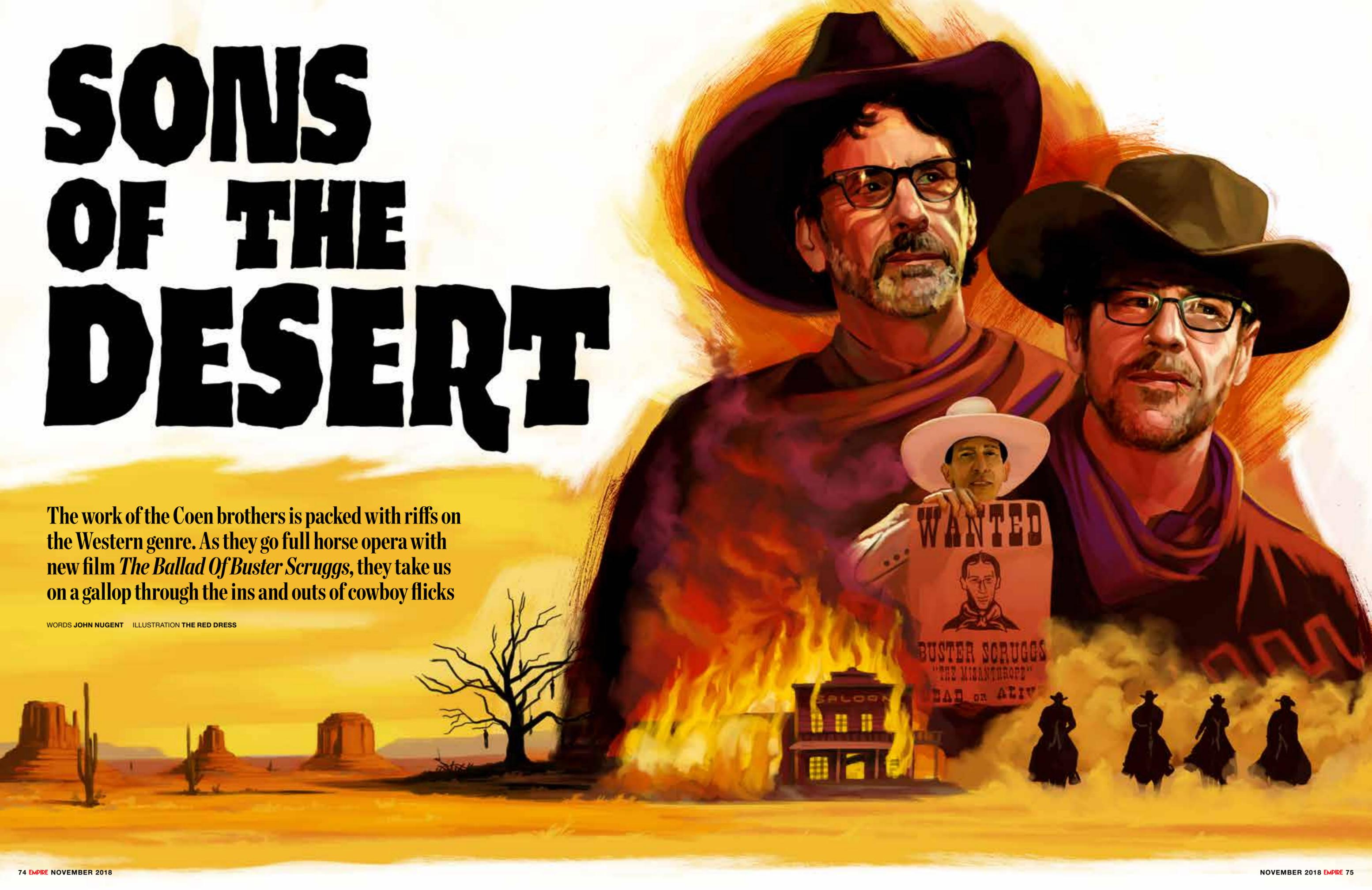


# SONS OF THE DESERT

The work of the Coen brothers is packed with riffs on the Western genre. As they go full horse opera with new film *The Ballad Of Buster Scruggs*, they take us on a gallop through the ins and outs of cowboy flicks

WORDS JOHN NUGENT ILLUSTRATION THE RED DRESS



# WESTERN

## TIP YOUR HAT TO THE PAST

THE COENS GREW up in suburban Minneapolis, a solid thousand-or-so miles from anywhere that might look like a Western; you'd have to ride west, three weeks or more by wagon train, to find the arid wilderness of the Great Basin Desert, or the prairies of the Great Plains. But the myth of the Western gripped them from an early age. Voracious consumers of film and television, the young Coens indiscriminately watched the grand, operatically violent Spaghetti Westerns as often as they watched the faintly ridiculous thigh-slapping singing cowboys. All points of the Western spectrum can be seen in *Buster Scruggs*, which opens with a white-Stetsoned Tim Blake Nelson, as the title character, declaring, "That puts me in mind of a song!" at every available opportunity — even as his cheerful warbles are incongruously, hilariously pitted against the bloody violence more likely found in a Leone flick.

