

How the West Was Sung

Music in the Westerns of John Ford

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"What Makes a Man to Wander"

The Searchers

Imagine hearing these lyrics, the original first verse to Stan Jones's title song "The Searchers," as *The Searchers* begins:

The horizon's like a woman
With her arms flung open wide
And a man that's tryin' to fill his heart
Ain't got no place to hide.
Ride away—Ride away—Ride away.¹

It is the second verse of this song that found its way into the film and, with its unanswered and unanswerable set of questions, dynamically alters the film from a generic western to a metaphysical quest.

What makes a man to wander
What makes a man to roam
What makes a man leave bed and board
And turn his back on home.
Ride away—Ride away—Ride away.

The argument of this book has been that song is a distinguishing feature of Ford's westerns. Ford was well aware of the power of music; that was why he concerned himself so closely with its use. Given that *The Searchers* is generally regarded as Ford's masterpiece, and the accompanying body of criticism is dazzling in its quantity and quality, the lack of in-depth attention to the score is somewhat surprising. The music has much to reveal, enriching an understanding of both the film and the culture in which it was produced.

All the verses to "The Searchers" were recorded by Sons of the Pioneers,² but someone chose verses two and seven, neither the expedient nor, without the benefit of hindsight, the obvious choices. Max Steiner, one of the architects of the classical film score and its most prolific practitioner, composed the original score, and Jones, a sometime member of Ford's stock company, wrote the song. But I'm putting my money on Ford.³ For one thing, the paper trail leads there. Notorious for collaborating with other production personnel, whether they liked it not, Ford expected compliance from those who worked for him. The lyrics for "The Searchers" can be found in Ford's files, not Steiner's, because that is where Jones sent them. Having worked for Ford before, Jones knew the drill; send the lyrics to Ford and let him decide what to use.⁴ For another thing, Ford had a penchant for avoiding the obvious. The original first verse with its clear allusions to Martha and the original last verse with its conventional ending may have been too pointed. As he did with so many other aspects of this film, Ford chose not to "spell it out" for the audience.

Consider the way the lyrics for the second verse not only structure the narrative but set up an important connection between Ethan (John Wayne) and Scar (Henry Brandon) on which the film depends: "What makes a man to wander / What makes a man to roam / What makes a man leave bed and board / And turn his back on home." Ethan is established as a wanderer and the question of why he wanders is established as the central issue of the film. One immediately thinks of Ethan's own translation of Nawyhecka Comanche: "Sorta like round about: man says he's going one place, means to go t'other." Alan LeMay, in the source novel, translates "Nawyhecka" as "Them As Never Gets Where They're Going."⁵ I favor James F. Brooks's translation of the Comanche term as "wanderer," because it highlights the similarities between Ethan and Scar.⁶ Both are wanderers—Scar by tribal association, Ethan by nature and by circumstance. Even Chris the dog links them. He barks at only two people: Ethan and Scar. Wandering, a central connection between the two adversaries, sustained throughout the film in a variety of ways, is initially posited by song. Is this one of the reasons Ford chose the second verse of "The Searchers," with its focus on wandering?

The seventh verse of the song, the only other verse of the original eight used in the film, can be heard at the end. None of the questions the song initially posed are answered; in fact, the last verse offers only more questions: when will the searching end, and "Where, Oh lord, lord where?" The original last verse, although containing some ambiguity, provides much more closure:

Me I go on searchin'.

For where there ain't no hate

For a tender love I'm dreamin' of

A'fore it gets too late.

The searcher charts his course for true love, "A'fore it gets too late," a creaky device to end the song and the quest that structures it. Jones's original first and last verses overtly shape the search around a woman and a man's desire for her, telegraphing a pedestrian message about true love conquering all. Succeeding verses map out this quest through a variety of different geographic locations. Without the frame of verses one and eight, the song is dramatically altered from a rather prosaic search for romantic love to a metaphorical search for what can never be found. This is Ford's hand at work.

Consider also the way in which verses two and seven frame the quest in terms of masculinity. Peter Lehman reminds us that, narratively, women are contained in *The Searchers*, limited in the expression of their desires and restricted in their actions: "Men search and women wait at home."⁷ The choice of the second verse over the first provocatively shifts the focus from the feminine ("The horizon's like a woman / With her arms flung open wide") to the masculine: "What makes a man to wander / What makes a man to roam." Still, there is plenty left in the film to connect the frontier to the feminine: Martha (Dorothy Jordan), who "wouldn't let a man quit" a life on the frontier, Mrs. Jorgensen (Olive Carey), who gives the film's most impassioned speech about the wilderness and life "way out on a limb"; Laurie (Vera Miles), who voices the anger and frustrations of living on the edge. The music supports this connection in subtle ways: it is Martha whose presence is instilled into the leitmotif that represents the family on the frontier. I would like to suggest that traces of the original lyrics to Jones's first verse also find their way into the film: in the farewell scene between Ethan and Martha, Martha raises her arms ("flung open wide") as if to embrace Ethan but stops, her arms falling helplessly to her side.

The Searchers chronicles Ethan Edwards's search for his niece, Debbie (played at as a young girl by Lana Wood and as a young woman by Natalie Wood). Materializing out of the wilderness and under suspicious circumstances, Ethan clearly has a mysterious past, as well as an incessant attachment to his brother's wife, Martha. The search, to which the title alludes, begins after the Comanches lure Ethan away from the ranch, abduct Debbie, and murder the rest of the family. Ethan and Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter), adopted by the Edwards family, search for Debbie for seven years. As time passes and Debbie reaches sexual maturity, Ethan is committed to killing her. At the dramatic moment of his

confrontation with her, however, Ethan embraces rather than murders her. He eventually returns her to a neighbor's ranch.

A number of period songs appear in the film, some that Ford had used before, "The Yellow Rose of Texas" (a personal favorite of Ford's), "Shall We Gather at the River?" and "The Girl I Left Behind Me," and some new ones: "Jubilo," "Bonnie Blue Flag," and the memorable "Lorena." Ford's participation in the scripting process was "very intense," as Arthur Eckstein has demonstrated,⁸ and production records indicate a similar involvement with the music. When "Ethan" was still "Amos," the original name from Alan LeMay's novel, and casting had barely begun, Ford was already including musical selections in his story notes to the screenwriter, Frank Nugent, and the producer, Patrick Ford. Ford suggested "Blue Bonnet," "The Yellow Rose of Texas," and "The Bonnie Blue Flag" penciled in (an addition or a correction?) for the wedding sequence.⁹ Neither "The Bonnie Blue Flag" nor "Blue Bonnet" was used in the wedding sequence (they were replaced by "Jubilo"), but "Bonnie Blue Flag" did find its way into the film, where it appears prominently in the famous opening sequence. "The Yellow Rose of Texas" can be heard exactly where Ford intended it—as the assembled wedding guests await Laurie's arrival. Studio publicity cited Ford's participation, crediting him with the choice of "The Yellow Rose of Texas" for a "nostalgic square dance scene," noting that Ford "picked the sentimental ditty from a dozen other favorites in his musical collection of Americana."¹⁰ Of course, "The Yellow Rose of Texas" is hardly the "sentimental ditty" that Warner Bros. dubbed it. Perhaps they were thinking of the Mitch Miller version, widely circulating in 1955, which sanitized the lyrics.

