

## Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid



Poster by Tom Beauvais Courtesy Wikipedia

Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by George Roy Hill. Produced by John Foreman. Screenplay by William Goldman. Cinematography by Conrad Hall. Art Direction by Jack Martin Smith & Philip M. Jefferies. Music by Burt Bacharach. Edited by John C. Howard & Richard C. Meyer. Sound George R. Edmondson. Costume designs: Edith Head.

Cinematic length: 110 minutes. Distributed by 20<sup>TH</sup> Century Fox. Companies: Campanile Productions and the Newman–Foreman Company. Cinematic release: October 1969. DVD release 2006 2 disc edition. Check for ratings. Rating 90%.

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Written Without Prejudice

## Cast

- **Paul Newman as Butch Cassidy**
- **Robert Redford as the Sundance Kid**
- **Katharine Ross as Etta Place**
- **Strother Martin as Percy Garris**
- **Henry Jones as Bike Salesman**
- **Jeff Corey as Sheriff Ray Bledsoe**
- **George Furth as Woodcock**
- **Cloris Leachman as Agnes**
- **Ted Cassidy as Harvey Logan**
- **Kenneth Mars as the town marshal**
- **Donnelly Rhodes as Macon**
- **Timothy Scott as News Carver**
- **Jody Gilbert as the Large Woman on the train**
- **Don Keifer as a Fireman**
- **Charles Dierkop as Flat Nose Curry**
- **Pancho Córdova as a Bank Manager**
- **Paul Bryar as Card Player No. 1**
- **Sam Elliott as Card Player No. 2**
- **Charles Akins as a Bank Teller**
- **Percy Helton as Sweetface**

## Review

In the second half of the 1960s westerns about the twilight of the Wild West suddenly became popular, as if both filmmakers and audiences wanted to keep the West within living memory. Films like this would be made into the beginning of the 1980s and included *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), *McLintock!* (1965), *Cat Ballou!* (1965), *Viva Maria* (1965), *The Professionals* (1966), *Villa Rides* (1968), *Death of*

*A Gunfighter* (1969), *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *100 Rifles* (1969), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (1970), *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* (1970), *A Fistful of Dynamite* (1971), *Little Big Man* (1971), *Pancho Villa* (1972) *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* (1973), *Pat Garret and Billy the Kid*, (1973), *Bite the Bullet* (1974), *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1976), *The Shootist* (1977), *Comes A Horseman* (1978) *Tom Horn* (1980), *Harry Tracy: Last of the Wild Bunch* (1981) and *Heaven's Gate* (1981) The latter was such an expensive financial disaster that it temporarily sunk both the genre and Columbia Studios. Interestingly of these twenty-five films, eight have Latino settings. Mexico was still a wild land after the American West had been tamed by the 1890s.

The most popular and most financially successful of these films was *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. When the eponymous outlaw heroes capture an old compatriot turned sheriff (Jeff Corey as Sheriff Bledsoe) he gives them a combination of blasting and advice that reveals the theme of so many in this genre. He tells them that they should know that the time for their wild outlaw way of life is over and that if they do not adapt all they can do is choose the time and place of their death and that they will die bloody. Beneath the many laughs and humorous ironies this remains the film's theme, always just below the humor and the eponymous central characters' exuberance. These lighter touches to some extent account for the film's popularity. *Death of A Gunfighter*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here*, *Pat Garret and Billy the Kid*, *The Shootist*, *Tom Horn* and *Harry Tracy: Last of the Wild Bunch* also focused on the lone westerners quixotically and fatally sticking to their wild individualistic way of life, but without this film's humor or exuberance. Like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* all of these films blurred the lines between lawmen and outlaws. Like Bledsoe, Butch and Sundance turn law enforcers – as payroll guards. In *The Wild Bunch* the gang are hunted down by a former compatriot turned lawman and this is the same idea so evident with the eponymous heroes in *Pat Garret and Billy the Kid*. In *Death of a Gunfighter*, *The Shootist* and *Tom Horn* the lawman is the outsider, destroyed by the society he thinks he protects. Society no longer needs him now that it has the stability he did so much to ensure: his wildness is now a threat. Law is not about justice, protection or mercy, it is force used to uphold profits and power for elites.