Walking into a room with Joel and Ethan Coen is a little like walking into the saloon of a one-horse town where nobody knows your name. The music seems to stop. There is an uncomfortable silence. Drinks are put down (in this case, Joel's mug of herbal tea). Searching eyes assess you. Nobody's quite sure how this one's going to go down.

But then you get the brothers talking about Westerns, and it's as if the honky-tonk piano starts playing again. "Making Westerns somehow seems connected to that play that you used to do as kids," says Ethan (younger, shorter, more prone to giggles). "It's certainly part of the pleasure of doing this kind of movie," concurs Joel (older, taller, wilder hair, hidden behind a pair of sepia-tinted 1970s shades). The famously reserved brothers rarely give interviews, but while they rigorously maintain a lack of eye contact throughout our conversation in a Venice hotel suite, it's clear they have deep affection for the Western genre, an enduring slice of Americana. It's an affection they've channelled frequently across their 35 years of filmmaking — from the oppressive vistas of *No Country For Old Men* to the folksy charm of *True Grit*; from *The Big Lebowski*'s mysterious, moustachioed narrator to *Hail, Caesar!*'s singing cowboy — and never more so than in *The Ballad Of Buster Scruggs*, their new anthology film.

Despite widely being reported to the contrary, they confirm to *Empire* that *Buster Scruggs* was always intended as a film. "We would never actually do a TV series," asserts Joel. "In terms of what we did, it never changed." The six short stories, some of which resurrect scraps from 25 years' worth of unused story ideas, span every dusty corner of the Western, embracing the genre even as they subvert it. Like generations of American storytellers before them, they're clearly bewitched by the romance and roughness of the American frontier as it was, and wasn't. So we attempt to tease a few insights on how to put together a cowboy movie from the most inscrutable brothers in cinema. Pull up a chair, partner: we're headed west.

**Joel:** There was a funny period in Westerns, when we first started going to movies. As very small kids, it was [films like] *The Magnificent Seven*.

**Ethan:** They were pretty cheesy. Though we didn't make those quality distinctions, and still don't.

**Joel:** Then Sergio Leone came along with *Once Upon A Time In The West*, and that was, of course, a mindblower.

**Ethan:** Even when we were youths, I think we recognised: "Yeah, this is good shit."

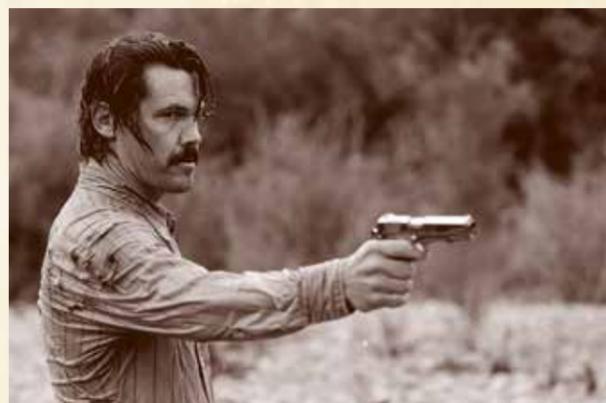
**Joel:** So there was a really great progression in the Western that we were around for. Interestingly, we didn't come to John Ford until much, much later — except I think I saw *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* on television when I was a little kid.

**Ethan:** We knew [singing cowboy] Roy Rogers.

**Joel:** We knew him from the television show. We knew him from his [country music group] Sons Of The Pioneers. And then we knew him from the hamburger place [a fast food chain licensed to use the Roy Rogers name]. There was one in Times Square, when we were cutting our first movie.

**Ethan:** Such a great progression!

**Joel:** I have to say, singing cowboy movies have had more of a hold on our imagination [as adults] than when we were kids. I think when we were kids, we probably thought they were corny.



## SADDLE UP

OUR MAN ROY Rogers once said that when his time came, he'd like to be stuffed and mounted on his beloved horse, Trigger. Cowboys rarely speak as lovingly as they do about their trusty steeds and the same can be said for the Coens, who talk with atypical animation about their favourite horse chases from classic Westerns. Bring up *The Searchers* in their company, for example, and they'll marvel at the risks John Ford took to stage his daring chase sequence across the San Juan River. *Buster Scruggs* features plenty of daring horse sequences, including a couple of intense showdowns between cowboys and Native Americans. Tim Blake Nelson straddles a gleaming white horse as *Buster Scruggs* opens, requiring five months in training prior to filming, learning the duel skills of riding and playing the guitar — at the same time.

