The Singing Cowboy In American Culture

by Douglas B. Green

Of all the facets of American life, one of the few universal experiences which cuts across boundaries of age, social status, race, or location is that of sitting in a hushed theater, accompanying the crack of six-guns with the rhythmic chewing of stale popcorn, staring wide-eyed at some handsome cowpuncher either roughing up a scurrilous scoundrel or two or leaping from a thundering stallion on to a fastmoving freight or rampaging stagecoach. If that rich and redolent experience was somehow missed, surely no one has not been at least aware of the heroics of Matt Dillon on "Gunsmoke" or the Cartwrights of "Bonanza," two longtime staples of television. Perhaps no occupation has been more glamorized over the years than that of cowboy, rancher, frontiersman, prospector, or prairie lawman. It is a national legend and legacy, part of us all. It is a delightful myth we know to be a myth, one which our grandfathers helped create, one which we continue to preserve.

Yet positive sentiments toward the halcyon years of the western film in the motion picture industry seem today to be scarce: western film historians look upon the whole genre of singing cowboys as an unhappy and unfortunate bastardization which diluted the purity of the classic action western, while music historians, in general, tend to look upon the genre with equal horror as a bastardization which not only diluted the purity of old time country music, but which also bathed it in such gaudy commercialism that it stripped the music of its inherent dignity.

Pity the poor singing cowboy: denegrated and, except for a few die-hards, forgotten. Yet he has filled an extremely influential role within country music (as well as, indeed, American life) which has largely been overlooked and ignored, for the singing cowboy, far from stripping dignity from old time music, actually lent dignity and respect to a music which had been condescendingly known as "hillbilly" for years. Country music's contact with the singing western gave it a prestige and respectability it needed to enter the mainstream of American consciousness, and to eventually rise to its current popularity. No matter what your favorite sub-genre—bluegrass, western swing, cajun—it might well have come to nothing more than an interesting historical footnote had not Gene Autry and the hoards of singing cowboys who followed him made a respectable profession of

country and/or western singer on a grand scale across the country and much of the world as well. It is, after all, with both interest in and respect for cowboy song that the possibility and ability for deeper study of, interest in, and respect for other facets of earthy, rural music arose.

Cowboy songs, of course, predated singing cowboys of the silver screen by decades, and represent by themselves unique and fascinating documents of a place and a time in American history. The 1880's—the days of the flourishing cattle business and vast unfenced ranges—proved the initial era of creation and spread of cowboy songs, though of course many of these songs pre-dated that particular decade. The songs themselves were usually taken from poems published in small local newspapers, pamphlets, or books, and put to the tune of some Irish or English melody the cowboys—usually immigrants from the east—had previously known. More often than not their melodic repertoire was limited, and it is said that most of the classic songs of the cowboy were sung to only three or four tunes.

Contrary to the popular image of the cowboy riding the range with his everpresent guitar strapped to his side or over his shoulder, these early songs were usually sung without accompaniment, for the guitar was as late in reaching the southwest as it had been in the southeast. Once it did appear, however, at about the turn of the century, it was quickly adopted for the same reason it was among folk musicians of the southeast: it compactness and its sympathetic accompaniment to the human voice. Cowboy songs were not even sung, more often than not, as entertainment, but generally served as a reflief from the pounding monotony and boredom of range work, as well as providing a way of queting cattle to the solitary cowboy herding herd at night. As singers, the silvery yodels of Roy Rogers represent poorly the capabilities of authentic cowboy singers. Scholar Fred G. Heoptner quotes a writer of the era as saying "I never did hear a cowboy with a real good voice. If he ever had one to start with, he lost it bawling at cattle."

Still, a song does not need to be polished to have meaning to a singer, and the rough-hewn cowboys quickly cast in song tales of stampedes and of tragic death on the prairie like "Utah Carroll" and "Little Joe The Wrangler." Such ballads are sentimental yet true to life, and many of these songs passed straight from newsprint into oral, or folk, tradition.

Considering the romance which has surrounded the cowboy and the cowboy's life since the late nineteenth century, it is no wonder that commercial record companies tried to tap this rich wellspring of cowboy songs. In fact, shortly after recording Vernon Dalhart's "The Prisoner's Song" in New York, Victor Records recorded another native Texan, Carl T. Sprauge, who had a substantial hit of his own,

a near-million seller called "When The Work's All Done This Fall." Sprague, Jules Verne Allen, "Haywire Mac" McClintock, and others were rather busy, in fact, recording cowboy classics like "The Zebra Dun," "The Old Chisholm Trail," and "The Strawberry Roan" during phonograph records' big pre-Depression boom period, and the tradition of the singing cowboy—replete with guitar, which had been integrated into the folk tradition by then—was firmly fixed in the public mind by these descriptive, colorful ballads of a romantic, sometimes dangerous, often tedious life on the range.

