

Ten Classic Westerns You Absolutely Must See Before You Die

It's a sadly overlooked genre

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Source: [Turner Classic Movies](#)

The confluence of two recent events has rekindled a flame of sorts that should never have been allowed to dwindle to embers. Reading several articles by intrepid film critic combined with a late-night discovery of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* on Amazon Prime reminded me of something very important: I love Western movies. I am not talking about Western vs. Eastern, as in Hollywood vs.

Bollywood; I mean good old cowboys on the open trail, John Wayne and Gary Cooper and Clint Eastwood Westerns.

It is a genre that once dominated the movies but has all but died out over the past several decades. Occasionally an acclaimed Western will pop up, and there will be talk of a resurgence of the genre, then nothing. This is a shame, in no small part because so many of the films we love are nothing more than Westerns in a different setting. For example, *Star Wars* is simply a classic Western set in space, right down to innocent farm boy Luke Skywalker, rogue cowboy Han Solo, and black-hatted (well, black-helmeted) Darth Vader.

Westerns are a uniquely American form of cinema (I think I stole that line from Simon), and as such should never be allowed to fade out of existence. Some of the greatest films ever made were Westerns, right up there with *Lawrence of Arabia* (a Western with camels) and *The Godfather* (a Western with Italians). What follows are ten Westerns everyone should see before they shuffle off to the great roundup in the sky. Not all will show up on the list of greatest Westerns of all time, and several on that list won't show up here. These are simply my personal favorites, and they are in no particular order.

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969). Part buddy film, part comedy, and all Western, the chemistry of Paul Newman and Robert Redford alone make this one of

the greatest films ever. Like *The Godfather*, it also contains dialogue people quote decades later, often not even knowing where it originally came from. These include "I've got vision and the rest of the world wears bifocals," "You just keep thinking, Butch. It's what you're good at," and my all-time favorite, "Think you used enough dynamite there, Butch?" The cinematography is breathtaking, and the final scene is one of the most iconic in movie history.

***True Grit* (1969).** I list the John Wayne original while fully acknowledging the greatness of the 2010 Jeff Bridges remake. This one is special to me for a personal reason. As a kid growing up, the only person I wanted to be besides Springsteen and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (best basketball player ever; better than Jordan, better than LeBron, better than anyone) was John Wayne. A few years back when the retina in my left eye detached and I had to wear an eye patch for a bit, I finally got to be the *True Grit* version of the Duke: a one-eyed fat man. And oh my lord, that climactic scene.

***Silverado* (1985).** Many thought this might just be the film that started a renaissance of Western movies. It has a great cast (including Kevin Cline, Jeff Goldblum, Scott Glenn, Danny Glover, Linda Hunt, and Kevin Costner) and a great villain in Brian Dennehy. It was directed by Lawrence Kasdan and co-written by Kasdan and his brother Mark, following his co-writing work on three little films called *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and *Return of the Jedi*. It was everything a Western, and a movie in

general, is supposed to be. Even this wasn't enough to spark a Western resurgence.

Tombstone (1993). Another film that should have been the start of a Western comeback, this one has virtually no flaws from the standpoint of the genre. Kurt Russell played Wyatt Earp to perfection, Sam Elliott was his usual cowboy self, and Val Kilmer *became* Doc Holiday. This was easily Kilmer's finest role, and the fact that he was not even *nominated* for an Academy Award is beyond belief. And really, does it get any more Western than the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral? It's the best Western made in the past 30 years, and was what my best man used to calm me down the day of my wedding.