**Ethan:** We had phenomenal stunt riders.

**Joel:** These kids — some of them were teenagers, some in their twenties, not much older than that — were all bareback riders, riding without saddles, as the Native Americans did at that time. It's unbelievable.

**Ethan:** It's weird: for all the horrible production nightmares, of which there were many, the horse stunts were easy. I mean, they just *did 'em*.

**Joel:** What those guys did went off like clockwork. Those guys were incredible. What was permissible [on older Westerns] was very different from what is permissible now on a movie set. You look at this unbelievable amount of stuff they were doing with actors — there was real danger.

**Ethan:** Oh my God. That's what's striking. You look at it again and you go, "Wow, that's good." Ward Bond's a pretty good actor but fuck, he could actually *ride*.

**Joel:** John Wayne was a great rider. Though he hated horses. Glenn Ford was a great rider. You look at these

**Above:** *Buster Scruggs* (Tim Blake Nelson) croons a ballad from atop his trusty steed. **Left, top to bottom:** Hobie Doyle (Alden Ehrenreich) gets his singing cowboy on in *Hail, Caesar!*; Jeff Bridges as Reuben J. 'Rooster' Cogburn with Joel and Ethan Coen on the set of *True Grit*; Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin) gun-toting in *No Country For Old Men*.

Glenn Ford movies and he's doing this stuff effortlessly, which would be such a big deal.

**Ethan:** It used to be the skill that actors have. Like elocution.

**Joel:** We've actually worked with some actors that ride really well. Josh Brolin is a really great rider. He has that skill. He grew up on a ranch.

**Ethan:** Matt Damon is very good. Jeff [Bridges] is very good — totally at ease.

**Joel:** In the old days, they used to trip horses with wires. But it was dangerous for the horse. They would break its neck. It's become more restricted, for good reason. In fact, quite honestly, there are more stringent rules about horses and animals than people.

**Ethan:** It's weird. In *True Grit*, we had Hailee Steinfeld, who was 13 at the time, riding a horse across the river. The American Humane people were there, and there's a rule about what temperature the water can be. It can't be too cold for the horse. But the 13-year-old girl — no rule about that!

## TAKE IN THE SCENERY

**THE BALLAD OF** *Buster Scruggs* opens like a thousand Westerns before it: in the vast, iconic panorama of Monument Valley, the landmark made famous by John Ford in *Stagecoach*, and a shorthand for the Wild West ever since. It's the Coens consciously nodding to Ford and his VistaVision widescreens, borrowing iconography that sets the tone in a single frame, even if it's geographically incongruous. The end of *Stagecoach* sees John Wayne leave Lordsburg, New Mexico, by way of Monument Valley, Arizona, 450 miles to the north; in a pleasingly similar bit of creative licence, *Scruggs* has New Mexico doubling for Arizona, the famous sandstone mesas and buttes of Monument Valley digitally inserted behind Tim Blake Nelson in post-production. Perhaps more than any genre, the landscape is like a character in these films: tough and indifferent, but also aching with beauty and mystery. Reflecting the diversity of the American frontier, the Coens' multi-chapter Western darts across the country, from the Great Plains of Nebraska to the dusty deserts of Arizona to the lush, pastoral valleys of Colorado's Rocky Mountains.

**Ethan:** I saw *Stagecoach* again before we shot this movie. I thought: "Wow, they are travelling around Monument Valley for many days in this stagecoach!" At that point, you're kind of familiar with the locations, having been to Monument Valley. You go, "Huh!" We actually didn't go [to Monument Valley] when we filmed this — that's Tim digitally inserted into a plate. The stuff that's live action was shot near Santa Fe in New Mexico. **Joel:** The landscapes were certainly important to us here, as they have been in other movies. We wanted each of these stories to have a distinctive and different landscape. **Ethan:** For the Tom Waits one [All Gold Canyon] we needed the Rocky mountains **Joel:** That one is an adaptation of a Jack London story, and it so specifically describes this valley that he goes into. We weren't actually sure it was even findable. Or at least, findable in the way you can bring a movie crew. After a lot of looking all over, the location scouts found this valley near Telluride, in the Colorado mountains. It was really perfect. Beautiful box canyon to get into. Very high. Between 10,000 and 11,000 feet high. Very difficult to work up there — the air's very thin. But *beautiful*.

**Clockwise from above:** Joel and Ethan Coen with DP Bruno Delbonnel and Bill Heck on location for segment 'The Gal Who Got Rattled'; Tom Waits plays a gold prospector in the 'All Gold Canyon' segment; 'The Gal Who Got Rattled' segment sees Zoe Kazan team up with Heck.

