



## “THEY SHOT A WESTERN SOUTH OF HERE”: JOSH RITTER’S IMAGINARY WEST

LILY CORWIN  
VIRGINIA TECH

On his 2017 album *Gathering*, Josh Ritter took a giant step forward on a creative journey he had been on for years: using and rearranging images of the American West alongside images of Old Hollywood to craft a shorthand that resonates deep in the heart of Americana. In this album, Ritter creates his own mythology of the West, one in which history and the art it inspired are mixed together with something more amorphous; they are hazy and romanticized, a blend of what we know about the Old West and what we feel about it, of what we have seen in old movies and what we might have seen. Ritter’s audience knows these images well but probably cannot place them in one history book or one film. Instead, they are anchored deep in the American imagination. As Neil Campbell has affirmed, the West “has always existed as both a region and more than region, as imagined, dream-space as well as real, material space. It is in the confluence of these different, but connected, views of the West that it remains a powerful and meaningful idea within the American psyche” (2000, 21). The West of Ritter’s creation has become a backdrop dripping with nostalgia, humor, and subverted clichés against which he can set explorations of contemporary America and the nature of memory itself.

Wild West imagery has long been a sort of shorthand for Ritter, who uses it to create atmosphere and character in a number of his songs. In “Mind’s Eye,” for example, from his 2007 album *The Historical Conquests of Josh Ritter*, he can easily summon the boastful veteran trying to scare off those coming to replace him: “All of these kids who think they’re quick on the draw / Always shooting at outlaws. I’m busy keeping my Colt cocked.” Ritter has long played with the kind of braggadocio wordplay more often seen in hip-hop, and here he uses the images of the Western to do it. The poetic speaker presents himself as the veteran gunslinger, the one wise enough not to go shooting at outlaws to prove his prowess, to keep his sidearm ready for the real threats. He goes on: “I’m putting up with you lightweights/ Calling me out to the middle of



the street.” The cliché of the gunfight in the middle of the street of some small Western town surrounded by general stores, brothels, and fainting ladies on second-story balconies is so pervasive in our vision of the time period, even though it is based largely in our cultural mythology and not actual history, that we cannot help but immediately understand what this speaker feels. Even in the context of the song, this is easily understood as metaphorical; the title itself suggests this is how the poetic speaker envisions the situation, not that it reflects reality. “Mind’s Eye” does not feel like a song about a gunslinger any more than the Notorious BIG’s “Last Day” feels like a song about mafiosos because it takes advantage of references to famous Cosa Nostra hits. As Richard White has written, “So powerful is the influence of this imagined West that its fictional creations and personas become symbols of the West,” and here Ritter uses them to create a character and a feeling that easily resonates with his audience.

Similarly, in “Next to the Last True Romantic,” on the same record, the character, is quickly sketched with Old West references: “He’s riding the plains, living up to his name/ as the next to the last true romantic/ he knows that his story is tragic/ but he can’t rest/ until he’s next to you.” Here, instead of the gunslinger, we have the lone traveler, the high plains drifter, traditionally a character of great pathos and sadness. The title, of course, has already clued us in to the humorous tone of the song, and the Western images here are used to make this character’s self-pity clear and funny; he is an outlaw for love, forced to roam the fictional plains because you have rejected him. The saloon images here are of debauchery rather than danger: “There’s always whiskey and women and women and whiskey around/ He can’t tell which is worse, to be dying of thirst or to drown.” It is a quick and humorous portrait of a young man feeling sorry for himself as he indulges his sadness, and Ritter paints it using the shorthand of Western cliché.

In other songs, the connection between the Old West and the movies it inspired becomes clearer and more inevitable. On *The Animal Years*’ “Lillian, Egypt,” Ritter crafts a humorous little story of lost love from scraps of Western songs, stories, and films. The love interest’s name—Lillian—is certainly a reference to the traditional ballad “The Lily of the West,” in which a young man finds, falls in love with, and loses a woman named Flora; here, in a song that more comically tells the same tale, Ritter sings “the lily of the west was a rose.” In addition, it is probably a reference to Lillian Gish, arguably the most famous actress of the silent era and known for starring as a Western damsel in distress many times over. There is no reference to any specific movie in “Lillian, Egypt,” but everything here comes from what we think of when we think of a Western film: the poetic speaker saves a girl from the protective grasp of her father, a “big town banker,” they head west in search of freedom, and spend their time in bars drinking whiskey and dancing on tables.

