



## The Wild Bunch: Sam Peckinpah, a Revolution in Hollywood, and the Making of a Legendary Film

*W.K. Stratton*

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**For the fiftieth anniversary of the film, W.K. Stratton's definitive history of the making of *The Wild Bunch*, named one of the greatest Westerns of all time by the American Film Institute.**

Sam Peckinpah's film *The Wild Bunch* is the story of a gang of outlaws who are one big steal from retirement. When their attempted train robbery goes awry, the gang flees to Mexico and falls in with a brutal general of the Mexican Revolution, who offers them the job of a lifetime. Conceived by a stuntman, directed by a blacklisted director, and shot in the sand and heat of the Mexican desert, the movie seemed doomed. Instead, it became an instant classic with a dark, violent take on the Western movie tradition.

In *The Wild Bunch*, W.K. Stratton tells the fascinating history of the making of the movie and documents for the first time the extraordinary contribution of Mexican and Mexican-American actors and crew members to the movie's success. Shaped by infamous director Sam Peckinpah, and starring such visionary actors as William Holden, Ernest Borgnine, Edmond O'Brien, and Robert Ryan, the movie was also the product of an industry and a nation in transition. By 1968, when the movie was filmed, the studio system that had perpetuated the myth of the valiant cowboy in movies like *The Searchers* had collapsed, and America was riled by Vietnam, race riots, and assassinations. *The Wild Bunch* spoke to America in its moment, when war and senseless violence seemed to define both domestic and international life.

*The Wild Bunch* is an authoritative history of the making of a movie and the era behind it.

## **The Wild Bunch: Sam Peckinpah, a Revolution in Hollywood, and the Making of a Legendary Film Details**

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## From Reader Review The Wild Bunch: Sam Peckinpah, a Revolution in Hollywood, and the Making of a Legendary Film for online ebook

### Dan says

In April 1969, I left a Kansas City theater amazed and virtually breathless after attending a sneak preview of a film that to this day remains one of my all-time favorites. Sure, I was just 18 but I had never seen anything like "The Wild Bunch." Nobody had. Sam Peckinpah's tale about a gang of outlaws trying to adjust to a changing West in 1913 was raw and bloody and made a point of showing -- some said glorifying -- graphic violence in a way that had never been done. Created during a period of historic unrest in America, it was a landmark film. W.K. Stratton's "The Wild Bunch: Sam Peckinpah, a Revolution in Hollywood and the Making of a Legendary Film" (2019) breaks down the movie's yearslong genesis, its gritty filming in Mexico and the sharply mixed critical reaction, with plenty of background and anecdotes on all the major players, including combative director Peckinpah and alcoholic star William Holden, a pair of troubled men who came together to create a masterpiece. Informative, entertaining and a must for fans of one of the best westerns ever made.

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### Scott Wilson says

#### Headline: Area Man Loves Movie

Stratton's book is way too long but does what it promises: Makes a reasonable case for *The Wild Bunch* as the ultimate he-man art movie. I'm convinced enough to re-watch it soon, anyway.

The book's short chapters make it go by easily. There aren't many people still alive for him to interview, but he makes good use of old sources and footnotes them diligently. The result is heavy on anecdotes but not overly credulous about the ones that sound silly or apocryphal.

The most generous thesis for Peckinpah's movie, a theory to which Stratton adheres, is that the movie is a metaphor for the violence and inhumanity ushered in by mechanized modern warfare in the 20th century. The film arrived at the height of Vietnam, in a year when cinema became more emotionally and viscerally brutal (*Midnight Cowboy*, *Easy Rider*, *Once Upon a Time in the West*). But this book — a critical but not judgmental elegy for a certain kind of bloody, tortured art, made by a not altogether rare breed of bloody, self-tortured men — reminds you, perhaps unintentionally, that we've since passed another latitudinal parallel. In our own new century, we're striving to cope not just with constant warfare (counting endless gun violence) but also with the fact that it remains, as it was 100 years ago and 200 years ago and on and on backward, primarily men who beget conflict and bloodshed. Fascination with wild bunches shouldn't be confused with mourning.

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### Karla says

Good in-depth biography of one of my favorite movies. Lots of tidbits I hadn't heard before. Sometimes I

think the author went overboard in praising nearly every aspect of the film, which tended to shove the book into superfanboy territory at times, but it was a fine & easy read. I did take issue with him saying the Gorch Brothers were the least likable of the Bunch. Adorable amoral jackwagons, more like. ;D

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### **Stephen Hughes says**

Paul Seydor, Garner Simmons and David Weddle are the authors of the three best books on all things Peckinpah, but this book offers some new insights on the greatest movie ever made. Well worth reading.