The score of *The Searchers* begins with a mighty cymbal crash and a dramatic Max Steiner cue. But only moments into this classical film score, the quiet, melancholic, and folksy "The Searchers," sung by Sons of the Pioneers and accompanied by guitar strumming, displaces it. Guitars in Ford generally function as signifiers of Mexico. Sons of the Pioneers complicated this musical marker when they brought their own guitars. This is how guitars wind up in the hands of cavalry soldiers in *Rio Grande*, in which Sons of the Pioneers appear. It is, of course, Sons of the Pioneers who are singing "The Searchers" here too, but their contemporary use of the guitar converges in an interesting way with the guitar's more typical signification in Ford. Has Ethan returned from Mexico where he has been evading the law?

"The Searchers" will reappear where it crosses the diegesis from the conscious recognition of song to the less conscious perception of the

background score, and there it enters the terrain of Max Steiner. Steiner scored three films for Ford in the mid 1930s: *The Lost Patrol*, *The Informer*, for which both men won their first Academy Awards, and *Mary of Scotland* (1936). Ford and Steiner had worked closely together on *The Informer*. Steiner composed the score's major leitmotif in preproduction so that Ford could film Victor McLaglen in perfect synchronization to it. Working in advance of a rough cut was an unusual practice for Steiner and not one he repeated with other directors: "I never read a script; I run a mile when I see one," he proclaimed.¹¹ Steiner and Ford parted professional company in 1937 when Steiner left RKO for Warner Bros., and it was not until 1955 that the two men's paths crossed again.

By the 1950s, Steiner was finding himself passed over in favor of younger composers with more contemporary scoring styles, and he left Warner Bros. in 1953 when his decades-old contract was not renewed. He moved into the more speculative world of music publishing, continuing to freelance as a composer. While Warner Bros. publicity described Steiner as "big league," he clearly was not playing in the majors anymore.¹² Exactly how Steiner came to score *The Searchers* is not documented, but the archivist James D'Arc suggests that it was "a kind gesture from old friend and *Searchers* producer Merian C. Cooper,"¹³ the producer of *King Kong*, the film that had launched Steiner's Hollywood career over twenty years earlier. If this was the case, it was an easy enough favor to extend: Steiner had scored a number of prominent westerns, including *Dodge City* (Michael Curtiz, 1939), *The Oklahoma Kid* (Lloyd Bacon, 1939), *Virginia City* (Michael Curtiz, 1940), *Santa Fe Trail* (Michael Curtiz, 1941), *They Died with Their Boots On*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (John Huston, 1948), and *Pursued*.

This time, however, the collaboration did not go as smoothly. There is strong evidence that the final cut of the music was presided over by Ford. Steiner was apparently miffed to discover at a sneak preview that his music had been edited. A letter to Steiner from C. V. Whitney, credited as the film's producer, addresses those concerns: "I can assure you that the end result is typically American. This, I am sure, is what Mr. Ford wanted to achieve, and I feel he has done it. For my part, I understand your criticisms. I am satisfied, however, that the mood of reality in the picture is furthered by Mr. Ford's cuts."¹⁴ It sounds as if Ford deleted some of Steiner's nondiegetic cues. The result privileged more of the "typically American" period music, giving the film a leaner sound than Steiner had originally created. Ford was in control here, and he exercised that control in matters large and small throughout the production.

Ford's longtime collaborators, such as screenwriter Frank Nugent, had learned to put up with this. But Steiner was clearly irritated.

Even after Ford's interventions, *The Searchers* remains among the most classical of Ford's film scores. Like Hageman's scores for *Fort Apache* and especially *3 Godfathers*, Steiner's score represents a distinctly different approach to musical accompaniment from earlier westerns such as *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine*, which used a leaner approach and depended more upon diegetic music. The score for *The Searchers* also reflects another musical trend: the monothematic score, often based on the styles and idioms of popular music, which was beginning to infiltrate and even dominate the scoring scene. Theme songs had been a phenomenon in Hollywood since the 1920s, when movie studios bought music publishing houses to market sheet music generated as spin-off by their films. As studios saw the mechanical reproduction of music replacing actual performance in American homes, they began investing in the recording industry. Theme music could be simultaneously released as sheet music and on record. Some notable examples include Tara's Theme, recast as "My Own True Love," from *Gone with the Wind* (1939), "Laura" from *Laura* (1944), and "The Third Man Theme" from *The Third Man* (1949). But before the 1950s, theme songs remained largely the by-product of film scores. In the case of *Laura*, for instance, lyrics were hastily added to David Raksin's signature tune to accommodate public interest.

The phenomenal success of *High Noon*'s "Do Not Forsake Me, Oh, My Darlin'" alerted Hollywood to the vast potential revenue that could be harnessed through tie-in recording sales, and theme songs began to monopolize soundtracks.¹⁵ The suddenly old-fashioned romanticism of the classical Hollywood film score gave way to more contemporary musical idioms. Sometimes tacked onto the beginning or ending of a film (a practice that continues to this day), sometimes endlessly recycled in every situation cued for musical accompaniment, theme songs became de rigueur in the Hollywood of the 1950s. One need only hear a film like *Comanche* (George Sherman, 1956), in content if not ambition related to *The Searchers*, to experience fully how wincingly inappropriate a theme score can be.¹⁶ Steiner's score for *The Searchers*, featuring a song by a celebrated country-and-western composer, but steeped in classical scoring principles, provides an interesting flashpoint between the two institutional practices, reflected in the film's opening moments: Steiner's cynical crash and symphonic cue juxtaposed with Jones's folksy theme song. For *The Searchers*, Steiner would develop, adapt, and weave Jones's song

into the nondiegetic score. To do so, Steiner recast Jones's song as a leitmotif and unleashed the full resources of the symphony orchestra in its deployment.