Ritter doesn’t stop there, though, and adds a metafictional level when he introduces the third member of his love triangle: the movie man. He has already set up his



Western film script, but he complicates it and draws our attention to its artifice by now introducing the making of a Western film into the story. Lillian, the love interest, ends up tied to the train tracks and mouthing the words “OH, NO!”—mouthing both because it is a silent film, and to remind us it isn’t real on two levels; she is an actress inside a story. The singer is cast as “the villain, the sheriff’s worst enemy” and rides a horse around the set. The Old West and the movies are inextricably entwined for Ritter. There were no movies yet, of course, during most of the period we consider the Old West in America; there was some overlap as one ended and the other began, but Hollywood’s obsession with the period continued long after any vestiges of it remained. For Ritter, though, they are too connected to part, and he suggests this is true now in the American imagination as well.

In the music video made to accompany “Lillian, Egypt,” the story is acted out as a silent film, with Ritter playing the poetic speaker’s part. There are Western costumes, brawls in saloons, slapstick gags, horses, and all. Cards with dialogue and exposition mimic the style of real silent film intertitles. The film has been made to look old, with low resolution, pops and starts, static everywhere. It is a loving homage, and it continues the work of the song: here is a humorous take on the traditional Western tale, the lily of the West leaving her earnest young man, but Ritter presents a quiet argument that we can’t really tell this kind of story straight anymore. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, our vision of the Old West is almost entirely created by the art that told its stories, and that too is pretty jumbled and hazily remembered. “Lillian, Egypt,” then, both is and isn’t a parody of itself: a love song and a joke.

“Good Man,” on the same record, shares the same wink so characteristic of Ritter’s songwriting, but uses the Western wordplay and metafiction for a more interesting take on the love song. The singer is arguing that he is a “good man for” his love interest, and he uses the traditional good man/bad man dichotomy of the Western film. The first two verses are pretty straight, but the final begins: “They shot a Western south of here/They had him cornered in a canyon. / Even his horse had disappeared. /They said it got run down by a bad, bad man.” Any listener, upon hearing the phrase “shot a western” is going to assume that “shot” refers to using a camera to “shoot film,” making “western” refer to the genre of that film. The next line, though, offers a different context when the pronoun “him” is used and opens up the wordplay essential to the Old West/movie mashup: someone has been shot with a gun, not a movie camera. So, who has been shot? A westerner? An embodiment of the concept of the old West itself? It is not revealed, and it doesn’t really matter. Campbell writes that “the West is, and always has been, many different spaces - real and imagined” (2000, 2) and here Ritter’s wordplay summons the tangled web of Wests audiences carry. Once Ritter has summoned the world in which a horse is run down by a villain, in which people and/or films are shot in canyons, he has tapped into the romanticized



vision his listeners have in their heads, the blurred amalgam of history and art and cultural myth that is the Old West.

The song ends “You’re not a good shot, but I’m worse/And there’s so much where we ain’t been yet./ So climb up on this little horse./ The only thing we’ll hit is sunset.” The cliché of the couple riding off together on the horse toward the sunset has permeated every bit of American pop culture and needs little explanation, making it a perfect shorthand for a happy ending. It is worth noting that riding towards the sunset means heading West, of course, and so the cliché, grounded in Western film, is also a celebration of the American idea that freedom can be found in the great open spaces of the West. Not only is Ritter using the sunset image in a traditional way, as his happy ending for the poetic speaker and his love interest, but in deploying it alongside the idea that the woman is the better shot, he also challenges those very romantic traditions. He’ll hold the reins; she can hold the gun. He’s having a little fun with the tradition while he modernizes the myth and gives it a new tenderness. The bad man, the horse, the canyon, and the sunset create an expectation that our hero will rescue the damsel in distress; instead, Ritter undermines that expectation to show his lovers on more even ground and headed for happiness.

