



Cowboy Smoke

Review by [David Cornelius](#) | posted November 27, 2008 | [E-mail the Author](#) | [Start a Discussion](#)

Meet Joe, the fastest gun in town. He'll outdraw you any day, any time. Using a single action revolver, he can take down two men before they even reach their triggers. He's born to be a gunslinger in the old west - but this ain't the old west, and Joe ain't no cowboy.

"Cowboy Smoke" bills itself as "a modern western," and just watch how writer/director Will Moore builds on such a premise. His hero, Joe (played by Mike Lutz), is a suburban rube, his quick draw honed from years of playing video games, his knowledge of the cowboy life culled from countless hours spent watching old Eastwood flicks. For a while, the film treats Joe's story with a lighthearted flair: fired from his convenience store job, the poor guy hoofs it to south Texas, where he dreams of landing a job as a real-life cowboy - only to discover he's not cut out for the mundane work of the modern rancher. Here, Moore takes the expected approach, with grizzled old men impatiently putting up with Joe's naïve eagerness and repeated failures. Like the ranchers, we look at Joe and chuckle to ourselves, with a little head shake of disbelief and frustration.

But then. Ah, here is a But Then that elevates the film, reveals its true intentions. But then some ranchers take note of Joe's six-shooter abilities and hire him on the spot, a hunting chore that pays five hundred a kill. Joe is thrilled, then horrified: the targets are not wild animals, but illegal immigrants. The rancher is chillingly calm in his explanation, something about trespassing and land owner's rights, but to Joe, it is murder, plain and simple and utterly wrong.

The sight of these killings is a shock, but it is not a surprise, not to us. Moore prepares us with a pre-credits sequence detailing a second story, that of outlaw Wesley Cash (Chad Matthews) and the Texas Ranger (Matthew T. Johnson) on his trail. (The outlaw was also the subject of Moore's first feature, "Wesley Cash," making this a sequel of sorts.) There is action and suspense here, as well as effective character drama, and Moore allows his characters to make critical mistakes which not only set up the plot, but its tone. In its opening minutes, the film has already taken numerous turns in its rhythm and mood; it is fun and serious, tense and loose, never uneven in its shifts. By the time the opening credits (a brilliantly animated rotoscoped tribute to Leone) play, we've come to expect the dark with the light. The sudden murder of several innocent Mexicans is merely the final step in moving the story from playful to somber, as Joe is kicked out of his adolescent mindset in a split second.

From here, the screenplay continues to bob and weave, introducing us more, and more, and more. Joe falls for a lovely immigrant waitress (Estella Perez), and later is surprised to be offered the job of sheriff in a small town looking for a do-nothing lawman. The town is the hub of immigrant smuggling, an operation run by the ruthless Indio (James Paul). The former sheriff was in Indio's pocket before he got out of line; what the villains need now is someone who won't come snooping around when Mexicans are carried across the border, and who won't ask questions when the same smugglers bring those Mexicans to jail, a scheme that will earn them a nice reward from the government. They do not expect Joe to take action, but Joe, now

wiser, knows action is his only choice.

Wesley and the Ranger soon arrive here, too, and their morals are tested. Joe needs men on any side of the law. He appeals to the righteous in both men. He may not find it. The choices made here are as engaging on a dramatic level as the action is one a visceral one. Moore allows some characters to go over the top (Paul plays Indio as a cackling madman, to great effect) while pushing other characters under it (our three main characters are all expertly low-key). His script is constantly moving forward in exciting ways, taking us further away from gentle genre self-reference and into a weighty story with a genuine emotional hook.

Inspired by various real-life events (chief among them a tragedy in which nineteen Mexicans suffocated while hiding in a truck while being smuggled over the border), the airtight script is busy without being overwhelming, complex without being complicated. I'd have liked to have seen Moore give his running time room to breathe, yet it's so nicely paced as it is; I'm reminded of Roger Ebert's old line about how no good movie is too long and no bad movie is short enough. "Cowboy Smoke" is too short, by far. But I wouldn't change a thing.

Moore's screenplay is enhanced by Lutz' elegant performance, sharp and knowing in its range. All of the cast does a fantastic job here, bringing the most out of their characters, especially in the final scenes. But with Lutz, we have a performance that shines brightest, the sort of turn that makes you sit up and take note. Lutz, it turns out, has put years into the Hollywood system as a set costumer, and has given very few acting roles. Yet here, he plays like a seasoned vet, giving a richly detailed performance that's also smartly restrained. If he ever wants to further his career, "Cowboy Smoke" is his perfect calling card.

The rest of the film could be judged as a how-to guide for aspiring indie filmmakers wondering how to overcome a thin budget. "Cowboy Smoke" was made on the cheap, but you never care because the elements are so carefully placed. Moore and his crew toss in some DIY stuntwork, enhanced by clever editing, that pull big action from limited means. Filming in available areas of Moore's home state lends the movie an authenticity that's actually missing from more expensive projects. Super 16mm film was chosen for its low cost, but it also provides the rich look of film at the price of cheaper-looking digital video (a matter cinematographer Stephen Acevedo uses to his advantage, resulting in some surprisingly stunning imagery).

And Brian Satterwhite's musical score deserves a mention all to itself. A well made score can make a small movie feel big, and Satterwhite delivers with a soundtrack that mixes rousing old school bravado with quieter modern melodies, effortlessly following the ever-shifting mood of the story. A poke around the web reveals Satterwhite to be a busy composer in the Austin film scene and something of an authority on film score history, two elements that serve him very well here, in this truly memorable piece of movie music.

"Cowboy Smoke" is a hell of a find, a small indie carrying a great big story. Moore and his cast and crew have crafted something special here, one of the year's finest independent works.

The DVD

Please note: DVD Talk has been given an advance copy of "Cowboy Smoke" for review, burned onto a DVD-R, presented to us with no official packaging. I'm not

sure how closely this will match any final product, and I'll keep this review updated if new information comes my way. In the meantime, since the disc is notably absent of the usual problems accompanying DVD-R screeners - the whole thing looks and sounds just fine - I'll go ahead and treat this disc like final product for review purposes.

Video & Audio

There's a pinch of grain in the 1.85:1 anamorphic widescreen transfer, inherent to the source material, but the picture otherwise looks very solid, with rich colors and a fair amount of detail. For the budget involved, the super 16mm photography comes through splendidly.

The soundtrack is a simple but effective stereo mix that richly blends dialogue, effects, and that brilliant musical score. No subtitles are provided.

Extras

"The Story Behind Cowboy Smoke" (4:54) is a small featurette in which Matthew T. Johnson sits down, video diary-style, and briefly explains the characters and plot; lengthy clips from the movie flesh out Johnson's points.

The film's trailer (1:45), which makes inspired use of Johnny Cash's version of "Hurt," is also included.

Final Thoughts

I'm not sure how easily you'll be able to get your hands on a copy of "Cowboy Smoke," but it's **Highly Recommended** that you do so quickly. This is a tremendous production and a pitch-perfect story. See it now, any way you can. <http://www.dvdtalk.com/reviews/35565/cowboy-smoke/>