

# The Gunfighter's Never Ending Tour

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*"If there's an original thought out there, I could use it right now."*

—BOB DYLAN

"Brownsville Girl" opens with a two-stanza reference to Henry King's Western movie *The Gunfighter* (1950):

*Well, there was this movie I seen one time  
About a man riding 'cross the desert and it starred Gregory Peck  
He was shot down by a hungry kid trying to make a name for himself  
The townspeople wanted to crush that kid down and string him up by the neck.*

*Well, the marshal, now he beat that kid to a bloody pulp  
As the dying gunfighter lay in the sun and gasped for his last breath  
Turn him loose, let him go, let him say he outdrew me fair and square  
I want him to feel what it's like to every moment face his death.*

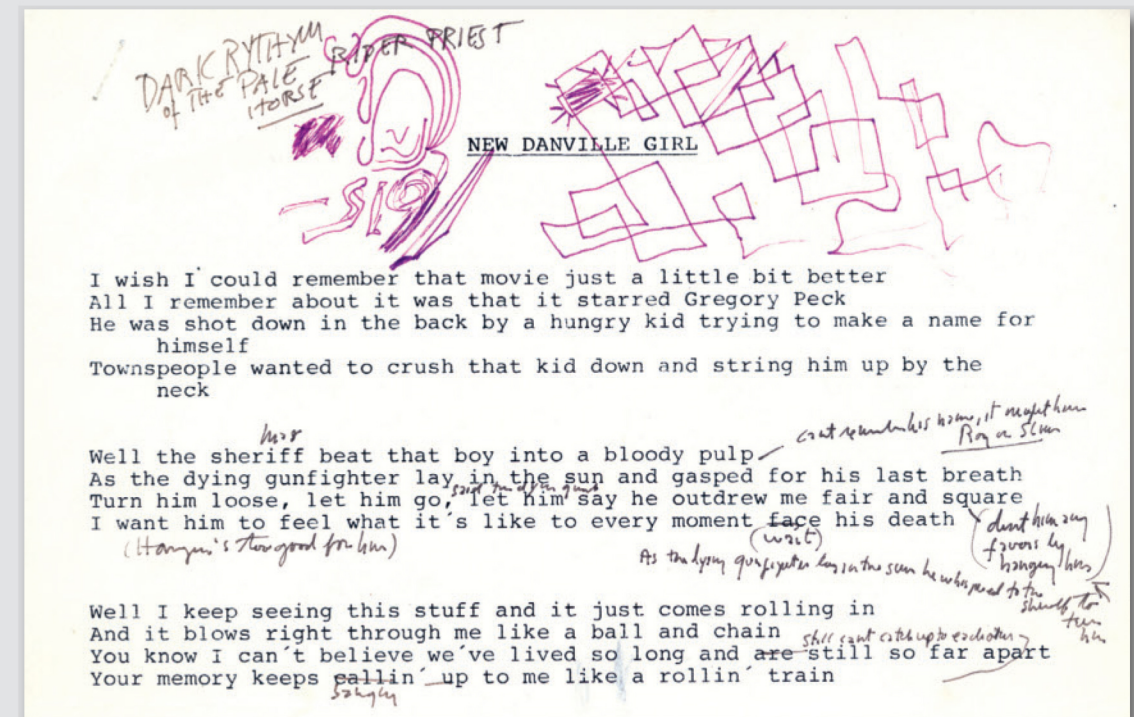
Peck's actual onscreen words as he dies are: "If I was doing you a favor I'd let 'em hang you right now—and get it over with. But I don't want you to get off that light. I want you to go on being a big tough gunny. I want you to have to see what it means to have to live like a big tough gunny. So don't thank me yet, pardner. Just wait. You'll see what I mean."

The gunfighter is the transitional love object of the American frontier. He renders himself obsolete in the process of taming it for decent folk: think John Wayne yielding to Jimmy Stewart in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* after secretly saving his life. ("When the facts become legend, print the legend.") Lose the law and order gloss and what you are left with is a guy who, once he achieves a certain level of success, narrowly defined—killing rather than being killed in a series of theatrical confrontations—must keep moving just to avoid more pointless showdowns. To paraphrase Robert Warshaw, we don't know what he does all day, where he sleeps, or the particulars of what he stands for . . . just that he's "psychically troubled and isolated in his profession by something 'dark' in his nature or past."<sup>1</sup> As originally envisioned by André de Toth, from whom King took over the directing reins, the gunfighter is, according to Richard Slotkin, "a killer celebrity who finds himself trapped in the role and reputation he has spent his life seeking."<sup>2</sup> Sound familiar? Want more? He's at "the center of a public fantasy life so powerful that those in its spell had to seek to become and, failing that to destroy, the idealized figure."<sup>3</sup>

The gunfighter remains an enduring metaphor for artists, especially musicians. Alto players constantly tried to knock Charlie "Bird" Parker off his perch. Hendrix blew Clapton away in London with "Killing Floor" after inviting himself on stage to "sit in." Young guns were always coming for Dylan. Having owned the sixties, he was a sitting duck by the eighties. He was Jimmy Ringo. Is *The*

*Gunfighter* the Western Dylan wished he had made, or at least the one he felt like he was trapped in?