This was another reason for the film's immense popularity. It resonated with the cynical mood of the late 1960s about government, law and order campaigns, business and money. The filmmakers brilliant strategy was not to personalise these

forces with characters such as sheriffs or railroad magnates. They are referred to or shown to be small figures in the distance. From the film's first scene, where Butch cases a bank and we see bars, clocks, signs and a guard, we have a sense of a conformist, oppressive elitist society encroaching on the wild free west. We also rapidly get a sense of Butch's quixotry as he comments to the guard that the bank was once beautiful and that continual robbery is a small price to pay for beauty.



*This portrait of the film's three principals is modelled on an Edwardian era New York studio portrait Courtesy The Red List*

*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* became one of the most popular films of all time, grossing over 96 million dollars and much of this amount came from the 1970s days when the dollar had much more purchasing power. This popularity did not come from ecstatic critics: reviews were very mixed, especially at first. Audiences loved it and its reputation initially spread by word of mouth. Seeing it in



the middle of 1970 when the jokes and the theme were new, audiences gave it repeated laughter and affectionate comments reinforced this. By the time of the next Academy Awards Hollywood establishment opinion had changed: it got four Oscars (original screenplay, song, original score and cinematography) and three more nominations, for best film, direction and sound. Amazingly the three principals, Newman, Redford and Ross, were not even nominated for their acting.



*The Wild Bunch. Left to Right News Carver (Timothy Scott) The Sundance Kid Harvey Logan (Ted Cassidy) Butch ? and Charles Dierkop as Flatnose Curry. Only the unknown man did not die by violence within a decade of their group photo of 1898. Courtesy The Red List*

The film's popularity continued and has never really ended. Three years after its initial premiere in our town it was shown at the same commercial cinema – and it was crowded with people who knew of the film by reputation. Few films have their

screenplay printed in book form, but William Goldman's screenplay had gone into a ninth reprinting by late 1972. This film regularly makes the best films of all time lists. It has a magic about it that sometimes comes to the great screen classics. The fine acting and cinematography, the perfect score, the majestic, breathtakingly beautiful scenery, the fresh outlook and extraordinary mix of comedy and drama all worked to make for such cinematic magic.

It seems a seamless film perfectly put together, but much of this was luck or fortuitous circumstances. William Goldman wrote the screenplay with Jack Lemmon in line for Butch, but would the film have worked so well if Jack Lemmon had been Butch? A fine actor, would Lemmon have been at home in a Western? His characters are often anxious urbanites or resentful cogs in the system. He played everyman types in the system, not outlaws outside the system. Marlon Brando was considered and may have been great in either role, but by the later 1960s the quality of his performances was erratic. Warren Beatty also may have worked well, but his characters often have no sense of vulnerability. Instead they frequently show too much confidence. Steve McQueen had a wry fatalistic humour that matched Newman's - but those qualities worked best in contrast and Redford's Sundance had a cold, swift laconic style that worked as a perfect foil and contrast to Newman's loud irrepressible optimism, cheer and humour. Steve McQueen almost made it to the Sundance role, but walked off in disputes about whose name should come first. Producer Richard Zanuck actually had the title cards in two styles: one with McQueen first and one with Newman first. He actually intended to divide global and American distribution so that McQueen's name would be shown first on one half of the globe and Newman's on the other. It didn't satisfy. The two stars would get equal billing years later in *The Towering Inferno* (1976).

Apart from casting other aspects should have lead to disaster. Neither director George Roy Hill nor Writer William Goldman had ever made a western before. Before making this film Hill had proved himself equally adept at urban comedies such as *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (1967) and the epic tragedy *Hawaii* (1966). Perhaps these diverse abilities was because he had started as a Shakesperan actor. Known for his ability to apply himself to every detail and to extract the best performances from actors, he was strict on being on time and exact on detail.





