

Film Close-Up: Peter Fonda

by Joey_Berlin

Peter Fonda, a grizzled veteran of several Westerns, climbs back into the saddle for "3:10 to Yuma," a mythic morality tale of the Old West that reinvigorates the classic American film genre.

PETER FONDA - Peter Fonda plays Pinkerton guard Byron McElroy in the Western drama '3:10 to Yuma.' CNS Photo courtesy of Richard Foreman. Co-starring opposite Russell Crowe, who plays cold-hearted killer Ben Wade, Fonda portrays a character who does not appear in the original Elmore Leonard story. He is a bounty hunter, the only survivor of a stagecoach bushwhacking by the notorious outlaw and his crew. Along with star Christian Bale, Fonda aims to put the criminal on a train, the "3:10 to Yuma," which will send him to face justice.

Fonda's relationship with Westerns goes all the way back to the early 1960s and bit parts in "The Rounders" and TV's "Wagon Train." He shot to prominence with a 1966 biker film, "The Wild Angels," and a 1967 druggie film, "The Trip." Those were followed by the 1969 biker-druggie film "Easy Rider," which momentarily rocked Hollywood to its core. Only a handful of his movies since then, including "The Limey," his Oscar-nominated performance in "Ulee's Gold" and his supporting turn in the hit "Ghost Rider" have received a lot of mainstream attention.

Now 67, Fonda is, of course, part of an estimable acting dynasty. He is the son of Henry Fonda, brother of Jane, father of Bridget (and father-in-law of her husband, film composer Danny Elfman) and uncle of Troy Garity.

Q: You have had a long relationship with Westerns and unlike some recent examples of the genre, "3:10 to Yuma" really embraces the spirit of the traditional Hollywood Western. Is that refreshing to you?

A: In many ways it does embrace the genre. What director Jim Mangold has been able to do is give us a journey. And on this journey that we take, we learn much more about the characters and the conflicts between them. I've always thought that a journey is essential to a Western. All my favorite Westerns, with the exception of "The Ox-Bow Incident," deal with a journey. Yeah, Westerns I think are ways of telling about our existence in this "now." Mr. Mangold uses a term which I think is fabulous - I told him I'd give him credit,

too - called "fever dream." And I thought, what an interesting way to describe it. This is a fever dream. And it's quite cool.

Q: How did you approach your role as the bounty hunter, a character who is not in the original film. What is his emotional baggage, his back story, as you saw it?

A: He's a very taciturn and stern and flinty guy, my character, Byron McElroy. Playing a bounty hunter? Yeah, I liked that idea. I think that the back story is not really investigated, nor should it be. But you have a feeling that I've known Ben Wade. I've probably hunted him down, and maybe one of the bullets I took was from his gun. And I am determined to put that guy on that train and take him into Yuma and see him hanged.

Q: Were you able to use the dirty, dusty set to enhance your performance?

A: Dirty? I'm telling you, I was down on the ground eating that dust, day after day. The wind was blowing it, and still the make-up people would throw it at me in the morning. I'd say, "It's going to happen anyway. Within an hour I'm going to look like this dude crawling through the dust." It was pretty dramatic in that sense. And it was not in the script that we would be doing that, but it gave us all something to deal with. The wind, it was cold, every day was dusty. It was an element that I thought Jim Mangold used very well, and it was an element that I couldn't help use.

Q: The grime certainly looks authentic.

A: Yeah, we had elements we had to deal with outside during our shooting which were not that far off from the elements that people dealt with in the days of 1881. But at the same time, we did go back to relatively comfortable rooms at night and had some food to eat. That was nice. That part was cool. We liked that part a lot.

Q: Why haven't we seen Hollywood making more Westerns lately?

A: Well you've heard the axiom: "Western's don't make money!" That's why we don't see the Westerns. So then explain to me "Dances with Wolves," "Unforgiven" and so forth, you know? I loved "Silverado!" So there are Westerns that are good and they make dough and they make good social comments. But Hollywood sticks to its axiom.

Q: "Easy Rider" is frequently pointed to as a turning point, when studios realized they could reach an audience with something which was not mainstream. What happened with that idea?

A: You know, we made an independent film when we started "Easy Rider," and we were totally independent of the studio. And Columbia hated us, in fact, when we came together as a cut piece. They hate us now. They hated us for years until of course, they stole the film in arbitration. They bought a judge and now they own the film. Suddenly there's lunch pails out there with me and Hopper's face on them. I went after them for merchandising, just for the posters, back in 1971 and they didn't want it then.

Q: But what happened to innovative films coming out of the studios?

A: What happened is they all got scared. They didn't want to make that kind of a movie. They didn't know how to make that kind of movie. Something that cost less made it harder to cook the books. They just got scared. They don't want to make a movie under a certain amount of dollars now because they do not feel it's something that they can market properly. If it didn't cost 50 million bucks they don't want to be dealing with it. They think a 20-million-dollar film is a low-budget film. For me, my goodness! I wouldn't know how to spend the dough.

