



## Too Much: Melodrama on Film

# Johnny Guitar

### Johnny Guitar

Director: Nicholas Ray

©/Production Company:

Republic Pictures Corporation

Presented by: Herbert J. Yates

Associate Producer: Nicholas Ray \*

Assistant Director: Herb Mendelson

Screenplay: Philip Yordan

Based on the novel by: Roy Chanslor

Director of Photography: Harry Stradling

Special Optical Effects:

Consolidated Film Industries

Special Effects: Howard Lydecker,

Theodore Lydecker

Editor: Richard L. Van Enger

Art Director: James Sullivan

Set Decorators: John McCarthy, Edward G. Boyle

Costume Designer: Sheila O'Brien

Make-up Supervision: Bob Mark

Hairstylist: Peggy Gray

Music: Victor Young

Song 'Johnny Guitar' by: Peggy Lee,

Victor Young; Sung by: Peggy Lee

Sound: T.A. Carman, Howard Wilson

Stunt Double for Mercedes McCambridge:

Helen Griffith \*

Stunt Double for Scott Brady: Bob Folkerson \*

Stunt Double for Sterling Hayden: Pete Kellett \*

Stunt Double for Ernest Borgnine: Forrest Burns \*

Stunt Double for Ward Bond: Rocky Shahan \*

Cast:

Joan Crawford (Vienna)

Sterling Hayden (Johnny Guitar)

Mercedes McCambridge (Emma Small)

Scott Brady (Dancin' Kid)

Ward Bond (John McIvers)

Ben Cooper (Turkey Ralston)

Ernest Borgnine (Bart Lonergan)

John Carradine (Old Tom)

Royal Dano (Corey)

Frank Ferguson (Marshal Williams)

Paul Fix (Eddie)

Rhys Williams (Andrews)

Ian MacDonald (Pete)

Will Wright (Ned) \*

John Maxwell (Jake) \*

Robert Osterloh (Sam) \*

Frank Marlowe (Frank) \*

Trevor Bardette (Jenks) \*

Sumner Williams, Sheb Wooley,

Denver Pyle, Clem Harvey, Jack Ingram (posse) \*

USA 1954©

110 mins

Digital 4K

\* Uncredited

It starts like any other western, with a lone man riding along a rocky trail. Before the scene can settle into a familiar rhythm, explosions blast through the mountains and workmen swarm around the falling debris. Then gunshots echo, and the rider stops to look down in the valley where robbers are attacking a stagecoach. His face is eerily blank as he watches a body fall. Darkening the ominous mood, a dust-storm dims the air. Soon after, the stranger bursts into a palatial saloon, branded 'Vienna's' and the delirious spell of Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954) is cast.

This saloon is one of cinema's great spaces: a cavernous, church-shaped room with a sleek design that is more mid-century modern than Old West. The warm, rich colours of polished wood and rough-hewn red rock are set off by gleams of green on the eye-shades of the dealers who stand sentinel beside their empty tables. Surveying her domain from a second-floor balcony, Vienna (Joan Crawford) is dressed all in black like a gunfighter, with tight trousers, a man's shirt, short hair and a gunbelt slung rakishly around her hips. She stands ramrod straight and gives clipped orders, her face grimly set.

'Never met a woman who was more a man,' one of the dealers says of her, walking towards the camera as though he were addressing us, the audience. 'She thinks like one, acts like one, and sometimes makes me feel I'm not.'

*Johnny Guitar* revolves around a feud between Vienna, who counts on getting rich when the railroad being built through the mountains turns her isolated saloon into a bustling town, and Emma (Mercedes McCambridge), who owns the local bank and who leads a posse to lynch her rival. Their behaviour affirms the general rule that in order for women, who are traditionally marginal in westerns, to take more prominent roles, they must act like men. (This principle is taken to cringe-inducing extremes in William Wellman's 1951 *Westward the Women*, which celebrates the hardiness of female pioneers with an undercurrent of misogyny: compared to livestock as they are driven across the continent to marry men they have never seen, the ladies win grudging admiration for their ability to shoot, holler at mule teams, fight with their fists and rough it like men.) *Johnny Guitar* famously climaxes in a distaff gunfight – not the first: Joan Leslie as a saloon owner and Audrey Totter as an outlaw face off in Allan Dwan's loopy *Woman They Almost Lynched* (1953), set in a Civil War border town run by a tough female mayor.