**Ethan:** Tom sucked a lot of oxygen between takes.

**Joel:** Fine, unless you're really exerting yourself. Which he was. It really takes its toll.

**Ethan:** I remember that you'd have to go pee at the top of this rise. I'd labour up the hill, and be in the porta potty peeing, and gasping for air. There's thin walls in those porta potties — I could hear the guy in the next porta potty gasping for air, too. *[Laughs]*

## FIND HUMOUR IN THE HORROR

THE COENS HAVE always leaned towards black-as-the-night humour; even at their most serious or sombre, their films are dripping in ironic wit. The Old West, then, seems like a comfortable fit for their sensibilities, where a wry remark is often offered in the same breath as a deadly shot. In fact, the second tale in *Buster Scruggs*, entitled



'Near Algodones', boasts a spot of *literal* gallows humour, with James Franco generating dark laughs from a hangman's noose — including a killer punchline to boot, which we won't spoil here, but one of which the Coens are rightly proud.

**Ethan:** That's a good gag, right? Fuck yeah, that's a good gag. James [Franco] really appreciated it. It was well done.

**Joel:** I forgot that we did this: right after James says his line, the guy [next to him on the gallows] goes: "Uh-huh." He was funny. That whole thing is a bit of a shaggy-dog story. James is very funny in it.

**Ethan:** It harks back to those Westerns like Sergio Leone and Clint's '70s Westerns, when the Western was more free. *[Laughs]* You could be free!

**Joel:** You want Westerns to be free! It's what gives it its vitality.

**Ethan:** Clint is so weird 'cause he's such a rock, and yet he's free and beautiful. *The Outlaw Of Josey Wales* — there's some weird shit in that.

**Joel:** [Tom Waits' character] is really the only one who gets out alive. The stories on either side are pretty dark.

**Ethan:** You gotta raise the little bit of hope so you can dash it again.

**Joel:** Is that story structure? *[Both laugh]*

**Ethan:** We're doing one of those masterclasses. Like Werner Herzog.

**Joel:** *[In Herzog voice]* "Zis is my masterclass." *[More laughter]*

## KEEP IT UNEXPECTED

AS MUCH AS they embrace a well-trodden genre, the Coens are just as interested in turning it on its head. Every story in *Buster Scruggs* features familiar hallmarks — essential cinematic vocabulary that would be instantly recognisable to even a casual viewer — but each one scurries down a surprising route, too, going darker and more gothic than Hollywood's Golden Age ever

dared. Revisionist Westerns, the kind that came into vogue in the 1960s and '70s, like Robert Altman's 1971 masterpiece *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, serve as an important inspiration for the aesthetic of the third tale, 'Meal Ticket' — but that revolutionary approach proved an important forebear as a whole. The final tale, 'The Mortal Remains', ends the film on a mysterious, bleak note, sending a group of strangers into an unknown fate. It is dark, surprising, savagely funny, and uniquely Coen-y.

**Ethan:** [For the final story, 'Mortal Remains'], we were thinking about interesting subgenres: people thrown together in a stagecoach who have to deal with each other. Disparate personalities. It was written consciously thinking, "Okay, this is going to be the last one, so how should it end as a collection? And how does that work?" Not in any literal way, but just in terms of feeling. How did we want the whole thing to wind up? **Joel:** *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* is fascinating.

**Ethan:** We mentioned *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* as a reference for 'Meal Ticket' when talking to Bruno [Delbonnel, director of photography].

**Joel:** In trying to get that grim, muddy... **Ethan:** Shit-town.

**Joel:** ... Shit-town look. There's something a little gothic about it, it's true.

**Ethan:** *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* is interesting because it is what everyone says we do: "We're going to update the West."

**Joel:** And put Leonard Cohen songs in. **Ethan:** And put Leonard Cohen songs in. [Director Robert Altman] actually did, though.

**Joel:** That's a bold move, you know? Putting Leonard Cohen against the Old West. You look at it now and it seems kind of radical.

AND WITH THAT, the Coens ride off into the sunset. Or rather, shuffle quietly out of a hotel conference suite. Though not before batting away any suggestion that they could make a *Buster Scruggs* sequel. "You'd think that — they're self-contained stories — but all our movies, you go, 'We did it. So we're not going to do it again,'" asserts Ethan. They may remain fairly inscrutable, but if they do decide to dip their toes in the Western sandpit again, one thing's for sure: it'll be kind of radical. ●

THE BALLAD OF BUSTER SCRUGGS IS IN CINEMAS AND ON NETFLIX FROM 16 NOVEMBER