Dylan was obsessed with Billy the Kid. A decade earlier he had elbowed his way into Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. Screenwriter Rudy Wurlitzer recalled Dylan thought he was some sort of reincarnation of William Bonney (Richard Gere would play a Dylanesque Billy in *I'm Not There*). Peckinpah loved Dylan's music, but there was not much room for him onscreen. (Ironically, Kris Kristofferson, featured as Billy the Kid, had been an aspiring tunesmith sweeping up at Columbia's Nashville studios when *Blonde on Blonde* was recorded.) To squeeze Dylan in, Wurlitzer made him a stuttering printer's assistant who happened to be a skilled knife fighter. He called him Alias. ("Brownsville Girl": "The only thing for sure we knew about Henry Porter was that his name wasn't Henry Porter.") The neophyte actor was frustrated by Peckinpah's rather unorthodox comportment on set, as well as his own marginality to the actual making of the movie apart from its soundtrack. He was already a celebrated singer/songwriter. What he really wanted was to be a Western movie star.



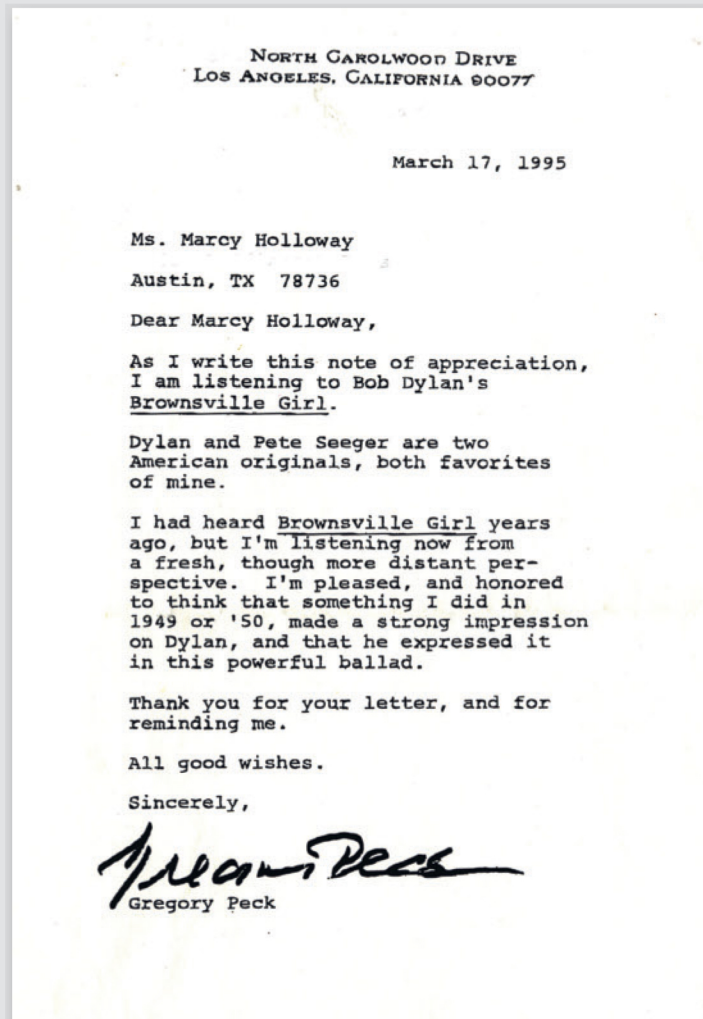
"New Danville Girl" (later "Brownsville Girl") draft manuscript



Shortly after the movie came out, Sam Shepard was hired to write a screenplay while traveling with Bob and the Rolling Thunder Revue. Dylan might have had some kind of Western in mind, but *Renaldo and Clara* didn't quite fit that bill. In 1975, Shepard was a cult figure, along for the ride. A decade later, brought on again for "Brownsville Girl," he's a Pulitzer Prize winner for . . . wait for it . . . *True West*. Shepard midwifed a screenplay for a metaphysical road movie, in the form of lyrics to a "long take" pop song, the whole shooting match triggered by the memory of a *noir* Western.

The narrator of "Brownsville Girl," while able to recall and recount aspects of the film in some detail, has a harder time situating himself in it. ("I can't remember why I was in it or what part I was supposed to play" / "I don't remember who I was or where I was bound.") Even when he places himself directly in the movie's narrative, it's not clear what's going on: "Well they were looking for somebody with a pompadour." In *The Gunfighter*, the young punk Hunt Bromley, whom we first meet in the barber chair, has a thick mop of natural curls. So who's the pompadour? Elvis in *Flaming Star*? Remember, Dylan briefly owned Warhol's *Double Elvis* before trading it to his manager for a couch. Can we call Dylan's haircut—at least the iteration he sported at Newport when he achieved electric outlaw status—a pompadour? Is he flashing on the moment when Pete Seeger et al. turned on him? When he's "cornered in the churchyard" (here we are far from the action of the original movie), is he referring to his "Christian" period and its less than enthusiastic critical reception? Who knows, and who really cares. The song is a ticket to a lucid dream. You put yourself in it, like Dylan does with *The Gunfighter*, and see where it takes you.

Jimmy Ringo is doomed, but Dylan is redeemed. He hung up his guns but not his spurs. Bob can walk into any bar in America and knock back a few fingers of Heaven's Door without constantly having to check the exits. "Brownsville Girl" heralds the "late" Dylan to come, a unique genre in which all music—not just his but everybody's, from Blind Willie McTell to Frank Sinatra—emerges from and melts back into memory, and is made new again. With "Love and Theft," and everything that came after, Dylan elevated himself back up into a category of one. In a musical landscape littered with undead legacy acts, he is a Living National Treasure.



Letter from Gregory Peck to Marcy Holloway, March 19, 1995



The Gunfighter theatrical poster, 1950



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