



COUNTRY MUSIC HALL OF FAME COLLECTIONS

The timeless appeal of cowboy laments, lullabies and yodels.

Singing in the Saddle

By DOUGLAS B. GREEN, MA'71

WHEN STUDYING THE POPULAR PORTRAYAL OF THE cowboy, it is fascinating to reflect how few of these men are shown actually tending cattle. Folklorist J. Frank Dobie observed that Owen Wister's *The Virginian* is "the classic cowboy novel without cows," and Wister's book is far

from alone in this peculiarity. In films this contradiction is exaggerated to the extreme. The cowboy hero is often a lawman or ranger, openly or undercover; he may be a cattleman or ranch foreman; he may be a drifter, a doctor, or a two-fisted newspaperman—but seldom is he portrayed as a bottom-level workaday cowpoke. In a significant number of the singing-cowboy films, he is a radio, stage, or film performer, righting wrongs with fists and guns between performances. What he is, really, is a professional hero, with no need to perform such messy chores as dehorning or branding.

Plainly, that spirit of independence, of owing nothing to any person, of living up to a personal code, is what generations have valued in this western hero, investing him with properties real cowboys may or may not have possessed. This is why the cowboy hero is frequently a man from nowhere; why it is convenient to have him come to town or ranch with no past, no baggage, no ties; why it is simple for him, in these morality plays, to right wrongs and clear up injustice with quick decisions, quick draws, quick fists, and occasionally a song or two. In an increasingly industrial and bureaucratic age, the appeal of a lone figure answering only to his own conscience is strong indeed, and popular culture has settled this longing, this need, this

fantasy, upon the lowly figure of the cowboy.

So the young, displaced skilled laborers who were the real cowboys have taken on a huge psychic and cultural load. They have become, through the imaginative eyes of writers and singers and songwriters and filmmakers, the repository of our national dreams, transmogrified into heroes and peacemakers. In addition, they carry the weight of nostalgia, for they represent for us the wilderness we will never know, an era we can never experience, yet one that we seem to feel is priceless beyond measure. All these conflicting and complementary impulses are inherent in western music as well. This is why the cowboy, whose numbers have always been few, has come to mean so much to us, why the image and sound of his music—no matter how far parted from reality—has continued to fascinate us and move us for more than a century and a quarter.

Popular mythology has cowboys crooning soft lullabies and yodels to the cattle on the open ranges to pacify jittery longhorns, singing old familiar songs and hymns from back home, or creating new songs or new verses to existing songs in the long, dark hours of the night. Although this image has long been highly romanticized, the association of music and the cowboy is not purely fictional. Anywhere working men have been isolated

for periods of time in particular circumstances, a tradition of song by or about those men and their work develops. Sailors, loggers, railroad workers, boatmen, miners and others all have musical traditions.

As for cowboys, even witnesses who were there in the days before singing became a profession on record and radio and film can't seem to agree. Journalist John Baumann wrote for the *Fortnightly Review* of April 1, 1887: "The younger hands are whiling away the time 'whittling' and 'plug chawing,' drawling out yarns of love and sport and singing ribald songs, until someone strikes up the favorite wail 'Oh bury me not on the lone prairie, Where the coyotes howl and the wind blows free.'"

Harry Stephens, claiming authorship of "The Night Herding Song," told John Lomax: "Well, we always got night-herd years ago when they didn't have so many fences and corrals, and that was the biggest job for the cowboy. We generally have a two-hour shift, and two to four men on a shift according to the size of the herd. And when I made up this song, why, we always had so many different squawks and yells and hollers a-trying to keep the cattle quiet, I thought I might as well have a kind of a song to it." The highly regarded Texas folklorist and historian J. Frank Dobie remarked that "no human sound that I have ever heard approaches in eeriness or in soothing melody that indescribable whistle of the cowboy," while stockman Joseph McCoy wrote in 1874 that he had "many times sat upon the fence of a shipping yard and sang to an enclosed herd whilst a train would be rushing by. And it is surprising how quiet the herd will be so long



as they can hear the human voice. . . . Singing hymns to Texas steers is the peculiar forte of a genuine cowboy, but the spirit of true piety does not abound in the sentiment.”

