

BIG BEND

— ON THE —
BIG SCREEN

BY BRENDA KISSKO
PHOTOGRAPH BY SARAH VASQUEZ



T

HE WIDE OPEN SPACES of West Texas provide the void we need to find ourselves. Mountains of possibility stand in the hopeful distance of an expansive landscape. This is a place where we can lose ourselves and find ourselves and reinvent ourselves. It's where cowboys and culture collide, and we're all welcomed just the same. It's a place free of falsities, where we can breathe in fresh air, lift our arms up to the sparse clouds, let the sun pour down on our face and take it all in. Filmmakers have recognized this elusive quality of the region and captured it time and time again on the big screen.

In June of 1955, the film crew and cast of *Giant* (1956) arrived in tiny Marfa. Movie stars Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson and James Dean were welcomed to the town with a larger-than-life skyline, greeted with a parade and friendly faces eager to welcome Hollywood. Director George Stevens wanted this Texas story to be filmed in the Lone Star State and Marfa's extraordinary, unescapable land surrounded by distant mountains provided the setting they desired.

They filmed on a private ranch where they erected the iconic Benedict

home facade designed by legendary art director Boris Leven. *Giant* was an instant success. It was nominated for 10 Academy Awards and three Golden Globes and it put Marfa on the map. The film, based on the Edna Ferber novel, shed light on many issues like greed, power, gender bias and racism through the lens of ranching and oil. *Giant* documents the story of Texas in a time when oil eclipsed ranching as chief industry of the state.

Watching this picturesque film on the big screen, we feel the pull of these aquamarine skies and sweeping grassland where the possibilities are as endless as the horizon. We want to experience that for ourselves and that's why we travel to the Big Bend region. To capture that feeling that Stevens — and the many filmmakers that have filmed here since — delivered.

Now, all that remains of the *Giant* set is a deteriorating wooden skeleton of the building. But the heart of the film lives on. Visit Hotel Paisano, an unofficial headquarters of sorts while filming in Marfa, to learn the stories of this epic production in far West Texas. Sip margaritas on the patio at Jett's Grill and overnight in the Elizabeth Taylor or Rock Hudson suites.

Head to Reata Restaurant (named after the film's ranch) in nearby



Alpine to enjoy a delicious meal surrounded by breathtaking murals depicting scenes from the movie. Reata's menu does not disappoint with options like smoked quail and cheddar grits, pepper-crusted tenderloin and chile rellenos topped with crab-stuffed, bacon-wrapped jalapenos.

The newest, coolest *Giant* attraction can be found about 5 miles west of Marfa, just off Highway 90. Here, at "Little Riata" — where Jett struck it rich — the old windmill and the ranch sign still remain and are now joined by artist John Cerney's "Giant Marfa" art installation. The seven enormous free-standing pieces of the mural feature a towering Elizabeth Taylor, James Dean, the iconic house and Rock Hudson in his yellow convertible, which actually plays music, making this a visual and audio experience.

It's no wonder this film that celebrates some of the most iconic aspects and tragic traits of Texas made such an indelible mark on the region and paved the path for the many filmmakers to follow in its footsteps.

Kevin Reynolds' *Fandango* (1985) is another that comes to mind when reviewing films shot in — and of — the Big Bend region. Set in 1971, this coming of age story follows the five "groovers" on one last road trip to the



GIANT MURAL: The back patio at the Reata Restaurant in Alpine features this large art piece by Styfle Read which was inspired by the movie *Giant*.

FROM TOP: STEWART RAMSER, CISCO GAMEZ

The Dom Rock can be found off River Road, along the Rio Grande.

