

THE OLD WORLD AND THE OLD WEST –

a Documentary Exploration of Europe's Fascination with the American West



Why have Europeans always been so fascinated with the American West and still are? Why do they write about it, paint it and make films about it? Of all the mythic images of America that circulate around the world, Chicago gangsters, Wall Street tycoons, Hollywood stars, the American West is the one that was always most exciting to Europeans ... and has stayed with them the longest. A recent exhibition in Frankfurt, Germany called "I Like America: Fictions of the Wild West", explored this phenomenon from the perspective of just one country, Germany. Yet its very popularity was a sign of Europe's enduring enthusiasm for the Wild West.

This 90 minute documentary-in-progress from producer/director Riva Freifeld ("Annie Oakley", PBS 2006) is destined for worldwide television broadcast and is being planned to coincide with a series of art exhibits and film festivals on the same topic in Europe and the U.S. It is partly sponsored by a grant from America's National Endowment for the Humanities.

The film's story begins in the fall of 1887 when Buffalo Bill Cody's "Wild West" made its first tour of Europe, in London. Seen by thousands (including Queen Victoria) and written up for months in the British press, this was a view of an American West that Europeans until then had only known through books and paintings. Playing to live audiences in an open air arena, with its sharpshooters, horses, buffalo, cowboys fighting Indians, attacks on settlers' cabins and stagecoaches, this live entertainment was noisy, gritty, startling and authentic. By 1889 when the show began its second European tour – 3 ½ years in France, Spain, Italy and Germany -- "Wild West" fever was taking hold in Europe. By the show's third trip, from 1903 to 1906, elements inspired by the "Wild West" were already penetrating European culture.

For the British, French, Germans, and Italians the American West stood for freedom, adventure, and possibility, the very things they were looking for. From the streets of London, to the salons of Paris, to the cafés of Berlin, to the operahouses and film sets of Italy, the West became an obsession – a projection screen for Europe's own myths and desires – a mirror image of themselves – and a stage set for the imagination.

Writers, artists, composers, and filmmakers turned their gaze on Western subjects, satisfying a European hunger for anything American. They took this new material, but challenged its conventions and reinterpreted it for themselves, each country differently. From Puccini's opera "The Girl of the Golden West" and the Winnetou novels of the German adventure writer Karl May, to films about the Gold Rush, Spaghetti, French and Spanish Westerns, British fiction and criticism, French intellectual debate, the West became a well of inspiration even as its myths were slowly turned upside down.

The film is designed as a "travelogue" through space and time, flashing backward and forward tracking the "Wild West"'s travels through Europe -- from the original impact to the fascination with the West that still exists today. The film will especially focus on the connections between Buffalo Bill Cody's "Wild West", the German adventure writer Karl May, and the "Euro-Westerns" of other countries.

Facts:

Completion date: Early 2014

Running time: 90 Minutes

More information: <http://www.rivaproductionsnyc.com/americas-west-europes-myth/>

Trailer: <http://www.rivaproductionsnyc.com/trailer-americas-west-europes-myth/>

Riva Freifeld / Riva Productions

Producer Freifeld was raised in Europe, Canada, and Latin America and speaks several languages. Her previous film on Annie Oakley was also sponsored by the N.E.H. and aired on "The American Experience", PBS' most watched television series. Riva has already assembled an interesting group of participants, including: Christopher Frayling, author of *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone*; Louis Warren, author of *Buffalo Bill's America*; Ruth Ellen Gruber, writer, Wild West Festival authority and author of *Sturm, Twang and Sauerkraut Cowboys*; Rob Rydell and Rob Kroes authors of *Buffalo Bill in Bologna*, Pamela Kort, curator of "I Like America", and several directors and actors from the original Spaghetti Westerns. Location shooting will include Almeria, Spain, site of "Little Hollywood", Radebeul, Germany at the Karl May Festival, Italy's "Old West Shooting Society", and "Country Rendez-Vous", a 3 day festival of Country-Western music in the Haute-Loire region of France.

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