



JAMES MILLER

"El Paso"

I don't consider "El Paso" a country-and-western song. It's a cowboy song, early American folk music from the western United States. It's not an old song—I wrote the song—but it's the type of song that you would have heard eighty years ago. That's not country-and-western.¹

—MARTY ROBBINS (1925–82)

As a multimedia child of the early fifties, weaned on the cross-merchandising of six-shooters and lunch pails blazoned with pictures of Hopalong Cassidy and Davy Crockett, I naturally assumed that cowboys and the songs of the West were a key part of my patrimony. I was encouraged in this assumption by my parents, who had a copy of the famous John and Alan Lomax anthology, *Best Loved American Folk Songs*. My mother would sometimes play songs from the book—"Home on the Range," "The Old Chisholm Trail"—on our upright piano.

For John Lomax, this music shed light on "that unique and romantic figure in modern civilization, the American cowboy"—a figure that Lomax dramatically placed "on the skirmish line of

¹ Quoted in Alanna Nash, *Behind Closed Doors*, p. 446. For full citations, see Notes, Books and Recordings.



civilization. Restless, fearless, chivalric, elemental, he lived hard, shot quick and true, and died with his face to his foe."²

For my mother, cowboy songs had no special significance; they were simply part of an American boy's common culture, like baseball and apple pie. But for my father, the ballads cut closer to the bone in ways that I didn't understand until I was much older.

He was born in 1920, on Cactus Hill outside Bartlesville, Oklahoma, where cowboys still tended cattle. The son of an oil worker active in the local union, he had grown up watching the films of Gene Autry, listening to the Western swing of Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys—and helping his dad recruit new members for the union. The first in his family to receive a Ph.D., he had a scholarly interest in Western music as well. Besides the Lomax book, he had acquired a number of the albums of union songs and folk music, including cowboy ballads, recorded by Woody Guthrie, Burl Ives, and Pete Seeger for Moses Asch and his Asch label in the 1940s.

As I grew older, I put away my toy spurs and coonskin cap. But I never quite outgrew the Western music I was raised on—which helps explain my continuing affection for one of the greatest cowboy ballads of the twentieth century, Marty Robbins's "El Paso."



Marty Robbins was of my father's generation and came of age at the height of the Great Depression. But whereas my father grew up in the Dust Bowl, Robbins was from the outback of Arizona.

Born in 1925 in a high-desert homestead outside of Glendale, northwest of Phoenix, Robbins was one of nine children. His father, an immigrant from Poland, was only intermittently employed—the family was sometimes forced to live in a tent.³

One of his earliest memories was of listening to the tales of the Wild West told by his maternal grandfather, Bob Heckle, a former cowpuncher and Texas Ranger who had also traveled with medicine

² John A. Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* (1925), "collectors note."

³ Colin Escott, notes to *Marty Robbins at Town Hall Party*. Bear Family DVD 20007 AT (2003).

shows, hawking books of his own cowboy poetry. "The stories that he would tell me were cowboy stories that he heard around the campfire," Robbins later recalled. "My grandfather inspired me to be a cowboy, I guess. That's what I wanted to be. Because I thought a lot of him, and he was a cowboy, you know."

Grandpa Heckle died when Robbins was six, but the boy was hooked: he became an avid reader of Western fiction (and would later in life publish a Western novel of his own). He picked cotton so that he could see the latest Westerns at the local picture show.

"I first started praying to be a cowboy singer," Robbins once explained. "I wanted to be Gene Autry. I wanted to ride off into the sunset."⁴

And so the young Robbins became a singer of cowboy songs, coming to master the "western" part of country-western—a mishmash of tall tales, old Irish music, and minstrel hokum. He doubtless knew the first popular recording of a cowboy ballad, "When the Work's All Done This Fall," a song based on a poem written by Montana cowboy D. J. O'Malley in 1895, reprinted in John Lomax's first book, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, in 1910, and sung by Carl T. Sprague, once a real cowboy too, in the 1925 recording that turned it into a Western standard. (It would be recorded by Robbins himself thirty-six years later.)

In 1929, the Arizona Wranglers, from Phoenix, recorded "Strawberry Roan," the saga of a bucking bronco that couldn't be broken; it became the basis of a 1933 movie, *The Strawberry Roan*, featuring Ken Maynard, Hollywood's first "Singing Cowboy," who delivered the song in an abrasive nasal monotone. (Robbins would record "The Strawberry Roan," too, in 1959.)

As a result of the growing popularity of musical Western films, demand started to outstrip the supply of more or less genuine cowboy songs. This created an opportunity for new singers and new songwriters, like the Sons of the Pioneers, a Hollywood-based harmony group with no firsthand experience of the frontier but a knack for imagining what it was like and writing tunes that evoked its

⁴ Quoted in Nash, *Behind Closed Doors*, p. 442.

wild beauty. Their 1934 recording of "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" was a national hit, and a year later the song became the centerpiece of the film that turned Gene Autry into a Hollywood star—*Tumbling Tumbleweeds*.