The power of a leitmotif is demonstrated at the beginning of the film through Steiner's treatment of Jones's song. Through its lyrics, its placement in the main title, and its association with Ethan in the film's opening, "The Searchers" becomes Ethan's leitmotif. When Ethan and his brother Aaron first meet, the opening phrase of the song can be heard, arranged for strings, with cellos deep in their register carrying the melody. The silent, but attendant lyrics—"What makes a man to wander"—hang over this awkward meeting, suggesting that something has transpired between the brothers that has sent Ethan "to wander." The cellos further suggest a melancholic dimension to their meeting. Steiner marked it *triste* (sad) in his original sketches.¹⁷ The music continues as Ethan approaches Martha to kiss her politely on the forehead, implicating her in his wanderings. Later, after Aaron remarks that Ethan's money looks "fresh minted," thus implying that it is stolen; this same musical phrase (with its unvoiced but present lyrics) can be heard. Is this why Ethan has been made "to wander"?

Throughout the film, motivic material from "The Searchers" reappears and the attendant (unvoiced) lyrics provide commentary on Ethan's motivations. For instance, moments before the posse happens upon a Comanche grave, the orchestra plays the phrase accompanying "... where, oh Lord, Lord where ..." in a slow reiteration, voicing the men's frustrations in their futile search for the girls. (The score opens up moments later when Ethan majestically guides his great horse down a deep descent.) When Brad (Harry Carey Jr.) dies, the orchestra plays the music accompanying the refrain, "Ride away, ride away, ride away," a commentary on Brad's fate and a reminder that the search will continue. And the music accompanying the opening questions, "What makes a man to wander / What makes a man to roam" can be heard in several key sequences, reminding us of Ethan's initial motivations for the search: "heavier and more ominous,"¹⁸ with a fuller orchestral deployment and excursions into the minor, as Ethan initially joins the search and the posse rides off (and after Ethan has ignored Mrs. Jorgensen's pleas to protect Martin and Brad); in a subdued string version when a wounded Ethan is nursed by Martin; in an ominous arrangement when Ethan and Martin view white scalps on Scar's lance; with strident instrumentation during the final attack on the Indian village (Steiner marked the moment in the score when Ethan scalps Scar "as loud and

shrill as possible");¹⁹ and strident again as Ethan tracks a terrified Debbie moments before he rescues her.

There is information to suggest that, at an early stage of production, "The Searchers" was intended to be reprised vocally. At one point, Ford must have considered having Ken Curtis sing it, because Curtis recorded it.²⁰ A studio press release announced that members of the cast, including John Wayne, Ward Bond, Jeffrey Hunter, and Harry Carey Jr., would sing it.²¹ That Ford was thinking along these lines for *The Searchers* is an intriguing possibility. Was there going to be a reprise of "The Searchers" by the men, bonding them in their search for Debbie and Lucy? Stan Jones composed eight verses for the song; it makes sense that at least some of them were meant to be used throughout the film.

The Searchers' dependence upon leitmotifs extends beyond the use of its title song, however. The period song "Lorena" functions as a theme for Ethan's brother's family, including—and specifically—Martha. Choosing a song with this important a function in the film was typically Ford's prerogative. In fact, Steiner hadn't even been chosen as the composer when Ford directed his staff to find an appropriate period piece. He didn't want an original theme: "Let's not have it written overnight by Victor Young or Hageman" (an indication that at one point he was thinking of Young or Hageman for *The Searchers*), and he expected his researchers to look "exhaustively" for "a theme that is completely haunting ... perhaps 'The Yellow Rose of Texas' is, after all, our theme song. ... together with 'Bonnie Blue Flags' [*sic*]. ... This is very important. ATTENTION ALL!"²² Something changed Ford's mind, however, and while "The Yellow Rose of Texas" and "Bonnie Blue Flag" do appear in the film, neither provides the "haunting" melody Ford sought. "Lorena" did. It is quite likely that it was Steiner who suggested it. Of course, whoever made the suggestion, it was Ford who made the final choice.

Steiner frequently recycled musical cues from one film to another (some of the Indian music for *The Searchers*, for example, is recycled from *They Died with Their Boots On*), and he had used "Lorena" before in *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), where it can be heard as a waltz at a Confederate ball. "Lorena" is a Civil War-era song, first published in Chicago in 1857, that became a favorite with Confederate soldiers. I suspect that Steiner got it from the Margaret Mitchell source novel, where "Lorena" figures prominently at a Confederate ball and serves as a marker for lost love and tragedy.²³ Using period music as a major leitmotif is a scoring practice atypical of Steiner, who, especially

in a film filled with period music, liked to compose his own leitmotifs. But it is entirely typical of Ford. .

Lorena's lost love is a forbidden one, very probably adulterous: "We loved each other, then, Lorena, / More than we ever dared to tell." Later, the speaker confesses: "A duty, stern and pressing, broke / The tie which linked my soul with thee." While the lyrics of "Lorena" are not used in *The Searchers*, they would have been available to members of the audience who recognized the tune. The song was still popular in the South in the 1950s. Steiner and Ford both knew the song's Confederate attachments: Steiner used it in his score for *Gone with the Wind* to accompany a Confederate ball, and Ford used it in *The Horse Soldiers*, where it serves as a leitmotif for Miss Hannah Hunter (Constance Towers), a southern belle loyal to the Confederacy.

The use of "Lorena," especially in the opening moments of *The Searchers*, underscores the unspoken love between Ethan and Martha and telegraphs its forbidden nature and tragic outcome. Arthur Eckstein notes that the original version, written by J. P. Webster, was based on his own failed romance with a woman named Martha, who was forbidden by her brothers to continue the relationship. In the autobiographical story on which the song is based, the love is not adulterous per se, but in the song, there is a clear implication that this is the case.²⁴ Thus, "Lorena," while functioning generally as a leitmotif for the Edwards family hearth and home, specifically refers to Martha and forbidden love.

Narrative placement of “Lorena” points to Martha. We first hear it as the film begins and at the very moment when Martha opens the door revealing Ethan’s arrival. The loss, encapsulated in the song’s lyrics, is emphasized by the largely string instrumentation of this cue (entitled “Ethan’s Return”), bridging nicely from the guitars of the main title. The initial performance of “Lorena” is followed by a lengthy quotation from another source, “The Bonnie Blue Flag,” as Ethan materializes out of the wilderness. The Bonnie blue flag in question is the flag of the Confederacy, and the song was a well-known Confederate anthem. Ford obviously knew its origins: it turns up in *The Horse Soldiers*, where it is sung by Confederate troops. “The Bonnie Blue Flag” was obviously meant to suggest Ethan’s Confederate past and, like his relationship with Martha, another lost cause. The music establishes Ethan’s status as defeated.

Gradually, "Lorena" begins to focus around Martha: it can be heard immediately after Ethan kisses her in greeting and later when he kisses her good-bye. We also hear "Lorena" when Ethan presents Debbie with his war medal. The connection between Martha and Debbie, posited in

LORENA.