*On the set. Courtesy The Red List*

He was furious when Cinematographer Conrad Hall let Katherine Ross operate a camera. When Katherine Ross was asked for her favourite scene in the film she referred to the bike riding scene because Hill left this to a second unit director. Hill initially intended to direct every scene, but wisely left the poignant title cards, the bike scene set to 'Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head' and the explosions to second unit directors. Although while filming *Hawaii* he could inspire loyalty to the extent that extras and locals threatened to walk off the set if

he was replaced, he could also inspire tension. There were problems between several cast members and Hill, but Newman and Redford continued to work with him on *The Sting* (1973) and then separately in later 1970s films where Hill showed that his talent for both comedy and tragedy endured, but *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* was his only film to mix both. This may not have been his intention. At the film's first showing he was disturbed by the reception. Sadly and deeply worried he stated that people laughed at his tragedy – and then proceeded to cut out the jokes that got the most laughs. Was this wise?

Another possible mistake was editing out the scene in Latin America where Sundance, Butch and Etta watch a silent western about themselves and are outraged when their on screen representations tie a child to the tracks before they are killed by a posse. During the film Etta leaves – for the USA. It reads well in script, but Hill thought the scene was heavy-handed and unnecessary, but it would have added to the seriousness he wanted and made the point that the world of the western film emerged just as the old west was dying. By being self-referential it would have also reinforced the postmodernist currents that many would perceive at work in the film. On the other hand, was it heavy handed?

The film has come in for criticism from two directions. The first concerns historic accuracy and the second concerns glorifying thieves. In the titles we are told that much of what is shown is true. True enough and much about the Wild Bunch remains speculative. Even so, the screenplay serves film, not history. The famous double robbery of *The Flyer* happened in 1900, not 1898. It was one of the last Wild West train robberies: after 1901 the trains became faster than the bandit's horses. Woodcock really did exist and was a victim in both robberies. News Carver was not shot dead in the second robbery but was killed months later. Butch, Sundance and Etta did not go to Bolivia in 1901. They stayed in Argentina making a success of cattle ranching until 1905, when they were unfairly blamed for a robbery and had to flee. They then returned to robberies but they did not partake in as many as the film depicts. Etta did leave them to return to America before their final stand – and after 1909 disappeared into an obscurity that nobody has been able to remove from her. Contrary stories had her working as a prostitute or a schoolteacher. Goldman decided that judging by her fresh appearance a schoolteacher was more likely. Butch and Sundance were briefly payroll guards for a time working under a man like Percy Garris. However the murder of Garris and the subsequent shooting of his killers seem to have no evidence.





*Katherine Ross as Etta Place. A studio shot Courtesy Wikipedia*



*Facial expressions, body language and blood show that however jaunty their words are, they know they are at the end. Courtesy The Red List*

The final gunbattle at San Vincent Bolivia was different from what the film shows in some aspects. The town itself is 15,000 feet above sea level, without trees and it looks very bleak, nothing like the white brick walled sunny plaza of the film. Butch and Sundance were indeed identified because a branded mule was recognised as being from a hold up and were shot at while eating and badly wounded, holed up in a room with dwindling ammunition. They did not charge out to unknowingly face volleys of fire as the film's last scene shows. The film's depiction, which shows them killing several policemen and a company of soldiers arriving on the scene, resembles Charles Kelly's reconstruction of the last stand in his *The Outlaw Trail: The Story of Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch*. (1949). Researched in the 1930s when many people who knew Butch were still alive, his account differs from Bolivian primary source documents. These mention one Bolivian fatality and that the two bandits lasted until late at night when, trapped and badly wounded, Cassidy shot Sundance and then himself. Kelly does deal with the rumours and stories that Butch survived, made his way back to America and lived until 1937. Butch's last surviving sibling actually repeated these stories while working on the film set as an advisor. Kelly's account makes it clear that many of Butch's contemporaries and later admirers were basing at least several of these accounts on another outlaw surnamed Cassidy who had connections to the Wild Bunch. This man was keeping a low profile in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The second criticism about glorifying thieves leads to some qualifications: sometimes the film seems to do this. They do get at least a humourous and affectionate treatment – most of the time. However other scenes give audiences the sadder and more prosaic reality, as when Sherrif Bledsoe, after praising their virtues, says that they are still just two bit outlaws and thieves – and despite their handsome looks, courage, audacity, humour and loyalty, this is exactly what they are. When Percy Garris tells them they may not be paid due to payroll robberies, we see the human cost of their robberies. We also hear the warnings from Etta and Bledsoe about where their robberies will lead them - to violent early deaths.