Right before writing and recording *Gathering*, Ritter had recently finished writing or cowriting all of the songs for *Blue Mountain*, Bob Weir’s 2016 solo release. The record was inspired by Weir’s teenage turn as a ranch hand. Ritter was a fitting collaborator who is himself from rural Idaho, or as he put it to Roisin O’Connor from *The Independent* (2017), “the middle of nowhere on the edge of a mountain.” As Ritter acknowledged in another interview, this one alongside Weir with *Relix*, this upbringing included “some of that mythology of the cowboys and loggers and all these mythic people” (2016). He reports that, upon learning of his sometime producer Josh Kaufman’s intention to make an album with Weir based on cowboy and ranch songs, he begged to be involved in the project. The songs he wrote or cowrote on that album are different from his other songs in that they are less tongue-in-cheek and less metafictional; they attempt more frequently to sound like the old songs really did, using simpler verbiage, traditional melodies, and little irony. Still, though, they are there, the references to the songs and movies that have formed most Americans’ vision of the Old West: he writes about pearl-handled pistols and the Red River Valley. In “Whatever Happened to Rose,” we see perhaps the most Ritter-esque moment as the wordplay spills out, referencing and twisting easily identifiable Western clichés and covering them with the Hollywood-soft sense of memory: “Whatever happened to the end of the trail/The gold strike, the gold spike, the want of a nail/ And every brass rail my thirst ever rode/ And whatever happened to Rose?/ And whatever happened to that panhandle town / And where blew the ashes when the whole thing burned down?”



In an interview with *Relix.com*, Weir and Ritter discussed the discrepancy between our cultural vision of the Wild West and its reality. Weir states: “None of that horseshit in the Westerns actually happened. None of it. Maybe there was a gunfight at the O.K. Corral, but it wasn’t just a bunch of guys with guns all in one place.” Ritter then comments “When we first started, I was thinking a lot about Marty Robbins. It’s so exciting. But, like you say, that’s so interesting—that’s not the way it was” (2016). The earlier songs I discussed were written before this interview and Ritter’s knowledge of the historical West can at least be questioned. “Myrna Loy,” the current culmination of this thread of his songwriting, was undoubtedly written after he had become aware of the discrepancies between Western films and Western realities.

Where other songs have referenced Hollywood tropes and conventions, here we have Ritter starting with a real actor. Myrna Loy was, of course, the beloved star of films like *The Thin Man* (1934), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), and *Cheaper by the Dozen* (1950). She was not, however, known particularly as a star of Western films, which makes Ritter’s choice a strange one. On Twitter, he reported “watching the classic movie channel” and responding to her aesthetically: he wrote, “I discovered Myrna Loy through the *Thin Man* movies. She was one of the first actresses to cross from silent movies to talkies. She came from Montana, and her face reminded me of a painting by Mucha” (October 30, 2017). The song begins with a strange combination of truth and fiction: “Let me stay with you a while and tell old, old stories/ Of your oft electric laughter and your charms/ How you came out of Montana with a wolf pup at your heels/ And a snow -white rabbit huddled in your arms.” The speaker is directly addressing someone, and the title suggests it will be Loy herself, certainly charming and certainly from Montana. The wolf pup and the rabbit, though, take us already into the realm of symbol and myth, away from the territory of literal biography. The first chorus then begins, the repetition of the three words “in the darkness” that will dominate the song. The first verse suggests the singer is speaking to Loy, but the chorus suggests he is watching her, calling up the experience of sitting in a movie theatre, lights out and unaware of the self, fully submerged in the world of the screen.

Tellingly, in an interview with the *Huffington Post* on *Gathering’s* release, Ritter moves from a discussion of this song and the timelessness of Loy’s appeal into a discussion of the timelessness of song. He says:

Words like timeless, we all have variations of what it is. A word like lust, it has variations, and there are shades of lust, or love, and how we use and describe love or lust, and it’s temporal. But there is the (non-temporal) thing about the stage, the release from everything and you are out there and you float. It’s wonderful and strange, and I can cut free from everything except gravity and not be aware of time passing. Yes, the song ends, the night ends, and you must move on, and back into the world, and where you need to be. Yet, within the songs, I stayed away from anything





contemporary, or anything that described the essence with a particular time, or tied it to a particular time. (2017)

The sensation he describes while on stage—untethered, floating in the song and the darkness of the room—is similar to that created by the three-word chorus of “Myrna Loy.” The surreal feeling we all know when we walk out of a movie theater to find that night has descended while we were inside, or that snow has begun to fall, is mirrored in Ritter’s comments on the non-temporal experience of performing and in the strange, hazy, half-memories created and recalled in the song.

