation, but his battle remains explicitly his own – 'Sorry don't get it done, Dude.'

For a film that runs almost two and a half hours, there's remarkably little by way of plot. Yet the mastery of late-period Hawks – of which *Rio Bravo* marks the beginning – lies in the filmmaker's ability to hone narrative, action and theme organically out of character. The laconic approach to plot matters little when it's such a pleasure simply keeping company with the gang. Casting proved key, but Hawks understood the importance of gesture in building relationships between characters, and so much of the film's magic stems from moments of understated nuance, the grace notes of interpersonal business.

The dynamic between sheriff John Wayne and Martin is economically established up top, as Duke's entrance – towering over a cowed and humiliated Dude – sets up the power balance between the pair. We see the former-crack-shot deputy before we learn the reason for his slide into disgrace (a woman, natch), feel his wounded pride as he slugs his boss, before he later saves his bacon by making an outnumbered move on the villain. If the rules of archetype with which Hawks toys suggest Dude is set up as the tragic figure, it's the humour and pathos brought by Martin, the resignation and then defiance at his allotted role that allows Dude to transcend a familiar fate.

That the pair became fast friends off screen pays dividends in their on-screen chemistry, with Martin's deference to Wayne bringing out a paternalistic softening in Duke (he even calls him Papa at one point). It was Wayne's suggestion that he roll cigarettes for the DT-addled Dude, and while the dialogue that sees the deputy aspire to 'goodness' for his sheriff came courtesy of screenwriters Jules Furthman and Leigh Brackett, the adoring eyes were all Dino's.

The protection of the jail ultimately takes a back seat to Dude's readiness for the job, the film's emotional climax being Martin's triumphantly steady hand as the band strikes up 'The Alamo' again, pouring his whisky back into the bottle ('I didn't spill a drop') moments after having handed in his resignation.

The climactic dynamite-tossing serves up some gang's-all-here larks, a stage set for Dude to play his part. But really, it's as superfluous an excuse for on-the-job camaraderie as an earlier sequence that's quintessentially Hawks. The jailroom singalong may have been conceived along commercial lines to make use of Dino and Ricky Nelson's pipes, but it's a poignant moment for Dude and the rest of the ragtag crew – as much a close-knit reminder of what's worth fighting for as an expression of pure joy.

**Matthew Thrift, [bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk), 7 June 2017**

### **A contemporary review**

Although this long, conventionally outlined Western restricts its action within the confines of a small Texas bordertown, it gives an impression of breadth and canvas and something very like depth. The characterisation has freshness and contrast – Stumpy's toothless age and Colorado's baby-faced, deadshot youth; Dude's weakness and Chance's domination: it is set in its environment and developed well beyond the cursory monolith-and-baggage

format of most 'horse opera.' Similarly the episodic script, alternating a taut and explosive violence with romantic and comic asides, is effortlessly integrated by Howard Hawks with a kind of deliberate informality which is most notably successful in such cliché-traps as a singing sequence. An instrumental melody played by a band of Mexican saloon musicians broods sadly and ominously over much of the action; and almost one's only disappointment rests with the spurious quality of the studio-ish night photography.

## Monthly Film Bulletin, May 1959

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### RIO BRAVO

*Directed by:* Howard Hawks  
*©:* Armada Productions, Inc.  
*Production Company:* Armada  
*Presented by:* Warner Bros.  
*Produced by:* Howard Hawks  
*Assistant Director:* Paul Helmick  
*Screenplay by:* Jules Furthman, Leigh Brackett  
*From a short story by:* B.H. McCampbell  
*Director of Photography:* Russell Harlan  
*Film Editor:* Folmar Blangsted  
*Sound System:* RCA Sound System  
*Art Director:* Leo K. Kuter  
*Set Decorator:* Ralph S. Hurst  
*Costumes Designed by:* Marjorie Best  
*Make-up Supervisor:* Gordon Bau  
*Original Songs Music by:* Dimitri Tiomkin  
*Original Songs Lyrics by:* Paul Francis Webster  
*Music Composed and Conducted by:* Dimitri Tiomkin  
*Sound by:* Robert B. Lee  
*Sound System:* RCA Sound System