In 1969/1970 we could still laugh at outlaws, but that was a world where milk money could be left beside the door untouched, churches were never locked and poor boxes were not pilfered. The full effects of the spreading drug epidemic would soon be felt and thieves would not seem so wonderful when we became their victims. Yes, earning a living working forty or fifty hours a week like the nerdish, subservient Woodcock, makes for a nerdish and dreary life – but without

people like that working the railways would people be able to travel or have their goods transported? Butch and Sundance soon became heroes to petty criminals. This all too common mentality was ably satirised in a 1970s Australian film where two dim-witted puerile teenagers introduce themselves to their victims as Butch and Moondance while holding up a tourist bus.

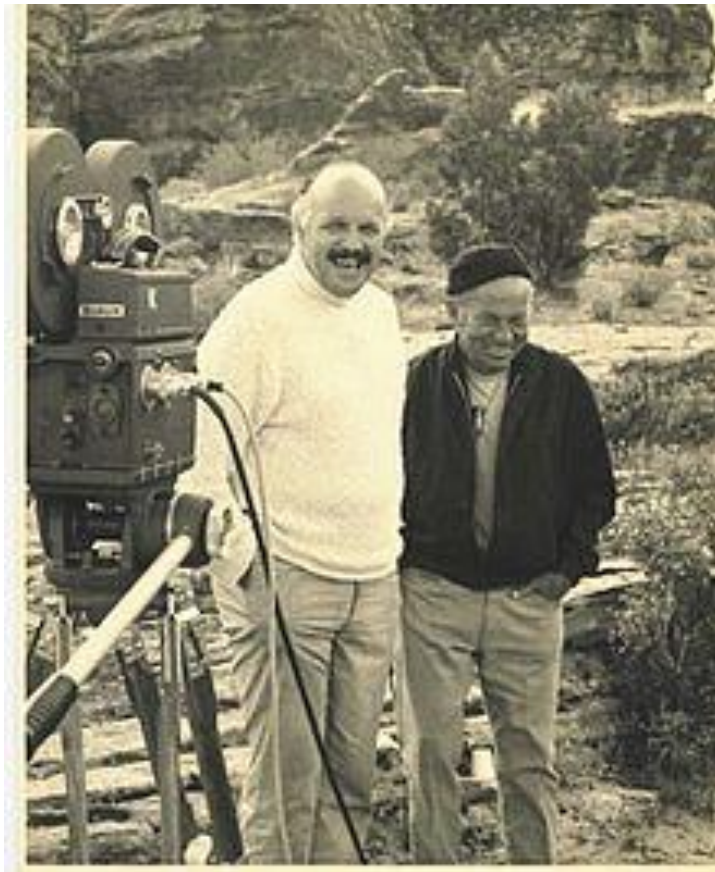


Courtesy The Red List



The idea that outlaws are wonderful, free people opposed to a repressive social order raises a conundrum. What if a massive proportion of the population decides to be reincarnations of Butch, Etta and Sundance? How many thieves like that can any society sustain? By focusing the robberies on an unseen identity called E.H. Harriman, the filmmakers avoid that question, but it remains in the subtext.

Even so, the updated Robin Hood dream of living in the wilderness by fleecing dreary authoritarians, of avoiding work and rules will always appeal, even if the film's jokes have gone from being fresh and delightful into common parlance. The anarchic ambience of 1960s/1970s rebellion permits this film without dating it.



*Sound Engineer George R. Edmonson (1906-1998) and George Roy Hill (1921-2002)*      *Courtesy Wikipedia*

The sources for this review include *Wikipedia* entries on different members of the Wild Bunch, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, Paul Newman, Robert Redford,

George Roy Hill and Katherine Ross. Other sources include Charles Kelly's *The Outlaw Trail: The Story of Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch*. (1938. Revised 1949) The IMD entry for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and the many documentaries, interviews and comments contained on Disc Two of the DVD special edition of the film.

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