It is in the second chorus when the Old West images begin: “remember, hey, those gold rush days, how the gold dust in the mud/ from Main Street leading all the way to Alder/ with sunset turned the color of a lover’s throated blush.” Loy never performed in a Gold Rush picture, further separating the song from reality. In addition, of course, the speaker is now remembering those gold rush days, days Ritter never lived through. Is this written from the perspective of a man in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century? Myrna Loy herself was born in 1905, two years after the first silent Western, *The Great Train Robbery*, was made. The song, as it unfolds, makes any attempt at such a literal reading impossible and undesired. It is the in-betweens that matter here, the unrooted feelings, the blending of history, art, and myth that has created what we think of when we think of Americana. Ritter wrote, when he offered some thoughts on the song on Facebook, “I meant for parts to be anachronistic and other parts to hew toward the dreaminess of memory” and we see that begin in earnest in this second verse (November 10, 2017). The “gold rush days” are metaphoric: the days of youth, of potential, the days of excitement—and a man’s gold rush days can be past as surely as a country’s can. Main Street is a quintessentially American place, and is the center of frontier town life in our vision. The ground, Ritter sings, is shining with gold dust, glowing like a lover’s blush, all the way from Main Street to Alder. Alder is a ghost town in Washington state which is submerged and inaccessible for a portion of every year. It once boasted a small population that relied on logging, and had the kinds of buildings you’d expect: a general store, a school, a post office. In 1942, when a dam was built nearby, it was abandoned and now can be toured during the months of the year when the lake dries up. Little needs to be said about why such a place would appeal to Ritter’s poetic sensibilities, but surely the image of a Western town there but not there, glimpsable through the hazy waters of the lake, echo the muddied memories of the song. It is also worth noting that the town did not exist until 1909 and so had no place in Gold Rush history. It is then a double ghost in this song: it was not there in the “gold rush days” and is not there now. Everything about this image is anachronistic, unreal, impossible.

The impossibilities continue in the following verse: “Remember, hey, those goldrush days,/ some last chance gulch saloon./ You and I and all the miners watching/as shadows danced across a screen as quiet as the moon/ without sound,



their fury signifying all things.” These are more memories of the salad days, the halcyon past, the goldrush days of yore, and here are the speaker and his love in a saloon with miners watching silent film. Myrna Loy was, of course, a silent film actor before successfully making the transition to talkies, but as we’ve noted the timelines in the song cannot match. The play on Shakespeare’s famous line further heightens and idealizes the past Ritter is toying with: somewhere, in the memories of love and art, there is personal meaning; somewhere, in the America we think of as our past, the America of the West and saloons, of silent film, there was meaning.

After watching the movie in the saloon, our hero and Myrna ventured out through the night: “The whole town was alive that night / as we floated down the street/ through fistfights, cowboy poets, parlor women, / and the light from the projector seemed to glow within your soul/like an opal throated songbird in its prism.” Surrounded by the stock characters of the Wild West—brawlers, poets, and harlots—the lovers float down Main Street, still a little bit stuck in that other world created by film. In fact, it is no longer clear if the speaker is remembering this happening to him, or remembering seeing it happen in a movie. The light from the projector glows in or on the lover. Is he with her watching a Western film, or is he watching her in a Western film?

The question is further complicated by the final verse, where Ritter sings: “They’re tearing down the movies. / Not a stone upon a stone. / All dust is dust no matter how celestial./ But I who tasted hornet juice and honey on the rose,/ what use have I for all their cold memorials?” The movies are being torn down, but what does that mean? The movie theater? The movies themselves? Certainly, we have left those goldrush days behind, as the singer affirms in the exquisite line “all dust is dust no matter how celestial” that all physical things—buildings, films, humans—are ultimately reduced to the same nothing, and the memorials we set up to the past are as well. Memory, though, is not the same as memorial and is housed elsewhere, somewhere both more and less real; experience and feeling endure and matter. Being able to recall the tastes of hornet juice and honey on the rose—the memory of sweetness and meaning—is sweet and meaningful, even as it is painful. The song ends, leaving us once again “in the darkness.”