A veteran of medicine shows, Gene Autry had first achieved fame as "Oklahoma's Yodelin' Cowboy," performing on radio station KVOO in Tulsa, Oklahoma, before moving on to WLS and joining the cast of its *National Barn Dance* in Chicago. Autry had style; he sang with a bluesy twang, like the Singing Brakeman, Jimmie Rodgers, but his delivery was relaxed and his diction clear, like Bing Crosby, the Old Groaner.

In *Tumbling Tumbleweeds*, as in the many films that followed, Autry wasn't only a cowboy who happened to sing; he was *Gene Autry*, frontier good guy. Invariably playing himself, he was miraculously able to defeat crooks and killers with a song and a sunny disposition—or, if that failed, some sharp shooting. Even in the depths of the Great Depression, a Gene Autry film seemed to promise, there was one place in America where justice would prevail. That was back home on the range—"where you sleep out every night, and the only law is right," as Autry sang in "Back in the Saddle Again," his radio theme song.



In December of 1959, my radio theme song became "El Paso."

At a time when the radio was full of watered-down rock 'n' roll sung by pretty boys bereft of talent, Marty Robbins and "El Paso" had the narrative arc of an epic film. The music was lilting, the singing gorgeous. The recording lasted for nearly five minutes, an eternity by the standards of the time. The lyrics told the story of a cowboy who kills, and in turn is killed, all for love of Felina, a Mexican girl. Even more memorably, the outlaw narrates his own death. He sings of the bullet going deep in his chest, the girl kissing his cheek, and his very last words: "Felina, goodbye!"

At the time, I was twelve years old. Though the killing spree of Charles Starkweather and Caril Fugate had terrorized my hometown

of Lincoln, Nebraska, the year before—and though my grade-school teachers had taught me to duck and cover in the event of nuclear war—I knew little about life and less about death. An introvert by temperament, I spent much of my youth daydreaming. Thanks to *Gunsmoke* and *Have Gun Will Travel*, two favorite TV shows, the image of a lawless frontier was vivid in my mind. But most of the time, it bore no resemblance to the world I thought I knew.

That winter, my family drove across Iowa to Moline, Illinois, to celebrate Christmas with my mother's extended family, the Anderson clan. There were six brothers and sisters still living on the banks of the Mississippi in 1959, all of them descended from Swedish stock, all of them still churchgoing Lutherans like my mother, and they were one image of a good community—loving, cozy, civilized.

Grandpa Anderson worked at the local Chevrolet dealership, which one of his older brothers owned. On this visit, I was to earn some money and learn some discipline by helping him take inventory in the parts department. It was a dirty job. The weather was bleak. Driving to the dealership every morning under sleet-gray skies, I would warm up by listening to the radio—and what warmed me the most was hearing “El Paso.”

I tried to interest my grandfather in the saga of the amorous outlaw and his inevitable death. But “El Paso” left him cold. Like most of the other members of his clan, grandpa Anderson was a loyal company man and a lifelong Republican, with little interest in the wilder side of life. He didn't much like Westerns, he explained, and he would rather listen to Dinah Shore—Chevrolet sponsored her TV show, after all.



Marty Robbins recorded “El Paso” in the course of an all-day session held in Nashville, Tennessee, on April 7, 1959. The session produced twelve songs that would appear later that year as a long-playing album entitled *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*.

A cast member of Nashville's “Grand Ole Opry” since the early 1950s, Robbins first achieved fame in the country field by writing and

singing love songs in a smooth, sweet tenor, like Eddy Arnold in the 1940s. When sales of his love songs began to sag, Robbins tried his hand at rock 'n' roll. In 1954, he cut a version of Elvis Presley's first record, "That's All Right," and had a country hit with it, unlike Presley. He cut a version of Chuck Berry's "Maybellene" and had a modest hit with that, too. Then, in 1956, his version of "Singing the Blues" became a number-one country hit, edging out Elvis Presley's "Hound Dog."

The following year, Robbins traveled to New York to work with veteran pop producers Mitch Miller and Ray Conniff. Targeting Presley's teen audience, Robbins recorded a new composition of his own, and in the spring of 1957 "A White Sport Coat and a Pink Carnation" rivaled the mainstream popularity of Presley's "All Shook Up." More pop hits followed—"The Story of My Life" in 1957, and "Just Married" in 1958—all of them featuring the kind of close-blended vocal accompaniment that Presley had made a fixture of his hit recordings with the Jordanaires.