*uncredited*

*Sound Editors:* Wally Haynes, Seth Larsen, Billy Mauch  
*Studio:* Old Tucson Studios (Arizona)

### Cast

John Wayne (*Sheriff John T. Chance*)  
Dean Martin (*Dude*)  
Ricky Nelson (*'Colorado' Ryan*)  
Angie Dickinson (*'Feathers'*)  
Walter Brennan (*'Stumpy'*)  
Ward Bond (*Pat Wheeler*)  
John Russell (*Nathan Burdette*)  
Pedro Gonzalez-Gonzalez (*Carlos Remonte*)  
Estelita Rodriguez (*Consuela*)  
Claude Akins (*Joe Burdette*)  
Malcolm Atterbury (*Jake*)  
Harry Carey Jr (*Harold [role deleted]*)

*uncredited*

Bob Steele (*Matt Harris*)  
Bob Terhune (*Charlie the bartender*)  
Ted White (*Bart*)  
Nesdon Booth (*Clark*)  
George Bruggeman (*Clem*)  
José Cuchillo (*Pedro*)  
Eugene Iglesias (*card player*)  
Joseph Shimada (*undertaker*)  
Myron Healey (*barfly*)  
Fred Graham (*gunman*)  
Riley Hill (*messenger*)  
Tom Monroe (*henchman*)  
James B. Leong (*Burt, Chinese townsman*)  
Arthur Kendall

USA 1958©  
141 mins

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### BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

#### Touch of Evil

Mon 27 Mar 20:45; Tue 4 Apr 14:30; Sun 9 Apr 18:30; Fri 28 Apr 20:45

#### Wild Strawberries (Smultronstället)

Tue 28 Mar 20:50; Wed 12 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Fri 14 Apr 20:50; Mon 24 Apr 14:30

#### To Sleep with Anger + Borom Sarret (The Wagoner)

Wed 29 Mar 18:10 (+ intro); Mon 10 Apr 12:45; Wed 12 Apr 18:00

#### Rio Bravo

Thu 30 Mar 20:20; Sun 9 Apr 12:50; Fri 21 Apr 20:20

#### Aguirre, Wrath of God (Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes)

Fri 31 Mar 21:00; Thu 13 Apr 21:00; Thu 20 Apr 18:15

#### Last year in Marienbad (L'Année dernière à Marienbad)

Sat 1 Apr 12:50; Mon 3 Apr 20:30; Sat 8 Apr 18:20; Tue 18 Apr 20:45

#### La Grande Illusion

Sat 1 Apr 13:00; Wed 12 Apr 20:40; Sat 15 Apr 18:00; Fri 21 Apr 18:15

#### The Godfather Part II

Sat 1 Apr 16:00; Sat 22 Apr 18:40; Sun 30 Apr 16:30

#### Nashville

Sun 2 Apr 17:50; Sat 8 Apr 20:00; Sat 29 Apr 16:30

#### The Passenger (Professione: reporter)

Wed 5 Apr 18:00 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Fri 7 Apr 20:20; Sun 16 Apr 18:15; Thu 27 Apr 18:10

#### Pickpocket

Thu 6 Apr 20:45; Tue 11 Apr 14:30; Mon 17 Apr 20:50; Mon 24 Apr 20:50

#### The Portrait of a Lady

Fri 7 Apr 14:30; Wed 19 Apr 17:50 (+ intro); Sat 29 Apr 20:15

#### Code Unknown (Code inconnu)

Sun 9 Apr 15:45; Wed 26 Apr 18:15

#### The Lady Eve

Mon 10 Apr 18:15; Sat 15 Apr 12:40; Sun 30 Apr 14:15

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