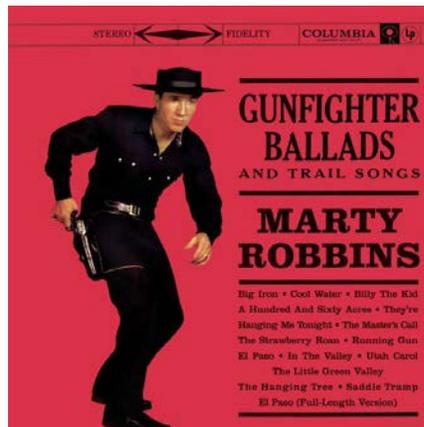


“Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs”--Marty Robbins (1959)

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Essay by Diane Diekman (guest post)*



Original album cover

“I would set so close to the screen that I would get powder burns when the guns would go off,” Marty Robbins once said in an interview. “I tell you, I'd get sand kicked in my face. Tumbleweeds rolled across me.”

Martin David Robinson (who later became Marty Robbins) grew up on the desert near Phoenix, Arizona, in the 1930s. He wanted to be a singing cowboy like his hero, Gene Autry. He earned money to attend Autry's movies every Saturday. At the end of the evening, he would walk home across the desert in the dark. “I was only 10-11 years old,” he recalled. “The desert's full of rattlesnakes, centipedes, scorpions, sidewinders, but it didn't bother me. Because, man, I was Gene Autry. They didn't dare come out of the bushes after *me*.”

By the mid-1950s, Marty Robbins was a Grand Ole Opry star in Nashville, Tennessee, with hits such as “Singing the Blues” and “A White Sport Coat (And a Pink Carnation).” He finally convinced Columbia Records producer Don Law to let him record an album of western songs. “I had no idea there would be a big market for it,” Robbins explained later.

The showpiece of the album came from a song idea that first occurred to Robbins in 1955, while driving his family home to Phoenix for Christmas. Seeing the city limits sign for El Paso, he thought it was a romantic-sounding name and he wanted to write a song about it. By the time he reached the other side of the city, however, he'd forgotten the idea.

The next Christmas he remembered, “Well, last year I said I was gonna write a song about El Paso.” But again, he drove through the city and forgot the idea before reaching the other side. The third time through, in 1957, he reminded himself he'd said he was going to write a song about El Paso. Right at that moment, a line popped into his mind: “Out in the west Texas town of El Paso, I fell in love with a Mexican girl.”

In later years, he enjoyed telling the story of writing “El Paso”: “It was a funny sensation. . . The song came out like a motion picture, and I could never forget the words to it. I put them down after I got to Phoenix. I didn't know how it was going to end. It just kept on coming out, and the tune was coming out at the same time. . . I kept waiting for the end to come to see what was going to happen.”

All 12 songs for “Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs” were recorded in a single eight-hour session on April 7, 1959. “Everybody was having such a good time that night,” recalled Bobby Sykes, a musician in the Marty Robbins Band. “Of course, when the lights went on, we all got serious. But we joked in between takes. In just about any session with Marty, he would clown around so much he would put you at ease. But then, if you got too loose, he would snap you back into shape in a second, I guarantee you.”

Four songs in the album were Marty Robbins originals. In addition to “El Paso,” he wrote “Big Iron,” “In the Valley,” and “The Master's Call.” Band members Tompall Glaser and Jim Glaser contributed “Running Gun.” Of the seven traditional western songs, three were in the public domain: “Billy the Kid,” “Strawberry Roan,” and “Utah Carol.” The others were “Cool Water” (Bob Nolan); “A Hundred and Sixty Acres” (Dave Kapp); “They're Hanging Me Tonight” (James Low/Art Wolpert), and “The Little Green Valley” (Carson Robison).

“Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs” was issued in September as a mono recording (CL 1349). The cover depicted gunfighter Robbins dressed in black and ready to draw his pistol. “El Paso” grew so rapidly in popularity that Don Law released it as a single on October 26, with “Running Gun” as the “B” side.

In an attempt to fit standard radio formats, a shorter version of “El Paso” was also released, with one verse deleted. The album was remixed and issued in stereo (CS 8158), with the shortened “El Paso.” Fans preferred the longer version. “I only recorded it one time,” Robbins said, “and I don't sing any less on personal appearances than I do on the original recording. It's still four minutes and thirty-seven seconds long.”

“El Paso” entered “Billboard's” country chart in early November and reached number one on December 21, 1959, where it stayed for seven weeks. As a crossover hit, it captured the number one spot on “Billboard's” pop chart on Christmas Day. Robbins moved into the 1960s with his forever favorite song sitting at number one on both country and pop charts. During the third annual Grammy awards ceremony, the recording of “El Paso” was named Best Country & Western Performance of 1960.

Fifty years later, Doug (“Ranger Doug”) Green, of the western singing group Riders in the Sky, would effusively praise the album: “For anybody that sings western music, the ‘Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs’ album is seminal. It's part of Cowboy 101. It influenced all of us.”

Robbins recorded six more western albums in his career, with the title track of “El Paso City” reaching number one in 1976. He placed 94 songs on the “Billboard” country charts and 24 songs on the pop charts during his three decades of recording. Sixteen of those reached number

one, with “Singing the Blues” holding the top position for 13 weeks. Robbins died December 8, 1982, at age 57, from his fourth heart attack.

In an interview shortly before his death, he called “El Paso” his favorite song he ever recorded. “I do it every night, but I never get tired of singing it,” he said. “There's not another song like it, I guess. Plus, it's cowboy music, and it's got a little bit of mariachi-type music in it, y'know, the Mexican border sound in it. That's kind of what I like, too.” When asked how many times he thought he'd sung “El Paso,” he answered, “Tell me how many personal appearances I've made since 1959, and then I will know.”

Diane Diekman is a retired U.S. Navy captain and the author of two biographies, “Twentieth Century Drifter: The Life of Marty Robbins” and “Live Fast, Love Hard: The Faron Young Story.” She lives in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where she serves as president of the Battleship South Dakota Memorial and commander of John M. Bliss Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 628.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.