Other contemporary accounts point to “Sam Bass” or “Red River Valley” as songs frequently sung by cowboys. J. Frank Dobie agreed: “Of course not all the cowboys on all days sang. Many a waddie could no more carry a tune than he could carry a buffalo bull. Often all hands were too busy fighting and cussin’ them dad-blamed cattle to sing. But in general the cowboys sang.” Ramon Adams recalled: “Away back at the beginnin’ of the cow business, it didn’t take the cowman long to savvy that the human voice gave cattle confidence, and kept ’em from junin’ around. . . . The practice got to be so common that night herdin’ was spoken of as ‘singing’ to ’em.” And E.C. Abbott (Teddy Blue) painted the legend in detail in his landmark book, *We Pointed Them North*:

One reason I believe there was so many songs about cowboys was the custom we had of singing to the cattle on night herd. The singing was supposed to soothe them and it did. . . . I know that if you wasn’t singing, any little sound in the night—it might be just a horse shaking himself—could make them leave the country; but if you were singing, they wouldn’t notice it. The two men on guard would circle around with their horses at a walk, if it was a clear night and the cattle was bedded down and quiet, and one man would sing a verse of a song, and his partner on the other side of the herd would sing another verse; and you’d go through a whole song like “Sam Bass.”

Likewise, Charles Siringo, whose *A Texas Cowboy* was one of the very first looks at the life of the cowboy written by a cowboy, unequivocally paints a portrait of cowboys singing, referring to an 1874 trail drive: “The steers showed a disposition to stampede but we handled them easy and sang melodious songs which kept them quieted. But about one o’clock they

stampeded in grand shape. . . . I finally about three o’clock got them stopped and after singing a few ‘lullaby’ songs they all lay down and went to snoring.” Later he describes a typical night on the trail: “The nights would be divided up into four equal parts— one man ‘on’ at a time, unless storming, tormented with mosquitoes, or something of the kind, when every one except the cook would have to be ‘out’ singing to them.”

On the other hand, Jack Thorp, the first collector and one of the first composers of cowboy songs, proclaimed bluntly: “It is generally thought that cowboys did a lot of singing around the herd at night to quiet them on the bed ground. I have been asked about this, and I’ll say that I have stood my share of night watches in 50 years, and I seldom heard singing of any kind.”

Regardless of how much singing was done on night guard, it is a fairly safe bet that in the days before radio, anytime men were

gathered together for long periods of isolation and boredom, any man who could come up with the slightest fragment of entertainment besides poker or some other card game was providing welcome relief from the endless hours not actively spent at work. In lonely bunkhouses, in line camps and at trail sides, some of the more creative of the band of men loosely defined as cowboys doubtless dreamed up the poems that, when put to old familiar melodies, became cowboy songs. Thus D.J. O’Malley’s 1893 poem “After the Roundup”—initially printed in the *Stock Grower’s Journal*—was popularized by cowpokes who learned the verses and set the lyrics to two very different melodies: the jaunty popular song “Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane” and the tender waltz “After the Ball.” Only three decades later, having finally evolved a tune of its own, this plaintive tale became the first recorded cowboy music hit, in Carl T. Sprague’s 1925 version on Victor Records under its now much more commonly known title, “When the Work’s All Done This Fall.”

This sequence is probably pretty illustrative of the way most classic cowboy songs were written. Some were art songs, like Dr. Brewster Higley’s 1873 “Home on the Range,” while others were folk songs in the truest sense: a bare skeleton of a tune and no story at all, with endless verses (occasionally exquisitely vulgar) added and subtracted by hundreds of bored or bemused cowhands—for example, “The Old Chisholm Trail,” which reputedly is based on an English folk song called “A Dainty Duck.” “The Cowboy’s Lament,” based on “The Unfortunate Rake,” dates back to at least 1790, and “Oh Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie” is based on an 1839 poem called “The Ocean-Buried.” Other cowboy songs easily traceable to English and Scottish songs in the folk tradition include many of the

most beloved songs of this early period: “Utah Carroll,” “Texas Rangers” and others.

