

BALLAD OF THE RIVERS

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EXT. VISTA - DAY

WEST TEXAS. 1876. From high atop a sun-streaked vista, looking down at the Rio Grande snaking away for miles and miles.

A horse and rider lope towards the crest of the vista casting a lonesome shadow on the patches of sand and sagebrush. This is BLUE RIVERS. THROUGH THIS:

BLUE (V.O.)

They say a man has three names, the one he inherits, the one his parents give him, and the one he makes for himself. This country has named many men, heard their stories, mine is just one.

Blue dismounts, dropping the reins. He walks to the edge and looks down at a herd of wild horses at play in the valley below. We notice the TEXAS RANGER BADGE pinned to his lapel.

BLUE (V.O.)

Long after I'm gone, it will move along these winds, echoing through these valleys, like the low chants of the cowboy songs the long-dead riders sang in years past. This is where I made my name with help from the men, and women, who braved these trails before me. It is their story which is mine, and mine which is theirs.

Blue Rivers gazes at the setting sun.

EXT. NEUCE PLAINS, TEXAS - DAY

Saguaros, chaparral, tumbleweeds tossed by the hot swirling wind. An army of scorpions strip the skull of a dead bison. Off to the side, a lone scorpion stings itself to death.

Then, A DRUMMING SOUND, awesome in power. It's the roar of horses' hoofbeats. Three horsemen appear on the desolate vista like a mirage. They ride in an arrowhead formation spurring their horses at a full headlong gallop. They're being hunted, by who they don't know, but it's got them spooked.

Wells Fargo bags full of money are tied to their saddles.

Gunfire chases them from behind.

The cowboy flanked on the right wing of the formation is startled when his belly explodes. He slumps forward in his saddle and dies falling to the parched Texas hardpan.

The two remaining riders split against an outcropping of rock. The horses are foamed with sweat, tongues lolling, teeth bared.

BANDIT #1

(yelling)

We gotta fight!!

The bandit pulls back hard on the reins, jumping out of the saddle. His partner does the same. They twist their horses's necks and the animals fall on their sides.

The bandits pull their rifles from their scabbards and take cover behind their prone horses. They aim for the horizon. Nothing. No one.

BANDIT #2

Where are they?

BANDIT #1

Don't know.

A VOICE comes from behind them.

BIG JOHN 'S VOICE

Put the guns down, boys.

A knowing comes over both of them. They slowly turn.

Sitting tall atop his paint stallion is a pine-knot of a man with a thousand-mile stare. He looks down with a killer squint which lets the riders know he's sent better men to hell by the barrel of his now holstered Peacemaker. Texas born and bred, BIG JOHN RIVERS looks and is like 40 years of the land he was born to. Every wrinkle on his weathered face counts another day, and he's huge in every way.

The bandits jump up and so do their horses.

BANDIT #1

Where's your posse, old man?

BIG JOHN

I've got six .45 caliber friends close at hand.

BANDIT #2

We've been hunted for a week. We went from four down to two, and you're saying you ride alone.

A nod.

BANDIT #1

I won't be took by any one man.

The bandit twirls his rifle loading a round.

BIG JOHN

You don't want this dance, son.

BANDIT #1

Yeah, I think I do.

BIG JOHN

Then, I'm afraid there's gonna be some Texas payback.

BANDIT #1

Texas payback?

BIG JOHN

That's when I get paid, to pay you back, for what you stole from the state of Texas.

Rider #1 starts laughing which sets his partner off.

BANDIT #1

You're funny.

Big John watches, stone-cold. The laughter peaks, and the bandits lift their rifles. With the speed of a man who's been shot at many times, Big John pulls his Peacemaker and fires several hammed-on shots.

The bandits can't even get off a shot before they're torn wide open. They buckle and fall to the dirt in a dead heap. Big John ejects the shells from the spin-wheel of his smoking Colt, and we notice the initials "JR" carved into the handle. As the shells pile up in the dirt we hear THE STRAINS OF A BARROOM PIANO.