Ultimately, “Myrna Loy” is not just one thing. It is a love song, a series of memories of intimacy and excitement recited dreamily by the speaker, whose lover is now gone. In this reading, the “goldrush days” are the days they spent in early love, and the elision of memory with film serves to create the hazy, romanticized, celluloid way we all remember our personal pasts. The use throughout the song, though, of the images and lexicon belonging to the collective American memory of the nation’s past, the Old, Wild West we have mythologized and placed firmly behind Vaseline-covered camera lenses, offers a secondary and complementary reading. While the song speaks of one man’s memory of young love, it also speaks of our national memory. Like a bereaved



lover, we put our past on a pedestal and we recognize it only through the stories we have long told ourselves about it. Its truth probably doesn't matter anymore, but the way we remember it does.

In *Slant Magazine's* review of *Gathering*, Josh Hurst writes that "Ritter's not interested in folk music for its own sake; tradition is the canvas on which he displays his own vision, deeply personal and emotionally direct" (2017). It is hard to know what Hurst means by "folk music for its own sake" as that suggests a serious misunderstanding of folk music, which has never really been for its own sake. Folk music, when it works, creates a thread between generations, carrying the story of the past, while also allowing each generation to speak its truth, to find and to add meaning simultaneously. At once static and dynamic, true to its roots and always being reimagined, folk music is the perfect medium for Ritter's ongoing project. It is indeed, as Hurst writes, a canvas where Ritter can create his own vision, and these references to the American Wild West and to the genre Westerns that shaped our cultural myths are colors he continues to use to explore contemporary America and memory, both personal and collective.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Campbell, Neil. 2000. *The Cultures of the New American West*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hurst, Josh. 2017. "Review: Josh Ritter, *Gathering*." Review of *Gathering*, by Josh Ritter. *Slant*, September 28, 2017. <https://www.slantmagazine.com/music/josh-ritter-gathering/>.
- Ritter, Josh. 2006. "Good Man." *The Animal Years*. V2 Records.
- Ritter, Josh. 2006. "Lillian, Egypt." *The Animal Years*. V2 Records.
- Ritter, Josh. 2007. "Mind's Eye." *The Historical Conquests of Josh Ritter*. V2 Records.
- Ritter, Josh. 2017. "Myrna Loy." *Gathering*. Pytheas Recordings.
- Ritter, Josh. 2007. "Next to the Last True Romantic." *The Historical Conquests of Josh Ritter*. V2 Records.
- Ritter, Josh & Bob Weir. 2016. "Whatever Happened to Rose." *Blue Mountain*. Legacy.
- Ritter, Josh. 2017. "Josh Ritter Interview: 'I don't trust answers in songs. It's more fun to write about questions.'" Interview by Roisin O'Connor. *Independent*, 8 December 2017. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/josh-ritter-interview-gathering-album-bob-weir-song-tour-dates-american-songwriting-lyrics-bruce-a8099046.html>.





- Ritter, Josh & Bob Weir. 2019. "In Conversation: Bob Weir and Josh Ritter on Cowboy Songs and Forging an Unlikely Songwriting Bond." Interview by Mike Greenhaus. *Relix*, 2 November 2016. [https://relix.com/articles/detail/in\\_conversation\\_bob\\_weir\\_and\\_josh\\_ritter\\_on\\_cowboy\\_songs\\_and\\_their\\_unlikely\\_songwriting\\_partnership/](https://relix.com/articles/detail/in_conversation_bob_weir_and_josh_ritter_on_cowboy_songs_and_their_unlikely_songwriting_partnership/).
- Ritter, Josh. 2017. "Josh Ritter: A Full Plate for "Gathering." Interview by Brian D'Ambrosio. *Huffington Post*. 14 September 2017, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/josh-ritter-a-full-plate-for-gathering\\_b\\_59bac39be4b0390a1564dbca](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/josh-ritter-a-full-plate-for-gathering_b_59bac39be4b0390a1564dbca).
- White, Richard. 1993. *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Corwin, Lily. 2023. "'They Shot a Western South of Here': Josh Ritter's Imaginary West." *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published May 22.