It was perhaps inevitable that the film industry, which had traded upon the romanticism of the cowboy and the west from its beginning would turn to cowboy song to enrich the screen western. Apparently, however, the drawing power of western song was just not needed until the Depression, when for the first time public interest in western films began to wane. Although Ken Maynard, as early as 1930, occasionally took his guitar aside in a film or two to sing a song, it was not until 1934 that the concept of the singing cowboy film as a genre, in whcih music was just as important as "action" (the industry euphemism for fist fights, gun battles, and high speed chases, then as now) was developed and implemented by Herbert J. Yates and Nat Levine of Republic Studios.

It is said that in auditioning for the part of the first singing cowboy, Levine screened actors who could sing but couldn't ride, and actors who could ride but couldn't sing before finally deciding on a singer who could ride but couln't act: a young yodeler from the National Barn Dance named Gene Autry. Autry had hit Hollywood riding high off the success of a recent hit record, a song he'd written with his sometimes-partner Jimmy Long, in the sentimental old time mountain tradition called "That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine."

They first tried this handsome blonde hillbilly singer with all those teeth in a Ken Maynard film in 1934, and the public response was so overwhelming that within three short years Autry was among Hollywood's top moneymakers, inspiring a legion of imitators—many of whom were to become extremely important in country music themselves—and simultaneously impressing a whole generation, maybe two, of the meaning and worth of heartfelt country songs.

Autrey was as authentic a cowboy as any born in the relatively late year of 1907, for he was born on a cattle farm near Tioga, Texas, and raised on a similar spread near Ravia, Oklahoma. Although he at one time aspired to alternate vocals with saxophone solos as a teenager, Autry joined the Fields Brothers Marvellous Medicine Show while still in high school, apparently longing for a career as a professional singer both then and after graduation despite being forced to make a living as a telegrapher at a distant outpost for the St. Louis & Frisco Railroad. He found his way to New York—then the hub of the recording world—more than once, however, to audition for

record companies; sometimes successfully, sometimes not. A connection with the American Record Company eventually led to success, and it was at this time that his style matured from what had been a letter-perfect imitation of Jimmie Rodgers to a warmer, mellower, more nasal tone, full of guileless sincerity, more like the voice which we associate with those dark movie theaters on long-ago Saturday afternoons. After a brief stint at KVOO in Tulsa—Bob Wills' home station for eight years—he became a member of the WLS National Barn Dance in Chicago, and became one of the Midwest's most popular singers with his Conqueror Record Time program on WLS. His place in country music was assured with the resounding success of "That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine," but it was at this time, 1934, that he was called to Hollywood, and the explosive popularity of singing cowboys was touched off.

Autry's popularity was, as one might suspect, not unnoticed by competitive movie studios, and by 1936 two singing cowboys from the WHN Barn Dance in New York City found themselves in movies: Tex Ritter, who truly has become, both in film and on record, in the words of a recent album title, "An American Legend," and Ray Whitley, who won renown as a songwriter although he was never able to rise above supporting roles as a singing sidekick in full-length westerns (although the RKO shorts he starred in are classics). Ritter and Whitley were followed by Dick Foran, and then two former members of Autry's vocal backup group: Broadway-voiced Eddie Dean, and Jimmy Wakely, later a big record seller on Capitol. In the late 1930's Republic Studios pulled a handsome singer from the established group the Sons of the Pioneers, changed his name from Len Slye to Roy Rogers, and thrust him into starring roles during a contract dispute with Autry. Rogers, of course, proved equal to the task, and has remained one of the world of show business; his recent hit recording, the nostalgically-oriented "Hoppy, Gene, and Me," proves he still has some muscle when it comes to record sales. Relative latecomers, were Monte Hale and Rex Allen, another singer who, like Autry, was plucked from the stage of the National Barn Dance. Allen had the distinction of making the last of the singing cowboy films in the middle 1950s.

By the middle Eisenhower years, postwar realism and cynicism had written off the singing cowboy, his heroism, flashy outfits, and pauses for song in the midst of troubled times as ill suited to a nation and a people who so recently had lived through the horrors of both real war and the wrenching adjustments to be made in coping with hard facts of postwar life. Still, in his time the singing cowboy contributed significantly to the acceptance and growth of country music, despite his present-day status as something of an outcast.