Westerns may be an essentially masculine genre, but Ray's androgynous, operatic film reveals the flamboyance and feverish anxiety ingrained in that masculinity. With its theatrical speeches and stagey confrontations, its gorgeously coordinated colours – red rock and fire and copper and Johnny's whiskey-hued jacket – the film is as stylised as a Douglas Sirk melodrama. But stylisation, ritual and melodramatic heightening are always a large part of westerns' appeal. Survival in the cinematic West depends on performance, and westerns' intense scrutiny of how men move, their mannerisms, bodies and clothes, subjects males to a gaze at once desiring and judgemental. François Truffaut compared *Johnny Guitar* to *Beauty and the Beast* – Beauty, of course, being Sterling Hayden in the title role.

The long, marvellous opening sequence in Vienna's is a fluid, often funny series of contests and showdowns, fuelled by envy and jealousy and each person's

### Become a BFI Member

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](http://bfi.org.uk/join)

## Sight and Sound

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25\*  
\* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info:  
[sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk/subscribe](http://sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk/subscribe)



## BFI Player

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](http://player.bfi.org.uk)

## 25 & Under

We want to open up great independent and classic film and TV for all, making it as accessible as possible. If you are under the age of 26, you can get discounted tickets for BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. BFI Southbank cinema tickets are £4, with festival tickets £5, so you can enjoy the very best of cinema from around the world at an affordable price.

Sign up today and verify your age online, and you can start enjoying discounted tickets immediately.

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at [www.bfi.org.uk/signup](http://www.bfi.org.uk/signup)

need to prove himself, or measure herself against another. Vienna holds off an angry mob with a gun and a showy speech. Johnny, a newly arrived stranger, is goaded into a fistfight and challenged to prove his prowess on the guitar. Young Turkey (Ben Cooper) tries to prove he's a man by showing off his shooting, and Johnny blasts the gun out of his hand. But the most intense rivalry is between the two women, and though Vienna taunts Emma for being jealous over an outlaw called the Dancin' Kid (Scott Brady), her diagnosis ('You want the Kid, and you're so ashamed you want him dead') seems even more descriptive of Emma's feelings toward Vienna – a kind of explosive, erotic hatred matched only by Jennifer Jones and Gregory Peck in *Duel in the Sun* (1946).

McCambridge's performance maintains a steady pitch of barely repressed hysteria: with her shrill voice, bared teeth, and tiny eyes glittering with sadistic joy, she's a grotesque figure of single-minded hate who finally repels even her followers. Joan Crawford, closing in on 50 and on the self-parody that took over her final years on screen, is none the less a far more complex figure, in whom brittle toughness masks stinging hurt, rage wells under polished poise, and a soft heart coexists with a demonic will. *Johnny Guitar* was written for Crawford (originally a novel by Roy Chanslor, the script was credited to Philip Yordan but heavily revised by Ray), and she tyrannised the production with her demands and insecurity.

A surprise hit on its release, *Johnny Guitar* has become a cinephile touchstone, especially revered by the directors of the French New Wave. Lyrical intensity and inspired lunacy charge both its big moments, like the indelible image of Vienna in a billowing white dress playing the piano while a lynch mob seethes around her; and its small moments, like the deft flourish with which Johnny catches a whiskey glass as it rolls off the bar. This is one of those rapturous, intoxicating movies that seems at times to be primarily about its own movie-ness.

The whole film has the vivid illogic and compulsion of a dream, in which hidden desires, fears and furies are boldly acted out. So intense are the emotions of these women and men, it's as though all the violence, the explosions and flames and flying bullets, were really inside them.

Imogen Sara Smith, *Sight and Sound*, May 2016