Interest in the cowboy and his music, fueled by the dime novel and the Wild West show, began to climb in earnest around the

turn of the 20th century. As early as 1901 the *Journal of American Folklore* published the lyrics to “Oh Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie,” and in 1909 it published “Songs of the Western Cowboy,” collected by G.F. Will in North Dakota. The most significant publication was N. Howard (Jack) Thorp’s booklet *Songs of the Cowboy*, which appeared in 1908, followed in 1910 by John Avery Lomax’s landmark *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, and in 1919 by his *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp*. Thorp was an amateur collector (and writer as well; he “collected” his own “Little Joe the Wrangler”), while Lomax was a trained academic who borrowed heavily from Thorp. Lomax became a tireless advocate for folk music in general, and cowboy songs in particular, throughout his long life. Charles Siringo published a companion volume to his *A Lone Star Cowboy* in Santa Fe in 1919 called *The Song Companion of a Lone Star Cowboy*, and Charles Finger published *Sailor Chanteys and Cowboy Songs* in 1923 with a small Kansas publisher; it was expanded and the sailor chanteys dropped when published as *Frontier Ballads* by Doubleday, Page in New York in 1927.

Margaret Larkin was the first to include melodies for the lyrics in her 1931 anthology, *Singing Cowboy: A Book of Western Songs* (each song introduced, in the words of folklorist Guy Logsdon, “by a short narrative with much romanticized nonsense”). And cowboy song popularizer, songwriter, and radio star Jules Verne Allen published *Cowboy Lore* in San Antonio in 1933. But by this time the line between cowboy folk songs and songs created for records and movies was blurring.

Owen Wister, in adapting his novel *The Virginian* for the stage, wrote his own cowboy song, “Ten Thousand Cattle Roaming,” to replace the minstrel tune the Virginian had sung in the novel. Tin Pan Alley had not been long in discovering the cowboy and his music, and between 1905 and 1920 proceeded to churn out clever, cheerful, and wholly inauthentic cowboy songs like “Cheyenne (Shy Ann)” and “San Antonio” (both by Egbert Van Alstyne and Harry H. Williams), “The Pride of the Prairie,” “My Pony Boy,” “Ragtime Cowboy Joe,” “Sierra Sue,” “I’d Like to



The Sons of the Pioneers sing “Blue Shadows on the Trail” in Walt Disney’s *Melody Time* (1948). From left: Tim Spencer, Lloyd Perryman, Hugh Farr, Bob Nolan and Pat Brady.

Be in Texas for the Roundup in the Spring” (based on a fragment of a folk song), “Let the Rest of the World Go By,” and “The Utah Trail.” Many of these songs were recorded (on cylinder, and later on disc) by well-known stage artists of the time such as Len Spencer, Eddie Morton and Billy Murray. Murray, who had a long vaudeville career and made records from 1903 well into the 1930s, recorded a small but significant number of cowboy songs, though novelty and topical songs made up the bulk of his output.

More than a few of these Tin Pan Alley cowboy songs quickly entered the folk repertoire and were recorded by country and cowboy artists in the 1920s and 1930s, when rural and folk music finally found its way to record, and records and record players became available and affordable to a wider audience. Vernon Dalhart, Patt Patterson and even Bradley Kincaid recorded “I’d Like to Be in Texas (When They Round Up in the Spring)” in those years; Everett Morgan recorded “Cheyenne” in 1933; and “Pride of the Prairie” was recorded by Aaron Campbell’s Mountaineers, Tex Owens, his sister Texas Ruby and her partner Zeke Clements, and Patsy Montana & the Prairie

Ramblers, to name a few early examples.