Rio Bravo (1959). I know I said I was not putting these in any order of preference, but I must admit this one is probably tied with *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* as my all-time favorite Western. For my money, it's the best John Wayne movie ever, and that includes the other two on this list. In *Rio Bravo*, both Dean Martin and a young Ricky Nelson sing, which automatically elevates the film to a new level. Walter Brennan adds some comic relief as well, but in the end this is the Duke being the Duke. You can't go wrong with that.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly (1966). *Unforgiven* is often considered the best Western ever made (it's not), but this conclusion to Sergio Leone's amazing Man With No Name trilogy (following *A Fistful of Dollars* and *For a Few*

Dollars More) is the Clint Eastwood Western I love most. This is the role that made Eastwood a star, but Eli Wallach and Lee Van Cleef are equally good as the three try to beat each other to a horde of Confederate gold. You may have never seen the film, but you've heard Ennio Morricone's score:

The Long Riders (1980). When it was first released, the film got more attention for having actual brothers playing the brothers in the film than for the film itself: James and Stacy Keach play Jesse and Frank James, David, Keith, and Robert Carradine play Cole, Jim, and Bob Younger, and Dennis and Randy Quaid play Ed and Clell Miller. This is no novelty piece though; it is easily my favorite of the many films (some good and some horrible) that portray the life of Jesse James and his gang. It is a bit different than most others listed here in one respect: while it is Western in time period, spirit, and action, it is technically not set in the Old West. Most of the action takes place in the Midwest, specifically Missouri.

The Searchers (1956). This is the film many critics place at the top of their best Western list, and with good reason. It was the greatest film that John Wayne and John Ford made together, and they made several. It's Wayne's most complex and interesting role; he plays Ethan Edwards, an ex-Confederate soldier consumed with and driven by hatred for the Comanches who killed his brother and kidnapped his nieces. His search for them and the eventual outcome is debated by critics to this day, with many troubled by what

they consider his racist views towards the Comanches. In my opinion, this is simply “woke” revisionist history; without his all-consuming rage, neither the character nor the film would hold the power it does. Martin Scorsese has compared it to Ahab’s maniacal pursuit of Moby Dick, which seems spot on to me. And visually it is one gorgeous film.



Image: Warner Brothers

***Django Unchained* (2012).** It was inevitable that Quentin Tarantino would make a Western eventually (he made another with 2015's *The Hateful Eight*). And though like *The Long Riders* this one is not technically set in the West, that does not in any way detract from its brilliance. Christoph Waltz, Samuel L. Jackson, and Leonardo DiCaprio give the Oscar-level performances we have come to expect, but the star here is Jamie Foxx, in his best performance since 2004's *Ray*. It has cracking dialogue and action scenes that only Tarantino could pull off.

Young Guns (1988) and Young Guns II (1990). I am counting these two films about legendary outlaw Billy the Kid as one, because they should always be watched together with only a short intermission between films. I also freely admit that neither film is likely to show up on a "best of" list, and I make no apologies; both movies are just plain fun, something sorely lacking in too many films today. With a cast of what was then the hottest young actors in Hollywood, including Emilio Estevez, Kiefer Sutherland, Lou Diamond Phillips, Charlie Sheen, and Christian Slater, it made the Western cool for a whole new generation. In a nod to the past, the first film starred Western movie legend Jack Palance as the villain and John Wayne's son Patrick as Pat Garrett, while the second featured James Coburn, who also starred in the final film on my list.

The Magnificent Seven (1960). I know this makes 11 movies instead of the 10 in the title (12 if you count both *Young Guns*), but I could not leave off a film that is both a classic Western and stars maybe the coolest man to ever walk the planet: Steve McQueen. Why was he not in the earlier list of people I wanted to be growing up? Because I am not worthy to even *want* to be Steve McQueen. I aspire to be Bruce; Bruce aspires to be Steve McQueen (he even wears the same Rolex Submariner watch McQueen wore). To be fair, Yul Brynner was pretty damn cool in the lead role as well, and I liked that the filmmakers stated in the opening credits that it was based on Akira Kurosawa's legendary 1954 film *Seven Samurai*.



The King of Cool (Image: United Artists)

There are many more I could have included here, from *Once Upon a Time in the West* to *High Noon* (in fact, I should have included them, so act like I did and watch those as well). It's a wonderful and too often dismissed genre, and one you'll be glad you gave a second (or first) chance. Grab your boots and hat, and let's go to the movies.