J. P. WEBSTER.

Airanged with Brilliant Variations.

BY ADDISON WYMAN.

A CAPRICCIO.

A CAPRICCIO.

Introduction.

p *ff* *Ped.*

8va.

p *p p*

Andantino.

TEMA.

Ped. *** *Ped.* *** *Ped.* *** *Ped.* *** *Ped.* *** *Ped.* ***

Entered according to Act of Congress, A. D. 1867, by J. L. PETERS, in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of New Jersey.

Example 5. "Lorena." Courtesy Archive of Popular American Music, UCLA.

the music, will return at Debbie's rescue. A nostalgic parlor arrangement of "Lorena," with harpsichord and strings, accompanies Ethan's fraught glance at Aaron's entrance into the bedroom he shares with Martha, Martha's furtive fondling of Ethan's coat, and the good-bye kiss between Ethan and Martha. The good-bye scene is the only scene in the film where the melody is heard at length.

Steiner described the quality he wanted in the opening to the orchestra Murray Cutter as "real old fashioned,"²⁵ and he specifically asked for a harpsichord with violins and violas for the good-byes. The parlor arrangement is revealing. Parlor arrangements were a common form of musical marketing in the nineteenth century, directed at women, who constituted a significant portion of amateur musicians. Parlor arrangements capitalized on the instruments typically found in an upper-middle-class parlor, such as the piano or harpsichord and stringed instruments, such as the violin. With its connotations of upward mobility, eastern refinement, and femininity, the parlor arrangement harkens back to a past that the film does not refer to, and points directly to Martha. When "Lorena" is heard in Ford's *Horse Soldiers*, it may also allude to lost love, specifically that of Colonel John Marlowe (John Wayne). There is even a pointed allusion to Martha in the film: when Miss Hunter scans the horizon to look for Marlowe, she shields her eyes from the sun with her arm exactly as Martha does in the opening scene of *The Searchers*. This gesture is accompanied by "Lorena."

"Lorena" returns, at various points in *The Searchers*, to flesh out the unspoken motivation and emotional content of several key sequences: Ethan's discovery of Martha's body, where it can be heard in the minor; the disbanding of the posse and the continued search by Ethan, Martin, and Brad; the first glimpse of a grown-up Debbie as she descends a cliff toward Martin, cut short by the intrusion of brass and percussion when Ethan spots her; Martin's embrace of Debbie when he rescues her in Scar's tepee; and Debbie's return to the Jorgenson ranch at the end of the film, displaced by a final reiteration of "The Searchers," now and only for the second time with lyrics.

Two instances merit more in-depth analysis. The first is when the posse realize that they have fallen for a Comanche trick to lure them away from their now unprotected homesteads: Ethan's glance offscreen over the back of his horse indicates his realization that his family is unprotected and as good as dead.²⁶ The use of "Lorena" as accompaniment here, performed low in the violin's register and cast into the minor, anchors Ethan's close-up specifically around his concern for Martha and

foreshadows her fate, soon confirmed when, upon his arrival at the site of the massacre, he calls out her name and searches for her body.

"Lorena" also performs a similar function at one of the film's most critical and ambiguous moments: when Ethan decides to rescue Debbie instead of kill her. That it is Debbie's physical resemblance to her mother that precipitates Ethan's sudden turnaround is clearly indicated in earlier versions of the script, where Ethan looks at Debbie and "says softly, 'You sure favor your mother.'"²⁷ In typical Fordian fashion, Ford deleted the dialogue from the final shooting script and replaced it with "Let's go home, Debbie," obfuscating Ethan's motives. Or perhaps Ford was simply being practical. Since Natalie Wood bears no physical resemblance to Dorothy Jordan, he may have felt that the original dialogue strained credibility. For whatever reason, a key moment, perhaps *the* key moment, in the film, is left unexplained. Peter Lehman reminds us "how much that is central in the film is never spoken about or even hinted at in the dialogue and how the visual information that cues our formulation of an answer to those central questions is inherently ambiguous—we simply do not see enough to know."²⁸ We are left to make inferences from a variety of sources, including the music. It is "Lorena" that accompanies Ethan's lifting of a tense and terrified Debbie into the air. "Lorena" functions as a specific aural marker for Martha. Thus, I would argue that hearing "Lorena" at this moment brings us back to the figure of Martha, who returns to the scene and supplies Ethan's motivation. Still, does Ethan save Debbie because she looks like her mother or because a respect for the memory of Martha prevents him from harming Debbie? Steiner was thinking otherwise. He entitled the cue "Reunion of Ethan and Debbie,"²⁹ obviously referring to the earlier scene in which Ethan lifts Debbie into the air, reenacted here.

The classical film score is identifiable, not only by its dependence on leitmotifs, but, on a structural level, by its intricate interconnectedness between music and narrative action, a characteristic epitomized by Steiner's penchant for responding to the slightest narrative provocation with music. Steiner's habit is noticeably toned down from earlier scores (*The Informer* is a hyperexplicit case in point) but there are enough examples left in *The Searchers* to mark the score as vintage Steiner: Scar's short leitmotif played sforzando and tremolo whenever his name is mentioned (in fact, a descending tremolo is a Steiner trademark for Indians); the musical cue that simulates dripping water in the cave sequence where Marty and the wounded Ethan seek cover; tremolo strings upon Aaron's discovery that Ethan's money is "fresh minted"; falling cadences to ac-

company the tragic story of Martin Pawley's origins; a cymbal crash to represent Brad Jorgensen's death; a musical stinger to punctuate the comic business between Ethan and Reverend Clayton during the Indian attack on the posse; and even mickey mousing as Martin makes his first entrance, leaping off a horse, or later, when a harp glissando mimics the flight of birds moments before an Indian attack. There are no moments in *The Searchers* quite as intrusive as the one Ford describes in his condemnation of bombastic film scores. Nonetheless, Ford appears to have disliked the score intensely even after he had toned it down, much to Steiner's displeasure.³⁰

Tag Gallagher describes *The Searchers* as "an atypical Ford movie in its concentration on a solitary hero rather than a social group."³¹ But it seems to me that *The Searchers* is very insistently about social bonds or, rather, the lack of them. I read the film as recording the struggle and the failure of community facing the overwhelming odds of hostile Indians and inhospitable terrain. Defeat hovers over the film, from the personal (at the beginning, it is revealed that the Edwards' neighbors have given up and left, and the Edwards themselves are massacred and their ranch destroyed) to the public (the disintegrated nations that haunt the film: the Confederacy, the independent Republic of Texas, the Spanish New World, the Comanche nation). It is the vulnerability of the American nation on the edge of the western frontier that is chronicled in *The Searchers*, and the systemic use of interrupted song insistently marks the breakdown of the frontier community.