There is a tendency to venerate the folk song and to denigrate the commercially composed in reviewing any traditionally based music, but it is important to remember that even the most unpolished early recording artists were often professionals or semi-professionals who performed music for an audience, and who added to their repertoires as they could—from the Victrolas, traveling medicine shows, or vaudeville troupes. While the Anglo-American folk song had hundreds of years to develop, cowboy music was romanticized and popularized in just three decades. Many a performer was first drawn to the world of entertainment by a musician or comedian performing in some long-forgotten tent, schoolhouse, or small-town theater. Some of these songs became virtual folk songs, accepted as age-old with their authors unknown, although the real composer may have been at that moment pounding away at his next composition at a piano in New York or Los Angeles.

By 1930 authentic cowboy songs had been performed on record by concert singers, beginning with Bentley Ball’s “Jesse James”



A now-rare 1932 songbook from Lois Dexter and Patt Patterson. Patterson recorded a dozen songs for the American Record Corporation, including his duets with Lois Dexter, but never achieved lasting fame.

and “The Dying Cowboy” in 1919. Carl T. Sprague, Vernon Dalhart and Jimmie Rodgers had national best-selling records of cowboy songs; Gene Autry was featured on radio as “Oklahoma’s Singing Cowboy”; and Warner Baxter, Bob Steele, Ken Maynard and others had already sung in films, though the singing was central neither to the plot nor the character. The visual and aural image of the cowboy loafing about with a guitar in his idle hours was in no way jarring to the moviegoer. Indeed, it was expected, as much a part of the cowboy’s colorful trappings as his sombrero, his rope, his tall boots and his chaps.

The western was becoming a genre of its own in literature, in song, on radio, on record, in comic strips and on film. With the coming of sound to film, image and music were united, and a new character—the singing cowboy—was preparing to step into the American consciousness, and with him developed, from these folk and popular sources, what we now think of as western music.

In time, cowboy bands in general used the same instrumentation as the string bands of the Southeast, although the feel was often far different. In the 1940s a smooth, pop-country sound came to exemplify the western music of the era, but the century-long appeal of western music has been, for the most part, the lyrics and the singer. No truly identifiable “sound” has ever developed to set it significantly apart from country music, save its peculiar and subtle loping beat. One can point out a jazz influence here, a mariachi influence there, but the average ear does not hear these fine points—in the public mind, fiddles and guitars have always branded western music as country. Intensifying the association, the records of virtually all cowboy and country singers were targeted toward the same rural audience. Although the purist considers western music a discrete style, it continues to be firmly identified and confused with country music.

And though its influences were quite var-

ied, western music has walked hand-in-hand with country music from the start, though the relationship has shown its strains from time to time. Despite the fact that *Billboard* magazine dropped the catchall “Country-Western” designation from its record charts more than 30 years ago, it is still a commonly used phrase among the public, who usually sees no distinction. Throughout his career Gene Autry easily drifted in and out of popular, country and western music, as did most of the singing cowboys. But popular music and jazz directly affected the sound of western music in the 1930s. From sophisticated chords and chord progressions to the Django Reinhardt-inspired guitar fills of Karl Farr, the music shaped commercial western music as it matured.

And there is the interesting anomaly of yodeling, which was never associated with the cowboy before Gene Autry brought it

to the screen, except in the handful of cowboy songs of Jimmie Rodgers, “the Singing Brakeman,” who found yodeling to be obligatory in most of his material. Although yodeling had been established in Autry’s repertoire for a number of years—he and many other radio and recording artists learned the trick from the vastly influential Rodgers—there is no evidence at all that traditional cowboys ever yodeled. It is probable that when there was singing, there was the use of the falsetto voice, and a melody hummed in falsetto might generously be termed a yodel, but it is extremely unlikely this ever went beyond the “who, who” sounds in a song like “The Cattle Call” (composed in the 1930s, though based on an earlier melody). It is conceivable that a kind of proto-yodeling was what Dobie was trying to describe when he referred to “the indescribable whistle of the cowboy,” but to the traditional cowboy singer the mournful blue yodels of Jimmie Rodgers or the athletic yodels of the Alps were unknown and unanticipated.