To reproduce the sound of his pop records on the road, Robbins hired a group of vocalists, the Glaser Brothers, a trio of Jewish farm boys from Nebraska. "We grew up in Spaulding," recalled Jim Glaser many years later, "and the nearest town was sixty miles away. The town wasn't on our side. A lot of people thought you had to be illiterate to like country music." Ironically rescued from a life of rural idiocy by their mastery of song forms symbolically associated with rural idiocy, the brothers joined Robbins and his touring show.

"In those days, Marty traveled in two cars, or sometimes station wagons," Jim Glaser says. "Marty carried a little ukulele, made by the Martin Guitar company, and would often pass the hours and miles by singing every song he could think of, with Bobby and me adding harmony. Many of the songs were Western songs, and it was during this time that Marty decided to do an album of these songs."

Robbins also began to make up new Western songs of his own. One of the first was "El Paso"—inspired, he would later say, by driving through the West Texas town on a family car trip from Tennessee to Arizona.

"The song took him several months to write," recalls Jim Glaser: "Each time we went out on tour, Marty would sing the latest verses. . . . By the time we accompanied Marty into the studio to record the song,

we had it down so well that it only took four takes to get the final version, and two of those were false starts.”⁵



“El Paso” shares some of its ingredients with the Western music that enchanted Marty Robbins as a boy. The song as a whole projects an aura of authenticity, like the ballads of Carl T. Sprague; it is sung with the sort of open-hearted sincerity that Gene Autry made a trademark; and the vocal blend of Robbins with Jim Glaser and Bobby Sykes evokes the freedom of the open range as surely as do the soaring harmonies of “Tumbling Tumbleweeds.”

But the *music* itself bears no resemblance at all to the sorts of songs sung by Sprague, Autry, and the Sons of the Pioneers—and neither do the lyrics, which invert the exaggerated optimism of the singing cowboys of the 1930s.

Robbins’s West is a dangerous place of large passions and empty violence, where death and eros are intertwined. Though *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* included such traditional numbers as “Billy the Kid” and “Utah Carol,” its keynote songs were “El Paso” and “Big Iron.” Here he evokes a specifically American fear of falling on the wrong side of the skirmish line of civilization, a fear that also informs the noir Westerns that Hollywood had begun to make after World War II: from *Red River* and *Winchester ’73* to *High Noon* and the TV series *Have Gun Will Travel*.

There are decent men in this West—but they are loners and outriders, and there is always a chance that a good man’s blood brother will turn out to be evil incarnate (as happens in *Winchester ’73*). The Paladin character in *Have Gun Will Travel* is a bounty hunter with a brain and what seems like a good heart—though where he found his moral compass is obscure, not least to some of the outlaws he brings to heel. (For the album cover of *Gunfighter Ballads*, Robbins wore *vaquero* black, just like Paladin.)

⁵ Memo from Jim Glaser to Norma J. posted on her Web site devoted to Jim Glaser: <http://norma100.com/glsrobbns1.html>.

The unrequited lover who narrates "El Paso" is not quite beyond good and evil. He expresses shock at his ability to kill a stranger in a jealous rage. But he is irresistibly drawn by his love for Felina, who is "wicked" and "evil" and "casting a spell." His violent end is as sublimely preordained as that suffered by any hero in Greek tragedy.

The song is cast in the form of a *ranchera*, the Mexican brand of "ranch" music associated in the 1940s with Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante, impassioned singers who were also Mexican movie stars, personifying on screen "El Charro Cantor," Mexico's version of the Singing Cowboy. The outlaw who sings "El Paso" tells his story in an operatic idiom that his Mexican maiden will surely understand. The song is taken at a brisk waltz tempo characteristic of *ranchera*—mariachi horns would be a natural addition. (In 1960, when Robbins tried to recapture the epic spirit of "El Paso" by recording a new gunfighter *ranchera*, "San Angelo," he in fact added mariachi trumpets.)

The music itself proves how porous cultural borders can be. Robbins's cowboy is trapped by a passion that bursts forth in a song-form that belongs to another world. Virtue and vice blur along this borderline. In the badlands the song evokes, power grows out of the barrel of a gun—and death seems almost a form of deliverance.



A similarly ambiguous moral universe was dramatized in the most popular Hollywood Western of 1959, *Rio Bravo*, a movie set in an anarchic border town much like the "El Paso" of Robbins's song. As in "El Paso," much of the action takes place in a cantina. "Every man should have a little taste of power before he's through," declares an outlaw who has just been forced to lay down his guns by the town's often unreliable deputy sheriff, an alcoholic gunslinger played by Dean Martin. As the film's director, Howard Hawks, famously quipped, he had made the movie, in part, as a rejoinder to *High Noon* with its picture of a high-minded lawman who must beg for help. "I didn't think a good sheriff was going to be running around town like a chicken with his head off asking for help."