Surely there are few more inhospitable places on the American frontier to settle than Monument Valley. John Ford's stand-in for a particular corner of Texas in 1868. This was neither the first film nor the last that Ford shot there. But as Richard Hutson observes, in *The Searchers*, Monument Valley is presented as home, unlike in *Stagecoach*, where it is a place to be "passed through": "Monument Valley would never have tempted . . . white settlers into thinking that it could be developed for civilization. This land is outside of civilized assimilation, heavily marked by its inutility."³² Mrs. Jorgensen says, "Texican is nothin' but a human man way out on a limb," but life among the buttes seems even more precarious than that. White settlers pay a heavy price for persisting there, and for their assault on the Indians who have made their peace with this land. Hostility emanates from both the landscape itself and the Comanches who inhabit it, and, as many critics have noted, the film often conflates the two. Lars Jorgensen (John Qualen) tells Ethan that it was "this country killed my boy," when, in fact, it was the Comanches, and

in a stunning sequence, Comanches appear on a ridge above the posse as if springing from the rocks beneath their feet.

Community has been so whittled down that it seems to be made up of only two families—the Edwardses and the Jorgensens. The insularity is so complete that when marriageable offspring from one family seek a mate, they look no further than the other. Witness Lucy Edwards and Brad Jorgensen, or Laurie Jorgensen and Martin Pawley, or, more intriguingly, the case of Ethan and Martha, in which family members turn toward each other. In this world, with such a tenuous hold on civilization altogether, the rituals that have always been an important social mechanism on Ford's frontier take on increased importance. In *The Searchers*, ritual is a bulwark against the chaos and malevolence of the surroundings, not just ceremonial glue binding the community together.

Hence there is no surer sign of the community's fragility in *The Searchers* than the interruption of its rituals. Peter Lehman has argued persuasively for the structural significance of interruption in *The Searchers*,³³ but interruption is at its most dramatic when human voices raised in song are silenced. In one of the most profoundly antisocial gestures in all of Ford, Ethan interrupts the singing of "Shall We Gather at the River?" at the funeral of Martha, Aaron, and their son, Ben. His action is heightened by the choice of song, "Shall We Gather at the River?" at its most appropriate.

A Methodist hymn Ford had used before in *Stagecoach*, *My Darling Clementine*, 3 *Godfathers*, and *Wagon Master*, "Shall We Gather at the River?" embodies the Calvinist notion of predestination. The hymn's determinism, even fatalism—only those who will be judged worthy by God are allowed to cross the river Jordan and be judged by him—serve *The Searchers* well, especially at the Edwardses' funeral, with its discomfiting sense that these deaths were fated once Ethan arrived. Vengeance transplants grief and reconciliation, both of which are interrupted, as is the ceremony itself. The mourners go their separate ways, and the search for the survivors commences. The film's own discomfort at this moment is reflected in the music. "Put an amen to it! . . . There's no more time for praying! AMEN," Ethan exclaims, and the score provides a final symphonic reiteration of the hymn that Ethan suspends, putting its own "Amen" to the ruptured ritual with church bells, no less, giving it that distinctive Steiner touch.

"Shall We Gather at the River?" returns at the aborted wedding of Laurie and Charlie McCorry (Ken Curtis). It is first heard, rather inappropriately and somewhat ominously (given that we last heard it at a fu-

neral), as the processional for Charlie and Captain Reverend Clayton.³⁴ They await Laurie, who never enters, having been waylaid by the entrance of Ethan and Marty, and the music stops. After Marty and Charlie duke it out, a lone fiddler begins "Shall We Gather at the River?" again. But this time the hymn is interrupted by Charlie who proclaims, "There ain't going to be a wedding." And that's the end of that.

Interrupted music abounds in *The Searchers*, both diegetic and nondiegetic. The castanet dance performed by a sultry Latina in the New Mexican saloon is interrupted not once but twice by Martin Pawley, whose sexual naïveté (or lack of interest?) blinds him to her intentions, and thus not only her music but any possibility of a tryst between them is forestalled. The "Skip to My Lou" number sung by Charlie McCorry is shortened; we hear only a single verse of a song with twelve.³⁵ Even a fiddle finds itself in danger. During the fistfight between Charlie and Marty, the instrument has to be rescued by Reverend Clayton from sure destruction.

Then there are the nondiegetic interruptions: the theme song interrupted by a cymbal crash when the posse finds the seventh Comanche grave and later, by "Lorena," when Ethan tracks Debbie to the mouth of a cave. And, if one considers the lyrics of the title song and the questions with which it frames the text—"What makes a man to wander? What makes a man to roam?"—the film itself becomes a kind of long, unanswered question.

Like any product of culture, music bears a dynamic relationship to ideology and is, in fact, part of the process through which ideology is constructed. Music's relationship to social discourse is not always immediate or obvious, however, giving rise to the notion that music has special status as an art form, free from the intervention of historical forces. *The Searchers* offers a dramatic example of the way music carries ideology's charge, and its songs open up avenues for reading the film in terms of race.

Race is, in fact, the starting point of *The Searchers*, musically speaking. Although most listeners remember the title song as opening the film, it is actually a Steiner cue, a romantic rendering of stereotypical "Indian" music that begins *The Searchers*: a prominent tom-tom rhythm played on the timpani under a descending melodic contour. This musical language, lying outside the conventional rhythms, harmonies, and melodic design of Western art music, is a powerful indicator of Otherness, with connotations of the primitive, the exotic, and the savage. Steiner described this opening cue as an "an Indian *Tosca*" (an opera that famously opens with the leitmotif of its villain, Scarpia).³⁶

In *The Searchers*, tom-tom rhythms, modal melodies, striking instrumentation, and unusual harmonies are in abundant display whenever Indians are on the screen and sometimes when they are not. And yet I would argue that the representation of Indians in *The Searchers* is more complicated than it seems, and that at least one component in that complication is the music. Charles Ramirez Berg argues that Ford's insistence on multiculturalism in his westerns—in particular, his focus on the margins of American society, its immigrants and outcasts, instead of its WASP mainstream—counterbalances the undeniable stereotyping in Ford and provides a more "nuanced" approach to ethnicity than does much classical Hollywood cinema.³⁷ Music can be a part of this argument. Clearly, *The Searchers* falls into racist stereotypes through its deployment of conventional musical clichés. But the sheer amount of music devoted to Indians, including important leitmotifs, however stereotypical they may be, for two Indian characters, and the structural placement of that music opens up space for a more nuanced reading.