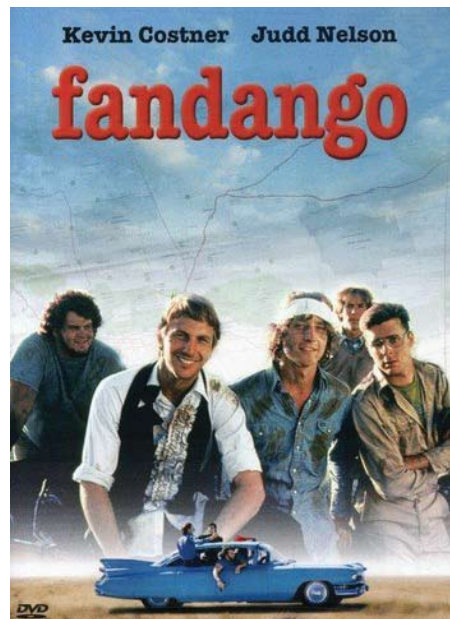


Mexican border following graduation from The University of Texas, each facing uncertainty with the Vietnam War weighing heavy on their shoulders. The film stars Kevin Costner young in his career, an early Judd Nelson, and Sam Robards (son of Lauren Bacall).

Reynolds has said in interviews that every director has that quintessential semi-autobiographical film they must first get out of their system and *Fandango* is his. His story, and so many others that can relate to this tale of escapism, of reflection, of holding on to the last grasps of one's youth.

Though it was not an immediate box office

A FAREWELL FANDANGO FOR THE GROOVERS: Below: *Fandango* DVD cover; Bottom left: Marvin McIntyre (aka Truman Sparks) makes a toast at the Dom Rock during an Ultimate Fandango; Bottom right: *Fandango* actors McIntyre, Robyn Rose (Lorna), Brian Cesak (the "fifth groover", Lester Griffin) and Chuck Bush (Dorman) seen in San Elizario during an Ultimate Fandango trip.



hit, the film has become a cult classic with a devoted following. A group of the film's fans — and some of its actors — return to its filming locations from time to time during "Ultimate Fandango" (ultimatefandango.com). The next pilgrimage is scheduled for Sept. 30 through Oct. 4, 2020.

Marvin J. McIntyre, who played unforgettably goofy Truman Sparks, and Chuck Bush, who played the quiet and beefy, yet intelligent Dorman, have both joined the "Ultimate Fandango" in the past when they've revisited filming locations including the Dom Rock, Alpine's Sonic, the cemetery in Marfa, Presidio Chapel of San Elizario and more. If you don't know what Dom Rock is, you have to watch the movie. Then you'll understand the pull of the groovers' compelling mission to go dig up Dom.

Yes, Dom Rock is still here, waiting for your discovery along with scenic River Road (Highway 170) between Lajitas and Presidio. And if you're brave enough, you, too, can stand atop the boulder overlooking the Rio Grande and toast to your innocence of youth, just as Costner did in the movie. Perhaps this flick has become popular because we're all looking to Fandango our life and delay responsibilities. Sneak in one last carefree moment before the sun sets.

Fandango and *Giant* are now just two cogs in the growing wheelhouse of West Texas-made films.



FILM FESTIVALS IN THE BIG BEND REGION

CineMarfa:
Marfa (April/May)
cinemarfa.org

Binational Independent Film Festival:
El Paso (May)
binationalfilmfestival.org

Plaza Classic Film Festival:
El Paso (August)
plazaclassic.com

Femme Frontera Filmmaker Showcase:
El Paso (September)
femmefrontera.org/2019-fffs

West Texas Film Festival:
Odessa (November)
wtxfilmfest.org

Before *Giant* there was *High Lonesome* (1950) starring John Barrymore Jr. — a classic shoot-'em-up Western. *The Andromeda Strain* (1971) found ghost town Shafter, off Highway 67 between Marfa and Presidio, as the perfect setting for this eerie story based on Michael Crichton's novel. And it could only be on the dusty mountainsides here along the river that the hijinks of duo Willie Nelson and Gary Busey in *Barbarosa* (1982) could take place.

There were, of course, more Westerns filmed here like the made-for-television movies *The Good Old Boys* (1995), *Streets of Laredo* (1995) and *Dead Man's Walk* (1996), and the feature film *All The Pretty Horses* (2000). Texas actor Tommy Lee Jones made his directorial debut with *The Good Old Boys* (which he also wrote and starred in) and has returned again and again to film in Big Bend country.