INT. SALOON - DAY

Liquor, gambling, women. The wild crowd is slapping their knees to a mean barroom piano riff. The strong hands taking it to the keys belong to A MAN hidden behind a black Stetson.

EXT. TEXAS BADLANDS - DAY

Big John bears eastbound across the bleak prairie pulling the bandit's horses, which have their dead owners tied to them. He gets to a cottonwood tree where a dead man hangs from a noose. Big John cuts the third dead bandit loose from the hangman's knot and ties him down.

INT. SALOON - DAY

WE'RE ON THE PIANO MAN, as he pounds the keys. Even though he's our focus, we can't help but notice this pretty blonde whore in amongst the Mexican whores gathered around him. This is LUCY.

He's dressed in black from head to toe. The only thing not black on his body is the silver Conchos on his holster and even these don't sparkle like they should.

EXT. TEXAS BADLANDS - DAY

A Diamondback rattlesnake peeks over the rim of a well. It coils when Big John rides up. The horses spook. The snake is about to strike when Big John's boot crushes its head.

Big John slings the dead rattler across his shoulder and goes to the well where he unties a rope and pulls out another dead bandit. He hauls the fourth dead man to his horse and ties him down.

INT. SALOON - DAY

The piano man brings his song home in a flurry of spitfire cord progressions. The Mexican banditos and Texas hard-cases applaud. The piano man drinks from a bottle of tequila. Lucy leans in.

LUCY

You must have a strong left hand to play like that.

The piano man looks down at his left hand which is badly scarred.

LUCY

Can I see it?

The piano man puts his hand out. Lucy takes hold.

LUCY

Burned?

The piano man nods underneath his Stetson, and Lucy turns his hand over to read his palm. Still we've only seen him in bits and pieces.

LUCY

Your life line's not long. Lots of pain in it, too. I see a wife.

The piano man takes his hand back.

LUCY

Palms don't lie. I see a wife. And a kid.

The piano man leaves.

EXT. STREETS OF LAREDO - DAY

The piano man exits the saloon and walks down the main street of Laredo. He sees the body of two dead outlaws propped up for public display. He crosses the street.

INT. UNDERTAKER'S SHOP - DAY

A small bespectacled man with a handlebar mustache is busy working on another corpse. The piano man enters.

UNDERTAKER

Can I help you?

The piano man pulls out a leather pouch and lays it down.

PIANO MAN

One day you'll read I was killed in a gunfight. When that day comes, I want you to bury me.

The undertaker stops embalming his patient and gets down from the wooden crate he's standing on. He carries the crate to where the piano man is and steps up on it, so he can look him in the eyes.

UNDERTAKER

I've drained and filled the best gunfighters, and I never saw one worth his salt that didn't have steel dust in his blood and cold blue in his eyes.

(inspects his eyes)

When you bleed is it red and thick?

A shrug. The undertaker's sold.

UNDERTAKER (CONT'D)

I'll bury you decent.

The piano man leaves his pouch full of money and turns to go.

UNDERTAKER (CONT'D)

You have a name, and I don't mean a front name and a back name? I mean a gunfighting name.

The piano man looks around. His eyes settle on the shop's window which reads: LAREDO UNDERTAKER.

PIANO MAN

Laredo Johnny.

UNDERTAKER

Laredo Johnny what?

LAREDO JOHNNY

Rivers.

UNDERTAKER

Laredo Johnny Rivers.

(as he writes)

That's good. A real Jim Dandy.

When the undertaker looks up, Laredo Johnny is out the swinging door.

EXT. STREETS OF LAREDO - DAY

Laredo Johnny walks down the boardwalk when he's joined by Lucy who carries a valise. She is only 20, but knows something beyond her years.

LUCY

Hey there.

LAREDO JOHNNY

Not looking for a wife.

LUCY

Don't blame you. Wives just get in the way.

(beat, then)

Name's Lucy.

LAREDO JOHNNY

Go back to work, Lucy.

LUCY

Just quit. Took one look at you and knew Mister
Destiny finally rode into my heart.

(off his look)

So I packed.

LAREDO JOHNNY

Unpack.