Musically speaking, it is the Indians who are allied with the frontier in *The Searchers*, an interesting development from earlier Ford westerns. In *Stagecoach*, for example, the music accompanying the awe-inspiring vista of Monument Valley is derived from the American folk idiom, with simple rhythms, lean texture, and familiar melody. This land is marked as white. Indians belong on the reservation; they are intruders into the landscape of Monument Valley, terrorizing the rightful heirs to the frontier, the white settlers. Indian music intrudes on the score as well. Written in a completely different idiom from the music that accompanies the stagecoach and its occupants, the music accompanying the Indians or their handiwork is menacing, depending on some of the most recognizable musical clichés for savagery: tom-tom rhythms, the exotic intervals of the fourth and fifth, and descending contours. The famous pan to Indians waiting to ambush the stagecoach could serve as an example here. When Indian music is heard in Monument Valley, we know there is trouble.

In *The Searchers*, the frontier belongs to the Indians, musically speaking—a reminder that the land is theirs and white settlers are the encroachers. Thus it is Indian music that opens the film and provides most of the aural accompaniment to scenes of the wilderness; even when Indians are not on screen, we can hear cues for their presence. Indian music, for instance, is heard during the scene following the departure of the posse, as the group descends into Monument Valley. Whereas in *Stagecoach*, Indian music seems out of place in Monument Valley, in *The Searchers*, it seems literally to emanate from it. I agree here with Hutson

that whites are out of place in Monument Valley. Music dramatically underscores their intrusion on the frontier.

In Ford westerns, Anglo, Indian, and Mexican cultures often blend in interesting and sometimes provocative ways. In *The Searchers*, the conflation between Mexican and Anglo cultures is most evident when Ethan and Marty enter New Mexico Territory to meet a man, Emilio Fernandez y Figueroa (Antonio Moreno), who claims to know Scar. The cantina in which they meet, encoded as Mexican by its architecture and artifacts, as well as Ethan and Marty's dress, language, and even cuisine, signals the borders that have been crossed geographically and culturally. Music marks this transversal, too, with guitars forming the accompaniment. At Scar's encampment, the Spanish language becomes the point of mediation between the Indians and the Anglos, and the conversation with Scar takes place in a mix of Spanish, "American," and Comanche. The music now belongs to the Indians, beginning with the prominent tom-tom rhythm, once more indicating that this "medicine country" of sand dunes and stone monoliths is theirs. Indian music even accompanies the climactic scene in which Debbie appears in Scar's teepee and, following a reprise of "Lorena," the stand-off between Marty and Ethan, when Ethan attempts to kill Debbie.

Additionally, two Indian characters in *The Searchers* have leitmotifs: Scar and Look (Beulah Archuleta). Scar's leitmotif is little more than a musical cliché for savagery, a series of descending chromatic intervals heard whenever his name is mentioned. But Look's leitmotif is a more complicated and more interesting. The cue Steiner entitled "News of Debbie" is the second longest cue in the film (3:07). Although the title focuses on Debbie, and the cue itself accompanies the reading of Martin Pawley's letter to Laurie, it is Look who commands the soundtrack, not the white characters around whom, ostensibly, the narrative is organized. Look's leitmotif does incorporate many of the stereotypes of Indian music, but for Look, Steiner offers us an identifiable melody for an Indian character and opens up the orchestral palette to do so, using flutes and other woodwinds, and especially violins, instruments not typically associated with Indians. Look's portrayal in the film is as complicated as the music's representation of her and as ambivalent. One of the most deeply moving scenes in the film remains, as least for me, the discovery of Look's death at the hands of the cavalry. Even Ethan is touched. And yet this is the same character at whom we are expected to laugh when Marty kicks her.

A standard critical interpretation of *The Searchers* reads the film in

terms of the civil rights movement of the 1950s. Given classic expression in Brian Henderson's, "*The Searchers*: An American Dilemma,"³⁸ this argument posits the film as displacing white-black relations onto the classic western standoff between cowboys and Indians. Hence the deeply troubling issue of miscegenation gets played out in *The Searchers* between Indians and whites.³⁹ *The Searchers* was made during a time of a tumultuous social drive for racial equality, and a number of indicators in the film do seem to facilitate this reading: Debbie's black-haired rag doll, Topsy (a clear reference to an African American character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*); Mose Harper's (Hank Worden) racial ambiguity, and the minstrel music that forms the aural backdrop for the wedding: "The Yellow Rose of Texas" and "Jubilo." These songs function most obviously to authenticate the film's depiction of frontier life when they accompany the dance that precedes the wedding. But their origins on the minstrel stage mark these songs with another, older discourse, which needs to be uncovered. Recent biographical work on Ford makes the case that he intended *The Searchers* to be read as a film about racism. Joseph McBride, for instance, argues that "by dealing so directly with the miscegenatory fears of white Americans in *The Searchers*, Ford was tapping into more generalized contemporary racial anxieties."⁴⁰ If what *The Searchers* cannot express directly are the tensions of contemporaneous white-black race relations, then music may be one of the telltale markers of both Ford's intentions to address race and racism and the ultimate impossibility of doing so within the genre of the western in 1950s America. In *The Searchers*, minstrel song helps to push to the surface what is deeply buried in the film.

As I've argued in another context, minstrel music functions in western film scores as a mark of authenticity.⁴¹ Blackface performance served to reinforce white superiority; its weapon was ridicule, and its function was nationalistic—to provide a definition of American identity at a historical moment when the young country was searching for one. Minstrelsy was a social construction, defining the image of an Other against which white Americans, many newly arrived from foreign shores, could measure themselves and feel superior. It was no coincidence that minstrelsy exploded onto the American scene during the Jacksonian era, when nationalism provided the justification for Manifest Destiny. Eric Lott, in his revisionary work on minstrelsy, describes whiteness in the nineteenth century as "precarious."⁴² Minstrelsy helped to establish a connection in the popular imagination between whiteness and the American nation and allowed for the release of tension required in sustaining

that definition. Given that the frontier was the forge where American character was supposedly hammered out, it should not be surprising that minstrel music found its way onto the frontier and into a number of texts about the frontier experience: dime novels, western fiction, Broadway plays, and films. Thus minstrelsy entered into a psychic and public discourse that helped to circumscribe the boundaries of American identity.

"The Yellow Rose of Texas"—a song originally about a mulatta—shows how minstrelsy reinforced white dominance. Given its origins in the nexus of race and sexuality, the song's appearance in a film obsessed with miscegenation is a complicated allusion to say the least. The song constructs an African American speaker (identified as a "darky" in the song's original lyrics) whose lack of education and inferior social status are signaled by the misspellings and ungrammatical constructions typical of minstrelsy peppering the verses. The song's narrative chronicles the loss the speaker experiences upon separation from his lover. That the speaker's grief is meant to be comic, or at the least not taken quite seriously, is marked by the buoyancy of the music. The spirited rhythm, derived from its use of eighth notes and the intermittent use of a sixteenth, undercuts, or is at least at odds with, the speaker's supposedly tragic emotions.