Three Burials (2005) was Jones' second film to direct and features some of the most beautiful shots of

this area. It's like watching a painted masterpiece come to life on the big screen as scenes traverse the region's rocky slopes and grassy prickly pear-spotted mountains. The dramatic scene shot at Santa Elena Canyon in Big Bend National Park takes your breath away, much like seeing the canyon in person. *Three Burials'* deep roster of stars including January Jones, Melissa Leo, Dwight Yoakum and Barry Pepper make this a standout film.

Jones returned to the Big Bend region again for the Coen brothers' *No Country for Old*



Men (2007). The film was based on Cormac McCarthy's novel and won numerous awards including four Academy Awards and two Golden Globes. Stars Javier Bardem, Josh Brolin, Woody Harrelson and Kelly Macdonald play out the twisted plot across a rugged terrain. Bardem's character, Anton Chigurh, is one of the coldest, most evil characters conjured up, killing many in his path as he pursues Brolin's character, Llewelyn Moss, after a drug deal goes bad. It's classic Coen brothers — raw, violent and indelible.

That same year, another major award-winning movie filmed in the Big Bend region was released: *There Will Be Blood* (2007). Based on Upton Sinclair's novel *Oil!*, this epic drama is about oil prospecting at the turn of the century and explores themes of greed, family, religion and madness. Actor Daniel Day-Lewis delivered a luminous performance in the lead role. The film took home two Academy Awards and two Golden Globes among a host of other awards.

Texas filmmaker Richard Linklater's groundbreaking *Boyhood* (2014) was filmed over

12 years throughout the state, including locations in Big Bend Ranch State Park, Big Bend National Park, Terlingua, and Sul Ross State University. Mason (played by Ellar Coltrane) literally comes of age before our eyes as he is raised by his divorced parents (played by Ethan Hawke and Patricia Arquette). There's arguably no better setting for the film's final scene than under the pink evening sky of Big Bend, a perfect place to be in the moment.

Dancer, Texas Pop. 81 (1998) is another coming-of-age filmed here about four friends planning to leave their small hometown upon graduation and head straight to Los Angeles. *Grand Champion* (2002) was also filmed throughout the region and tells a story quite familiar in Texas — that of showing livestock — with a star-studded cast that includes Bruce Willis, Julia Roberts, Natalie Maines and George Strait. *Blanche* (2018) was inspired by a true West Texas bet and is an endearing story about friendship that takes us along these beautiful backroads on a tale of friendship and second chances.

Marfa Girl (2012) is a much heavier, inde-

pendent film about a 16-year-old growing up in a border town and *Far Marfa* (2013) is an eccentric mix of myth and mystery that celebrates the famous art town. The Amazon original TV series *I Love Dick* (2016), starring Kevin Bacon, Kathryn Hahn and Griffin Dunne is another production shot in and around major spots in Marfa — the Lost Horse Saloon, the Judd Foundation and up and down the town's main drags. These could only be set and filmed here with that oh-so-Marfa vibe unlike any other.

German filmmaker Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas* (1984) was critically acclaimed and is still celebrated today. Its desolate landscape pulls us in to this road story that follows a drifter looking to reconnect with his young son and missing wife. The film stars Harry Dean Stanton and was written by Sam Shepard and L.M. Kit Carson.

One cannot discuss West Texas films without recognizing *Friday Night Lights* (2004) the movie and *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011) the television series. Based on H.G. Bissinger's hit book set in Odessa's Permian High School, both featured star-studded casts and won numerous awards. This story about Texas high school football examines the importance placed on this sport that has become a religion of its own.

This is by no means a definitive list, but rather the beginning of your visual introduction to the Big Bend region. No matter how many you watch, though, there's no replacement for seeing this grandeur in person.

**BIG BEND REGION
FILM RESOURCES**

**Texas Film
Commission:**
gov.texas.gov/film

**CF Ranch Production
Facilities:**
filmwesttexas.com

**Film Alliance of Texas
Border Communities:**
(432) 371-2524

Marfa On Location:
marfaonlocation.com

**Big Bend Film
Commission:**
shootbigbend.com

Discover the adventure of the true frontier...
it awaits you in Far West Texas!

TexasMountainTrail.com
part of the Texas Heritage Trails
so much more than just blue signs on the highway!