LUCY

You can't control destiny. It was written way before
today. You see I've been waiting for you. I knew
you were coming, saw you in a dream. We're
soulmates.

LAREDO JOHNNY

Soulmates?

LUCY

Two people matched in Heaven, cut of the same
cloth. I'm your other half.

LAREDO JOHNNY

You're crazy.

LUCY

Yeah. But I got a lot of love.

LAREDO JOHNNY

Love, what's love?

LUCY

A state of grace.

LAREDO JOHNNY

I don't like soft things wrapped in whispers and filled with want and need.

LUCY

Don't be such a hard-ass. Take the day off, play with me.

Laredo Johnny faces off with Lucy. He's tempted, then, catches himself.

LAREDO JOHNNY

Not today.

He walks off to the bank.

INT. BANK - DAY

Laredo Johnny enters and steps up to the wooden counter where the cashier and his father are cashing out.

CASHIER

Sorry, we're closed.

Laredo Johnny lays down a 10-dollar bill.

LAREDO JOHNNY

Just need a bill changed.

The reluctant cashier steps out from behind his desk.

CASHIER

All right, how do you want it?

Laredo Johnny pulls his Colt Peacemaker and sticks it in the cashier's face. WE NOTICE the initials "JR" carved into the bone handle.

LAREDO JOHNNY

Want it all.

Laredo Johnny pulls his grain sack out from under his duster and throws it to the cashier's father.

LAREDO JOHNNY

Empty the safe, old man.

The cashier's father begins filling the sack with the money and gold he gets from the vault. He eyes a shotgun sitting nearby. The cashier notices Laredo Johnny's Peacemaker.

CASHIER

Is that one of them Colonel Colt pistols everyone's talking about?

LAREDO JOHNNY

It's a revolver, not a pistol.

CASHIER

How's it handle?

The words are just out of the cashier's mouth when his dad picks up the shotgun and whirls, snapping off a blast.

The buckshot tears away part of the counter and hits Laredo Johnny in the arm. He takes the hit and nails the cashier's father with three dead-on shots that pitch him back into the open vault.

LAREDO JOHNNY

Good...

The cashier looks down the barrel of Laredo Johnny's gun.

CASHIER

(terrified)

Please don't kill me.

LAREDO JOHNNY

Fill the sack.

The cashier grabs the grain sack and fills it. He gives the sack to Laredo Johnny just as the bank's door opens. Laredo Johnny turns and there's Sheriff LATIGO MEANS, a hard-bitten Mexican man with a pipe stuck in the side of his mouth.

Latigo racks the bolt on his rifle.

LATIGO

We can do this the easy way. Or the hard way. I vote for the easy way. No blood to clean up. What say?

Laredo Johnny notices some lawmen standing outside the bank providing backup. He holds Latigo's stare, makes a decision and pulls off several rounds, as he's going up and over the counter. Latigo fires. His men pour into the bank joining the shoot-out.

Laredo Johnny is tucked behind the counter with the cashier.

LAREDO JOHNNY

Got a back way out of here?

The cashier nods to a back hallway.

Latigo waves his men off. The gunfire stops. Quiet, then:

LATIGO

Charley, you all right?

CASHIER

(calls over the counter)

Yeah, I'm all right.

Laredo Johnny does a quick reload and grabs the cashier. He pulls him to his feet using him like a shield. Latigo and his men raise their rifles, but they don't fire.

Laredo Johnny moves towards the hallway with the cashier held in front of him. Latigo watches. Laredo Johnny pushes the cashier and bolts down the hallway.

Latigo and his men bolt out of the bank and race after him.

EXT. BACK ALLEY - DAY

Laredo Johnny busts out the back door and draws gunfire from two lawmen perched across the street. The grain sack full of coins stops several bullets from killing him.

Laredo Johnny wheels in the direction of the gunfire and lets his Peacemaker sing. The lawmen are knocked from their perch and plunge to the ground dead.

Laredo Johnny is turned by the sound of horse's hoofbeats. To his surprise, he finds LUCY riding his black stallion. She reins up in front of him.