It has long been said that Jimmie Rodgers created the blue yodeling style by combining his own Mississippi music, a rich *mélange* of rural black and white music, with yodeling he had heard from a Swiss or Bavarian troupe appearing at a tent show or vaudeville stage. This may indeed be true, but research by several scholars, including Peter Stanfield, indicates that yodeling actually may have been introduced to the American stage by black-face entertainer Tom Christian in Chicago as early as 1847, and that the yodel moved from minstrelsy to country and cowboy music via medicine shows. It may be significant that Gene Autry appeared in a medicine show as a teenager, but yodeling was apparently not required of him for Dr. Fields’ Marvelous Medicine Show, for it was Johnny

Marvin who yodeled for Autry on his first recordings in 1929.

The first great popularizer of the blue yodel was well-known blackface vaudeville

artist Emmett Miller, whose career peaked in the 1920s, though he continued to appear well into the 1950s. As Stanfield reports, “In 1924 *Billboard* magazine, reporting on a show at the New York Hippodrome, noted that Miller’s ‘trick singing stunt’ almost stopped the show, and won him ‘encore after encore.’” He suggests, though without any hard evidence, that it was from Miller that Jimmie Rodgers learned the blue yodel, and this is certainly a plausible theory. Both men performed and traveled extensively, Rodgers was in and out of entertainment long before he actually recorded, and he could have caught Miller’s yodeling act onstage just as easily as that of any troupe of Alpine singers. On quite the other hand, longtime Jimmie Rodgers scholar Nolan Porterfield has posited just the opposite: that Miller may have learned to yodel from Rodgers in the days before either of them recorded. Might not their influences have been mutual?

Regardless, yodeling predated them both. Eminent folk-music scholar Norm Cohen has pointed out that one of the Singing Brakeman’s most evocative yodels, “Sleep, Baby, Sleep,” was recorded, with yodeling, as early as 1897 on a Berliner disc by George P. Watson and was recorded a dozen times between 1897 and 1917 by Watson and several others (Pete La Mar, Frank Wilson, Ward Barton and Frank Carroll, Matt Keefe, and Lucy Gates) on record labels like Edison, Zon-O-Phone, Columbia and Victor. It was recorded at least five times by hillbilly bands or singers—including Frank Marvin, under the pseudonym Frankie Wallace—and by at least three black quartets before Rodgers’ first recording.

Although determining who was first involves a great deal of speculation, what is certain is that yodeling became vastly popular during Jimmie Rodgers’ short career, spawning numerous yodelers in emulation of the Singing Brakeman: Johnny Marvin, Ernest Tubb, Ray Whitley and Gene Autry. Blue yodels were powerfully evocative, expressing loneliness, alienation, dejection and pain, as well as freedom and joy. They were relatively easy to master by any singer with the ability to break his voice, and the next generation of cowboy singers made yodeling a



A 1939 songbook for Al Clauser and His Oklahoma Outlaws. Clockwise from bottom: Curly Bray, Bud Roberts, Speed Foreman, Al Clauser and Tex Heoptner.



Patsy Montana, looking every inch a cowboy’s sweetheart in this 1930s publicity photo.

musical challenge. Although this next generation of yodelers may have lost the sense of profound loneliness and loss, the new crop of singers—including Roy Rogers, Elton Britt, Wilf Carter (Montana Slim), Patsy Montana and Ray Whitley—brought to the art a fresh sense of excitement and drive. European yodeling had been fast and tricky; it took just a few talented singers to adapt the somewhat formal European approach to the sunbaked music of the cowboy and the West, as did Rogers, Britt, Whitley and Carter so very quickly in the early 1930s, and as did Autry, who adapted well to the new style.

Did cowboys sing? Did they yodel? It matters to the historian, of course, but in the public mind the image was firmly in place: the cowboy amusing himself, his cattle and his compadres with songs, yodels, guitar playing, and music making. It is a perception that generations have adopted, and it is just this perception that made possible the movies and the songs that followed. ▼

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