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### **John Lamb says**

Stratton makes the case as *The Wild Bunch* as the ultimate and best Western partly because of its realism. While certainly an entertaining movie and the story of its creation makes for good reading, if one is truly looking for realism, then *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, with its gunfight involving more hiding and evasion than heroic confrontation, is the more realistic Western. After all, Billy the Kid was shot in the back in the dark. I would imagine the Wild Bunch would have left Angel to die if trying to mimic reality.

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### **Patrick O'Connor says**

It was great to learn of the importance of the many Mexican actors who grace this film.

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### **Phil Overeem says**

I'm not sure how essential this is if you've read past books devoted to the film and/or director, but it's got great stories I hadn't heard, a passionate author, and--it's fun to revisit.

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### **Taylor Hensel says**

By far the authoritative work on what is objectively the best Western film ever made--and one of the best films ever made in general--Stratton's exhaustive work was filled with awesome anecdotes and juicy information about filmmakers, stuntman, actors, actresses, and everyone involved with the film, which is one of my all-time favorites. An excellent informative source, and also an exciting read about 1960s Hollywood and the rise of the Auteur Movement. Highly recommended.

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### **Frank says**

The Wild Bunch is probably my favorite Western movie. It came out while I was in college and I remember friends talking about the firearms used and its violence. I saw it and thought it was a great Western story and

it still is. The book takes you deep into the story and its development which gives me a better understanding of the depth of the story.

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### **Kevin says**

When Sam Peckinpah's **THE WILD BUNCH** hit movie screens 50 years ago, it revolutionized the western genre. In contrast to family-friendly films like **TRUE GRIT** and **BUTCH CASSIDY & THE SUNDANCE KID**, **THE WILD BUNCH** shocked and divided critics and moviegoers with its outrageous slow-motion scenes of violence. W.K. Stratton ("Dreaming of Sam Peckinpah") details how Peckinpah's seminal and visceral film originated and how the amped-up violence reflected the country's mood during the Vietnam War and college protests. Moreover, it explores ways the film challenged and overcame limitations enforced on 1960s filmmakers.

Stratton offers concise and perceptive background information on the explosive director's earlier career. When Lee Marvin dropped out of the movie shortly before filming began, the filmmakers convinced William Holden to join Robert Ryan, Ernest Borgnine, Edmund O'Brien and Warren Oates as the aging group of outlaws and bounty hunters hoping to make one final score by robbing a U.S. army train. Peckinpah and Holden were known as blackout drinkers, but both swore off alcohol during the shooting. Stratton does an outstanding job highlighting the essential contributions of composer Jerry Fielding, cinematographer Lucien Ballard and editor Lou Lombardo.

Stratton loves **THE WILD BUNCH** (he succinctly writes, "I've never seen a better movie"), but this is not a gushing fan letter. Stratton's meticulous research, exhaustive interviews and scholarship all combine to create a fascinating portrait of a maverick filmmaker working at the top of his game and pushing the boundaries of moviemaking.

W.K. Stratton's perceptive research into Sam Peckinpah's **THE WILD BUNCH** arrives in time for the film's golden anniversary.

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### **Bookreporter.com Biography & Memoir says**

The genre of Western films has a life as long as the industry itself. As movies blossomed in the early 20th century, the California location offered producers and directors fertile ground for creating stories of the American West. For whatever reason, silent films often chronicled cowboys as both criminals and heroes. By the 1930s, director John Ford offered the nation its first Western saga, *Stagecoach*, and its first cowboy star, John Wayne. Forget that Wayne was born in Iowa and was a college football player rather than a ranch hand; it was all part of the cowboy myth. Western-themed movies would be a staple for decades, and several of the all-time great Westerns can be found on the American Film Institute's list of the 100 greatest films.

*The Wild Bunch*, directed by Sam Peckinpah and released in 1969, occupies position #79 on that list, several spots below *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, which also appeared in theaters that year. W.K. Stratton's **THE WILD BUNCH** notes that the two movies had both similar and competing production tracks as studios, producers and directors labored to get their movie into theaters first to gain whatever advantage possible in the battle for box-office dollars. Stratton's chronicle of *The Wild Bunch* is a fascinating and detailed history of the making of an iconic movie that portrayed the West in a fashion far different from previous Westerns

while still maintaining their natural artistic progression. Along the way, Stratton paints a portrait of movie production in an era when the industry was undergoing major transitions. Like any good history, he provides background for the making of the movie, placing it and the industry in its appropriate historical context.

The saga of *The Wild Bunch* is an oft-told tale of the Hollywood industry. An iconic movie is a combination of many factors, some within the creators' control, some beyond it. The final factors that no one can control are often timing and luck. As Peckinpah toiled on his movie, he feared for his career as a director. He had been fired from at least two films in the spring of 1967 and in despair told friends, "They're never going to let me direct again." But while working on the script for *The Wild Bunch*, Peckinpah benefited from a development in an unrelated movie that also would be a major contribution to the industry.