LUCY

Get on.

Laredo Johnny ties the grain sack to the saddle horn.

LAREDO JOHNNY

Get off.

LUCY

I just got on.

Laredo Johnny sticks his Colt right in her face.

LAREDO JOHNNY

I said get off.

Lucy looks down the barrel of his gun daring him. Latigo and his lawmen round the corner and seal off the alley.

LUCY

I were you, I'd jump on.

Laredo Johnny jumps on with Lucy and drives his spurs into the horse's flanks. The black stallion bolts forward. They can't reach a full gallop before their path is blocked by a wagon full of lumber turning into the narrow alley.

Lucy stops the stallion on a dime and does an about-face. To no avail. Latigo and his men let it all hangout. Bullets whiz past them.

Laredo Johnny returns to fire. Then a bullet tears open his shoulder, and he drops his Peacemaker.

The stallion rears back. Lucy banks the horse hard left. The horse follows the rein and dives through the back window of the dressmaker's shop.

INT. DRESSMAKER'S SHOP - DAY

The dressmaker is fitting a wedding dress on a young Mexican girl when Lucy and Laredo Johnny tear through the window sending shards of glass everywhere. The horse's hoof snags the hem of the Mexican girl's wedding dress and rips it off her .

They ride the length of the shop and just before they bust through the shop's front window. Lucy and Laredo Johnny lower their heads.

EXT. STREETS OF LAREDO - DAY

Lucy and Laredo Johnny ride out of town with the wedding dress dragging in the dirt.

As Latigo watches them go.

EXT. CRYSTAL CITY, TEXAS - DAY

Right on the Clear Fork of the Nueces River, Crystal City is a rough town by night, but it's day and the cattle business is underway as usual.

Big John Rivers rides into town caked with dust and four dead bandits tied to their horses. The rattlesnake he crushed now decorates his hat. Five little boys run alongside him ogling the dead men.

Sheriff DUKE HENSHAW, a cigar-smoking amateur artist sits on the porch of his office painting a hard-case juvenile, who's striking a gunfighter's pose. He holds his paint brush in one hand while using his other to hold his model at gunpoint.

DUKE

You're moving too goddamn much, stand still.

HARDCASE

This ain't fair.

DUKE

Shut up, it's art.

Big John rides up.

BIG JOHN

Paint on paper don't make it art, old boy.

Duke looks up and sees Big John and the dead bandits.

DUKE

About time, pard.

Big John jumps out of the saddle.

JILL JOHNSON, a 7-year old stable girl with a shock of bright red hair, runs up.

JILL
How you doing, Mister Rivers?

BIG JOHN
Glad to be home, Jilly.

JILL
Should I put new shoes on her?

BIG JOHN
Be gentle.

JILL
Always am.

Big John tosses Jill a fifty-cent piece. She catches the coin and takes the horse to a livery stable. Duke looks over the dead bandits.

DUKE
Did you have to kill 'em all?

BIG JOHN
That's what you pay me for.

DUKE
I pay you to bring them back alive so I can kill them.

BIG JOHN
Didn't want to come back alive.

DUKE
With you they never do.

Big John walks off towards the cafe.

INT. CAFE - DAY

Behind the bar, trimming the edges off some playing cards, is LIZ GENTRY. 40ish, and a widow, with dusty eyes and the vitality of woman half her age.

Big John and Duke walk through the swinging doors and sit.

LIZ

There's my boys.

DUKE

I've got enough hair on my ass to weave an Indian blanket, and you're still calling me boy.

LIZ

Grow up, Duke.

(then to Big John)

Hello, Mr. Rivers.

BIG JOHN

Liz.

LIZ

You don't look yourself.

BIG JOHN

Need a little food is all.

LIZ

We've missed you around here. Why don't you stay awhile this time?

BIG JOHN

I'm not used to being in one place for too long.

LIZ

(flirting)

Anything I can do to change your mind about that?

Big John takes out a cigar.

BIG JOHN

You flirting with me?

LIZ

Trying my best.

(smile, then)

Is it working?

BIG JOHN

A little.