Yellow, of course, was a common nineteenth-century signifier for a person of mixed race, and indeed in the second verse of the song, the speaker identifies his "dearest" as "the sweetest rose of color this darky ever knew." Here we have yet another of the defining tropes of minstrelsy: the powerful and alluring sexuality of the African American female. References to this "rose's" sexual allure are oblique but unmistakable, including a provocative claim that she is superior to her white counterparts ("You may talk about your Clementine, and sing of Rosalee, / But the yellow rose of Texas is the only girl for me . . ."). Like many other minstrel songs, "The Yellow Rose of Texas" has become disconnected from its minstrel past and wrapped up in folklore and legend. Descriptions of "The Yellow Rose of Texas" as an authentic folksong, and sometimes even a "Negro folksong,"⁴³ abound during the twentieth century, and reports that it is a folk song that originally commemorated a notorious episode in Texas history persisted well into the 1990s.⁴⁴ "The Yellow Rose of Texas," was published in 1858 and performed in this country and Europe by, among others, the Christy Minstrels.⁴⁵ It was appropriated as an anthem by Confederate soldiers from Texas and later was sung by the Texas Rangers.

Of course, in order for "The Yellow Rose of Texas" to function as a Confederate patriotic song, references to its minstrel origin had to be

elided. In the 1860s, "darky" thus became "soldier" and "sweetest rose of color" was changed to "sweetest little flower." It was probably this recontextualized version that Ford was thinking of when he requested it for the aborted wedding, resonating with the Confederate past of Texas and perhaps even foreshadowing Charlie McCorry's own lost cause—his quest for Laurie.

Alterations and embellishments that redefined "The Yellow Rose of Texas" from minstrel song to folk song continued throughout the twentieth century. During the 1930s, for instance, the art composer David Guion created a new melody and alternate lyrics as part of the centennial celebrations of Texas independence. This new version became a staple of the country-and-western music scene and was recorded by Sons of the Pioneers in 1943. In August 1955, Mitch Miller's even more sanitized version hit the charts and remained in the number one spot on the Lucky Strikes Hit Parade for six weeks (in fact during the film's shooting schedule), ending up the number five song in the country for that year. "The Yellow Rose of Texas" appears in *The Searchers* vocally, but without either the original minstrel lyrics, the Confederate lyrics, or the more thoroughly laundered Mitch Miller lyrics. I would characterize the lyrics of "The Yellow Rose of Texas" heard in *The Searchers* as somewhere "in between" the extremes of the nineteenth-century minstrel song and Mitch Miller's hit tune. While the minstrel origins of "The Yellow Rose of Texas" might not have been widely known, its attachment to the Confederacy was still pronounced. The cover of the sheet music for Mitch Miller's version features a photo of Miller in a Confederate uniform. Ford was well aware of the Confederate dimension of "The Yellow Rose of Texas," as shown by the fact that he coupled it with "The Bonnie Blue Flag" in production notes.⁴⁶

The minstrel origin of "The Yellow Rose of Texas" is a slightly more complicated matter. The song was a favorite of Ford's, he clearly knew its Confederate ties, and it is possible that he knew or suspected its minstrel provenance. Song has a cultural life of its own, however, and comes attached to cultural meanings, of which Ford may or may not have been fully aware. "The Yellow Rose of Texas" may, in fact, be the most extreme example of buried ideological meaning in Ford's westerns, its associations of minstrelsy creeping into the film regardless of whether or not Ford or his audience had the slightest idea of what they were hearing.

Minstrel song was created to reinforce white superiority but its condensed representation of race did not function in a totalizing manner. Minstrelsy can be described as a multifaceted practice, one that contains

virulent racism and sometimes ambiguity about that racism. Eric Lott calls it an "unsettled phenomenon," a "mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation."⁴⁷ A standard minstrel song type focused on the horrors of slavery, especially blighted love and the destruction of the family. Not surprisingly, this ambivalence is more pronounced in early minstrelsy. As the Civil War loomed and there was more at stake in voicing abolitionist sentiments, references to the horrors of slavery decreased. And yet one of the most successful songs in minstrelsy was just such a song. "Jubilo" (aka "The Year of the Jubilo" and "Kingdom Comin'") reached its greatest popularity during the Civil War. Its title, a permutation of "jubilee," carries a uniquely African American meaning, referring to the liberation of slaves that would precede and inaugurate jubilation. Composed by the noted abolitionist songwriter Henry Clay Work in 1862, complete with minstrel dialect, and transferred to the minstrel stage shortly thereafter by the Christy Minstrels, for whom it was a monster hit, "Jubilo" was deliberately created to further the cause of abolition. A year in advance of the Emancipation Proclamation, its lyrics tell the story of a plantation taken over by its slaves, awaiting Lincoln's soldiers.

The choice of "Jubilo," especially in juxtaposition to "Yellow Rose," complicates an already complicated discourse on race circulating through the film. Ford clearly knew the abolitionist origins of "Jubilo." The song can be heard in two other Ford westerns and in narrative situations that clearly point to the song's abolitionist thrust: in *The Horse Soldiers*, a Civil War film, it can be heard as Union troops pass an African American church, with its congregation gathered outside; and in *Sergeant Rutledge*, it underscores the dramatic escape of the African American soldier Rutledge. Steiner understood the abolitionist origins of "Jubilo" too. He had used it in *Virginia City* as a dance-hall tune heard in a Union stronghold, and coupled it with the popular Union anthem "The Battle-cry of Freedom." Douglas Pye argues that racism is "inherent" in the genre of the western, making "almost any attempt to produce an antiracist western a paradoxical, even contradictory, enterprise. It is, in effect, impossible to escape the genre's informing white supremacist terms."⁴⁸ I think his argument is illuminated by the music in *The Searchers* where an abolitionist song, "Jubilo," comes smack up against an example of the racism more characteristic of the form in "The Yellow Rose of Texas." *The Searchers* is struggling with the issue of race and its representation, and that struggle is writ large in the musical score.

