

arts & entertainment



'Shootist' interesting but Wayne role lacks depth

By Will Huffman

Dedicated John Wayne fans may be disappointed with the depth of his performance in his latest film, *The Shootist*.

Director Don Siegel opens the film, which recalls the last week in a famous gun-fighter's life, with a montage of clips showing gunfight scenes from famous John Wayne movies—*Red River* (1948), *Rio Bravo* (1959) and *El Dorado* (1967)—all directed by Howard Hawks. The clips explain the career and code of John Bernard Books, the character Wayne plays, and how he became one of the most famous gunfighters of the Old West.

The aging gunfighter rides into Carson City, Nev. (circa 1901) and immediately visits a doctor (James Stewart) who saved his life some years before. The doctor confirms Wayne's fear—he is dying of cancer and has only a few weeks left. The doctor tells Wayne his death will be slow and unbearably painful and ends by saying, "If I had your kind of courage, I wouldn't die like that."

The dying man resolves to spend his remaining days peacefully and anonymously, and checks into the boarding house run by Mrs. Rogers (Lauren Bacall), a widow with a rebellious teenage son (Ron Howard). Soon the whole town learns that the most famous gunfighter in the world is in their midst and about to die.

Harry Morgan plays the town marshal who is overjoyed to hear of Books' imminent demise and John Carradine portrays a greedy undertaker who offers Wayne his services for free so he can charge the public admission to the funeral.

An old flame out of the gunfighter's past (Sheree North) arrives to comfort the dying man, but only so she may marry

freeze frames



him and obtain the rights on a book to be published after his death.

Other residents of the town see the presence of the dying gunfighter in a different light. A gambler (Hugh O'Brien) and a local troublemaker (Bill McKinney) see a chance to enhance their own reputations as gunfighters by killing the famous J. B. Books, and Richard Boone shows up as a revengeful brother of one of Wayne's previous victims.

Carson City 'recreated'

The Carson City of 1901 has been meticulously recreated for the film. The

atmosphere of the town captures the feel of the ending of an era in the American West. There are now telephones, horse drawn trolleys ("soon to be electrified," as the marshal proudly states) and indoor plumbing; the first horseless carriages are beginning to fume around town. Counter to the conventions of the Western genre, there is little emphasis on the landscapes and wide open spaces of the West. Most of the film takes place indoors, where the cluttered, middle-class interiors reflect the changing times. Unfortunately, the authentic-looking sets often are over-emphasized at the expense of character development.

At the center of the film is the relationship between Wayne, the Widow Rogers (Bacall) and her son (Howard). Mrs. Rogers is shown to be an extremely religious woman who is appalled when she first discovers the identity of her new boarder. However, as she opens up to the dying man, she comes to realize he has been forced to live his life a certain way by the events and codes of an earlier era. Her son sees the gunfighter as a hero figure to be worshipped, much to his mother's consternation.

Unfortunately, the lack of development in the relationship of these three main characters doesn't allow the film to achieve the psychological intensity it needs. Although the performances of Wayne, Bacall and Howard all are excellent, the lack of definition in the script prevents a more penetrating look into the last days of the dying man.

Character lacks introspection

We see Wayne from the outside, as others see him, but the character isn't allowed enough introspection to achieve a deeper psychological level.

The film has more success in recreating the end of the era of the Wild West. It is highlighted as the marshal tells Wayne, "You've outlived your time."

The gunfighter looks and feels out of place in the urbanized atmosphere of the growing town. Times and people are changing. Everyone is out to make a dollar, even if it means selling tickets to a funeral.

The old code and way of life are dead. The shootist realizes his way of life is dying with him so he chooses to finish with a climatic gunfight with O'Brien, McKinney and Boone, the other representatives of the old way of life. The final shootout provides an ending that reinforces the theme of the death of the old honor code of the West.

The Shootist certainly is the most interesting John Wayne vehicle to come along in some time. However, many of Wayne's usual fans may be disappointed by the film's slow pace and lack of action.

There were rumors within the movie industry that *The Shootist* would be John Wayne's last film, but the rumors were scotched by Wayne himself. There are obvious parallels between Wayne and J. B. Books. Wayne won his own bout with

cancer, and his right-wing politics often seem to mirror the kind of rugged code the shootist lives by.

The film contains fine performances by everyone in an expert veteran cast. Don Siegel is best known for fast paced action thriller, like *Madigan*, *Dirty Harry* and *Charley Varrick*. His departure to a psychological Western is not entirely successful, but the flaws of the film lie in its own ambitions. We are constantly reminded that the era of the Wild West is ending—as Wayne and Richard Boone arrive for the final gunfight in a trolley and horseless carriage. What prevents the film from being entirely successful is the lack of insight into the gunfighter's character. Wayne is excellent in his role, but then he should be because he's played it so many times before. The real depth of the film is supplied by the atmosphere and vivid supporting performances.