Arthur Penn directed *Bonnie and Clyde*, which glamorized two criminals who in reality were ignorant and violent. Aside from the fantasy aspect, Penn made pioneering use of slow-motion and squibs, tiny devices that filmmakers employed to simulate a bullet striking a person. Prior to this, film edits showed a gunshot and then a bloodied actor. Squibs produced a bullet-like tear in an actor's clothing and an immediate flow of fake blood, allowing for a far more realistic depiction of gun violence. *Bonnie and Clyde* was a financial hit and pushed the limits of film violence in Hollywood. It also afforded Penn and other directors the opportunity to explore topics that had only been hinted upon in the movie industry.

Peckinpah had seen bits and pieces of *The Wild Bunch* story before commencing his work. A gang of outlaws seeking one final score before they retire decide to rob a bank. The scheme is bungled, and they flee to Mexico where all hell breaks loose. The shootout scenes are violent and unlike any previously seen in Westerns. Peckinpah assembled a team for his production that included actors William Holden, Ernest Borgnine, Edmund O'Brien and Robert Ryan. The violence of their roles in the film, unlike any they had played before, makes *The Wild Bunch* cinematic magic.

Stratton's account is mesmerizing. Countless details of the movie industry and *The Wild Bunch* are included in the fascinating history he presents. It was an era when the film industry was changing from a studio-controlled vehicle to one governed by individual actors and other artistic talent. THE WILD BUNCH is essential reading for film buffs everywhere. It has been reported that Mel Gibson will direct a remake of *The Wild Bunch*. Read this book first, as some sequels never do the original justice.

Reviewed by Stuart Shiffman

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### **James Higbie says**

I just finished reading this recently published work by W.K. Stratton on the making of my favorite movie and perhaps the best western movie of all time- The Wild Bunch. It stands as good companion piece to David Weddle's- If They Move Kill 'Em!

Stratton discusses the many nuances of the movie including themes, codes, loyalty, and outlaws living beyond their time amidst the brutality of the Mexican Revolution. The author explores the many complicated cinematic techniques that Peckinpah developed and the many difficulties he faced in producing this movie which some critics have hailed as the best movie of all time. Visually and artistically it is a visual step beyond Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian. I have easily watched this movie over 50 times from the time that I saw it during its first run in 1969. Seeing it in the theatre I was transfixed. Even now I still see things in this innovative movie that I had not seen previously.

See the movie, a few times, and read the book and you too can join the Wild Bunch cult.

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### **Chuck says**

Interesting book on a very controversial movie when made and now.

Good details on problems making this movie

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### **Jim says**

This movie, *The Wild Bunch*, is probably the ultimate "guy" movie. I don't know a single lady who cares for it, although who knows, maybe at some point in time, somewhere, some woman may have seen the movie without complaining about it. Could happen, right? Just like maybe, in these enlightened times, some guy somewhere might like soap operas. We can't judge that type of thing anymore. I first saw this movie as a wide-eyed teenager in Quesnel, B.C., in 1969 (the year of release). I left the theatre very conflicted, stunned by the action and a little aghast at the graphic bloodshed, which was new in the movies at the time but today is eclipsed on a daily basis by zombie movies streamed right into your home.

I loved it. I loved the message of the movie, the sacrifice of the self for the brotherhood, the subjugation of manly principles to modern compromise and technology. Subsequent viewings caused me to understand that the message is mixed and that there are some anachronistic flaws, particularly insofar as weaponry is concerned, but it remains my favourite movie ever, if you go strictly by the number of times I've viewed it...which has to be in three digits by now. I could probably act out any of the roles in the film without referring to a script.

Needless to say, when I saw that this book was coming out I pre-ordered it immediately, and Stratton does not disappoint. He has told the complete story of the making of this movie right from conception to the last edit. I was so envious of his interviews with the surviving cast members and other people associated with the movie. He details the making of the film clearly and concisely, takes the reader on the road in Mexico to find the location, explains budgeting concerns and staffing problems, and serves up many bits of enticing trivia pertaining to the actors involved. His chapters are brief, sometimes only a page and a half in length, which sort of causes the book to move right along much like the action in the movie itself.

I loved it. Just loved it, and will probably read it many times. So why only 4 stars? Mr Stratton got under my collar with the photographs. He went to the trouble of getting rare photos of the actors and scenes from the film, and then scatters them throughout the book in reduced size and printed on the same paper as the print. Why oh fucking why would you do that, Sir? Whatever happened to the day when the printed photograph was printed on glossy paper, often with onionskin inserted between the pages? Is it to save a few measly bucks? I would have happily paid more for a better book. However, I am somewhat mollified by the *Sources* section which I have already started to mine for Peckinpah and Wild Bunch-related literature.

If you are a fan of *The Wild Bunch*, I have no reservations about recommending this book to you. I'm going to go and watch the DVD.

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## **Erik says**

Right before you read this book, I'd highly recommend that you re-watch the film. This was an interesting and very detailed behind-the-scenes look at the movie, from pre-production to filming to release.

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