The taciturn sheriff in *Rio Bravo*, played by John Wayne, gets help

without asking for it. The sharp-shooting rifleman takes his name from the hostile power that he has mastered: "Chance" is fearless, independent, and a natural-born Stoic whose virtue is tested not just by killers but by a lady of low repute, like Felina from "El Paso."

When outlaws roll into the border town to spring a comrade from jail, the gang's leader tells the cantina's band to play "The Cutthroat Song"—a sinister mariachi that the Mexican Army used to break the will of the men defending the Alamo. Waxing philosophical, Chance explains the meaning of the music: "No mercy for the losers."

The *ranchera* in "El Paso" is similarly evocative. From the moment the music starts, it rushes forward to embrace death—like the cowboy who sings the song.



The Nashville recording session for "El Paso" involved four musicians in addition to Robbins and the Glaser Brothers. The players—Louis Dunn on drums, Bob Moore on bass, Jack H. Pruett on rhythm guitar, and Grady Martin on lead guitar—included several members of Nashville's A-Team, as the city's best pickers were called. The most important of these was Grady Martin, whose calling card was an uncanny ability to alter his sound to fit the needs of virtually any song—from the fleet boogie-woogie he plays on Red Foley's 1949 recording of "Chattanooga Shoe Shine Boy," to the thundering 12-string guitar riff that he uses to open Roy Orbison's 1964 recording of "Oh, Pretty Woman."

But all of Martin's other achievements pale beside the gut-string solo he improvised for the recording of "El Paso." For chorus after chorus, the guitarist accompanies Robbins's narrative with a nonstop sequence of runs, flourishes, and fills that are more redolent of Gypsy flamenco, or of Les Paul's playing on "Vaya con Dios," than of anything commonly heard in a *ranchera* or an ordinary Nashville session.

Martin's guitar becomes a second solo voice. It dances and gallops, and it makes the song seem to lift off the ground.



As a result of the popularity of "El Paso," Marty Robbins was able to fulfill a childhood dream. He starred in a Hollywood Western, *Ballad of a Gunfighter* (1964).

Like Gene Autry in all of his films, Marty Robbins appears as himself in *Ballad of a Gunfighter*. He is a frontier Robin Hood who steals gold that he gives to the local padre and the poor of San Angelo, a Texas border town. The town's cantina is home to a bordello full of Mexican maidens, including Felina from "El Paso" and Secora, the heroine of that song's sequel, "San Angelo."

In the film, "Señor Marty" falls in love with Secora. With the help of the padre, he tries to convince Secora that there is good in everyone, even a whore like her and a thief like himself—to become good, all you need is love.

The soundtrack opens with symphonic variations on "El Paso" and climaxes with Robbins's recording of "San Angelo." A corrupt sheriff traps Robin Hood by kidnapping Secora and forcing her lover to ride into an ambush. As in the song, Secora dies—and so does Marty Robbins.

The religious imagery could not be more explicit. In the film, the padre smiles beatifically as Secora and Robbins die. The cowboy is a kind of saint—a martyr, redeemed by his transcendent love, a love stronger than death.



Years after "El Paso" first captured my fancy, I asked my paternal grandfather to tell me about his life. We talked in the living room of a refrigerated bungalow in suburban Houston, where grandpa Miller had moved after he retired from the Phillips 66 petroleum company. He had worked as a roustabout for Phillips for almost his entire adult life.

Since I had developed an interest in the history of the American left, I pressed him about his political beliefs as a young man. Almost offhandedly, he revealed a fact that even my father didn't know: Phillips had banished him from Tulsa to remote Shidler, Oklahoma, to punish him for his union activism. A onetime socialist, he became a lifelong Democrat with a sharp sense that there is no justice in this world.

The ice broken, we kept talking—he was normally a man of few words. Before settling down to raise his family in Oklahoma, he explained, he had gone north to find work in the coal mines of Kansas. His earliest memories were of Texas at the turn of the twentieth century. As a teenager, he had hawked newspapers on the streets of Fort Worth. He recalled traveling in a covered wagon, and he recounted how, as a child, he and his parents had had a frightening encounter with Indians on the open range (nobody got hurt).

The West that Marty Robbins conjured up in “El Paso” never existed, of course, any more than the West depicted in “Home on the Range” or in John Wayne’s *Rio Bravo* did.

But as I came to understand while talking to my grandpa Miller shortly before his death, the West was a bigger part of my real patrimony than I had previously understood. Though not a cowboy, my grandfather had certainly lived on the skirmish line of civilization—and he had certainly fought the good fight in a morally uncertain universe.

And that is another reason why I still warm to hearing Marty Robbins exalt a lost world of rough passion and stoic courage—in what may be the last great cowboy ballad.