The Shootist is an extremely ambitious Western, and any fan of the genre should not miss it. A skillful Hollywood craftsman like Don Siegel can make good entertaining movies, even though they don't always entirely fulfill their aspirations.

Unfortunately, *The Shootist* never achieves the classic status it aspires to. Still it is interesting to wonder how the film would have emerged if it had been directed by Howard Hawks or John Ford, both old masters of the Western genre. Possibly they too, like the dying shootist, would have been unable to cope with the death of the old codes.

Wayne is 'dominant father-figure'

John Wayne's long and fruitful collaboration with Ford and Hawks has a great deal to do with the evolution of Wayne into one of the dominant father figures in modern American mythology. In his series of films for Ford and Hawks, this figure was explored and expanded through a number of complex roles such as the megalomaniac cattle baron in *Red River*, the haunted and melancholy hunter in *The Searchers* and the aging gunfighter in *El Dorado* and *Rio Lobo*, his last films for Hawks. These films helped create the myth and image of the quintessential John Wayne hero and exemplified the principle of American individualism by which the shootist lives. This code of honor includes respect for family and rugged self-reliance.

However, Wayne has played the mythical father-figure role for so long that it has become impossible for him to achieve the kind of quiet introspection the role in *The Shootist* needs. By now, the typical John Wayne character is so steeped in tradition that it becomes difficult for Wayne to achieve any new depths or facets in the character.

The Shootist is a valiant effort, but in the end shows only John Wayne playing the John Wayne legend. As the ads for the film say, "He's got to live up to his legend just one more time." *The Shootist* might have been the true classic it was meant to be if Wayne had been able to live down his legend just once.



Photo courtesy of Dino De Laurentiis Corporation
John Wayne in 'The Shootist'

Perfect's album close to perfection

The Legendary Christine Perfect Album/Christine Perfect, SASD-7522.

Christine Perfect, now Christine McVie of Fleetwood Mac, began her musical career with an English blues band, Chicken Shack. Christine stayed with CS for two years and played an integral role in its success. After leaving the group, she recorded this album in 1969 in collaboration with producer Mike Vernon.

In Europe, the album was a monumental success although it was not released in the United States until recently. This is a fine collection of blues ballads and it seems preposterous that the United States had to wait nearly seven years to enjoy this side of Christine's work.

On *Legendary* she captures the spirit of the blues with a remarkable sensitivity, but manages to soften the outward bitterness with a paradoxical attitude. Although she has been hurt, in the end everything will work out.

This can be seen in the selection *Wait and See*. The piece opens with a piano and bass combination backed by the calming percussion work of Chris Harding.

Other songs of this album also capture this spirit, but the cream of the album is her interpretation of an Etta James hit, *I'd Rather Go Blind*, which has a sound very much like the early blues of Fleetwood Mac. Eventually

these blues were absorbed by the optimism that softened them.

Even on this album, Christine hints at the love songs

back tracks



in her future. *Crazy 'Bout You Baby* is an upbeat, cheerful song that opens side one.

It's not often that an album contains quality music throughout both sides. This is one of those rare albums—seven years late.

Mystery to Me/Fleetwood Mac/Reprise MS2158

The reason Fleetwood Mac's *Mystery to Me* was chosen as the album to provide historical perspective on the group is based on personal bias.

I believe the music on this album is far superior to any of the group's other albums. But through further analysis, it became apparent the album was the best for more legitimate reasons.

The songs on the album are the best Fleetwood Mac has written and among the best performed in the field of soft progressive rock.

An interaction of talent makes this album's success inevitable. The members featured on their album, Christine McVie, Bob Welch, Mick Fleetwood, John McVie and Bob Weston, worked as a unit, and the end result is a unified, abundantly talented band rather than a fragmented assemblage of musicians who specialize in stage-stealing.

As was the case during this Fleetwood Mac era, Bob Welch and Christine McVie are the creative leaders. All but one of the tracks were written by either Welch or McVie. There is even collaboration by McVie, Welch and Weston.

Easily the best known song on the album is a Welch song, *Hypnotized*. That song, a rock classic by any standard, opens with a mechanical, almost stumbling drum beat set down by Mick Fleetwood. Abruptly, Welch enters with a mysterious and ominous guitar melody. Later he enters again, this time vocally. The style is magnetic as Welch delivers his message.

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