And there is something else. It is interesting to me that so much of the source music in *The Searchers* is tied up with a minor plot point: Ethan's past as a Confederate soldier. The Confederacy and its cause get stitched

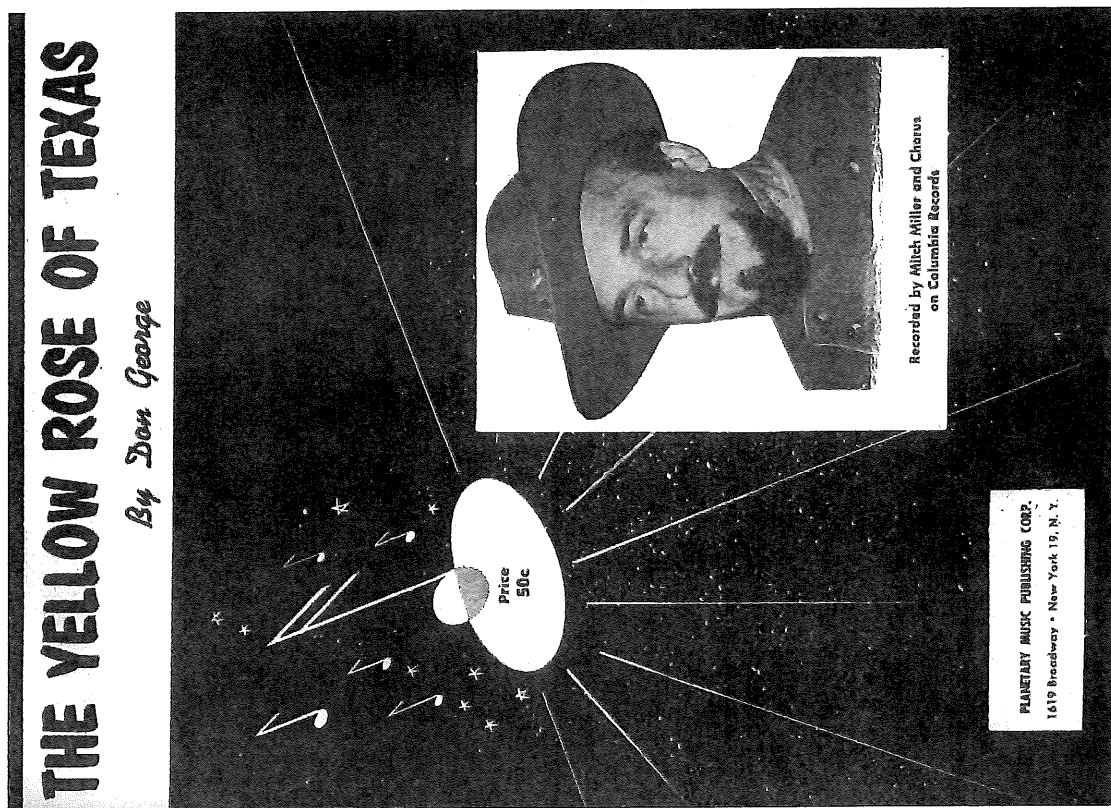


Figure 16. "The Yellow Rose of Texas." Cover of the 1935 sheet music featuring Mitch Miller as a Confederate officer. Author's collection.

into the film in a variety of ways, not the least of which is through the music, even music that is not, on the face of it, southern. "Lorena," a parlor ballad composed by a northern minister and published in Chicago, was, nonetheless, a favorite of Confederate soldiers (hence Margaret Mitchell's reference to it in *Gone with the Wind*). "The Bonnie Blue Flag," a Confederate patriotic song, composed by Harry MacCarthy,⁴⁹ commemorates the unofficial flag of the Confederacy, a blue flag with a single white star, used earlier by the sovereign state of Texas from 1836 to 1839 and often carried by Texas Confederate cavalry. "The Yellow Rose of Texas," with changed lyrics, was adopted by Texas recruits and other Confederate soldiers. There's something disturbing about what these songs get attached to: the family and the unrequited love between Ethan and Martha ("Lorena"), Ethan's heroic appearance, materializing as he does from the wilderness itself ("The Bonnie Blue Flag"), and communal life on the frontier ("The Yellow Rose of Texas").

There is a kind of diffused melancholy for the antebellum South circulating in *The Searchers* that the music focuses into a nostalgia for a less complicated and more graceful time.⁵⁰ I would not want to argue that *The Searchers* represents the Confederacy unproblematically. Certainly, Ethan's destructive racism is connected to his status as a former Confederate soldier. And the use of "Jubilo," with its unmistakable abolitionist context, provides a marker for slavery and the condition and status of African Americans, in a film in which such issues seem absent. But, in attaching the Confederacy, through its historic roots in song, to moments in the film that encapsulate heroism, family values, noble sacrifice, and community, the antebellum South cannot help but be ennobled in the process.⁵¹ I am reminded here of Douglas Pye's comment: "The film probably goes further than any other western in dramatizing and implicating us in the neurosis of racism. But in wrestling with the ideological and psycho-sexual complex that underlies attitudes to race, it is working within almost intractable traditions of representation."⁵²

"A Man will search his heart and soul / Go searching way out there / His piece [*sic*] o' mind he knows he'll find / But where oh Lord, Lord where." The film ends with a question, and one expressed musically at that. The search is not over; its terrain has simply changed from the literal to the figurative, from the wilderness to the recesses of the human mind. That this shift into the metaphysical has been signaled by the music indicates the importance of the score in the film's design. The prominence of the song in the film's final moments reminds us of how central music is to the meaning of *The Searchers*.

CHAPTER 8

In the Shadow of
*The Searchers**Two Rode Together* and *Sergeant Rutledge*

The Quiet Man may be John Ford's most enduringly popular film with the moviegoing public and his most successful from a financial standpoint, but it is *The Searchers* that is considered his masterpiece. Two films lurk in its shadow: *Two Rode Together* and *Sergeant Rutledge*. *Two Rode Together* is generally regarded as among Ford's worst, a film Ford himself called "the worst piece of crap I've directed in twenty years."¹ Both *The Searchers* and *Two Rode Together* are captivity narratives that gave Ford the opportunity to reexamine America's frontier past in terms of the confrontation between whites and Indians. Both films come to the same conclusion: racism is deadly. The films reach this point, however, in very different ways. *The Searchers* is rich in imagery, subtle in its storytelling, and overpowering in its emotional reverberations. Its score contributes, significantly, to the film's power. *Two Rode Together* deploys recycled images, pedestrian storytelling, and tepid emotion. Largely abandoning the folk songs and period music of other Ford westerns, the film also lacks the rich nondiegetic score of *The Searchers*. In its unconventional use of the guitar, however, the score of *Two Rode Together* anticipates later developments in the western film score. *The Searchers* received good reviews and did more than respectable business. It was generally thought of as a solid Ford western, hardly a message film. With *Sergeant Rutledge*, Ford put race on the front burner, and no one who saw the film could doubt his intentions. Musically, however, *Sergeant Rutledge* has more in common with *Two*