Yet another strain had been developing in cowboy music throughout the same period, nearly as important as the cowboy tradition but

less film oriented. The year was 1934, the beginning of the era of commercially-oriented country music, when an authentic westerner named Tim Spencer, a Canadian singer and songwriter named Bob Nolan, and an Ohioan with a beautiful yodeling style named Len Slye teamed up to form the Pioneer Trio, a name they changed to the Sons of the Pioneers when Hugh and Karl Farr joined the group, in deference to the Farr's largely American Indian (thus true pioneer) ancestry. Although they appeard as ranch hands and singing cowpunchers in scores of movies, they found their greatest success in the recording of songs which became instant classics, often from the pen of Bob Nolan: "Way Out There," "Cool Water," and "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" were most prominent among them. Although they generated a host of imitators like Foy Willing and the Riders of the Purple Sage, the Sons of the Pioneers seemed to be the only group or indeed the only act which could sell western songs on record with any consistency, and they are still actively touring today.

For, surprising as it may seem, western music just didn't seem to sell on record, despite its popularity on screen. Jimmy Wakely's two big hits ("One Has My Name, The Other Has My Heart" and the million-selling "Slippin' Around") were pure country love songs, rather than cowboy tunes. Autry, who outsold them all, had scores of hits—"Be Honest With Me," "At Mail Call Today," "Have I Told You Lately That I Love You?" "Tweedle-O-Twill," and of course "Rudolph The Red Nosed Reindeer" (which accounted for nine million alone of the over twenty-five million sales credited to Autry)—but only one of his big hits, "South Of The Border," was a western song.

Johnny Bond has a couple of amusing stories he likes to tell which demonstrate the salability of cowboy songs to country audiences, outside the realm of the silver screen: when Bond and Jimmy Wakely and Dick Reinhart were starting out in Oklahoma, they went to Dallas to try out for Columbia records, having polished their harmony singing to a Sons-of-the-Pioneers-edge, and having worked up some beautiful western songs, including Bond's haunting "Cimarron." They were, for all their hard work, and had a roughly sung record played for them, being told "You boys sing fine; learn some honky-tonk numbers like this and come back and try it again." A good many years later, Bond, then a Columbia recording artist in his own right, had a battle with his A & R man over whether or not he could record "Cimarron," for he'd not only just paid $100 for a fancy arrangement, but felt his song, a classic even then (1945), was hit material, a view not shared by his A & R man, who was sure that "Cimarron," a western song, wouldn't sell. Bond finally prevailed—"consider it a souvenier for your family" he was told—a beautiful version of "Cimarron" was cut, and, of course, sold dismally. What the public loved on the screen and in

the theater, they wouldn't spend cash on to buy at their local record store.

Record sales aside—as they should be, for record sales alone should never be taken as indications of either artistic merit or historic value—the influence of the singing cowboy has been tremendous. One obvious influence is the use of western dress by country performers, a trend which went so far toward dying out that it's coming back as campy nostalgia in the costuming of David Allen Coe and other self-styled "rhinestone cowboys." Second, much of the national interest in the guitar can be traced to the romantic image of the singing cowboys: although Sears Roebuck offered guitars in their omnipresent catalogue as early as 1890, guitar sales didn't become big business for them until they began marketing their Gene Autry "Roundup" and "Melody Ranch" guitars in the mid-1930's, for Autry was the first guitarist (other than, possibly, crooner Nick Lucas) to make a truly national impact with the instrument.

Yet the impact of the singing cowboy has been far greater than that of influencing costumes and popularizing guitars, although these are perhaps the most visible and therefore most obvious effects on country music. For one thing, celluloid singing cowboys brought country songs to an entire nation for the first time, for no matter how many violins eventually made their way into the arrangements (and even this was not as frequent as one might think), these were basically pure country songs, concerned with the land, the life on the range, or with love. Straight-forward and unaffected, they were simple, direct expressions of heartfelt feelings, and made no pretense at being any-other than country songs, and offered no apology for their heritage.

More to the point, there is a scene in Autry's first feature film, "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" (1935), where Gene is beset by a couple of rough-looking hecklers while earnestly singing "That Silver Haired Daddy Of Mine." Laying down his guitar, he proceeds to deal with their rudeness with his fists, and in doing so symbolically is dealing with more than poor manners: he is fighting for the dignity of the country song and the country singer. After all, the inherent worth of a country song was assumed by Autry and the singing cowboys who followed him, and their commitment was taught in turn to a generation or more of youngsters who learned by example from these films. Far from ridiculing or stripping dignity from rural music, singing cowboys in fact surrounded it with the powerful romanticism already attached to the cowboy, giving the music a good deal of the luster and the fondess America has felt for the pioneer west through the years.

Beyond legitimatizing material, the financial success enjoyed especially by Autry helped make "hillbilly" music a respectable career, for the abysmal pay and difficult working conditions made such a career a chancy, unsavory prospect before the respectability

that only wealth can give was bestowed upon cowboy singers. As a result, the career of hillbilly singer or musician became, to the musically talented and their families, an acceptable and even desirable goal, fostering the careers of many entertainers who have followed the singing cowboy era.

The most obvious barometer reflecting this change of attitude is the "Billboard" "charts," where the term "hillbilly" was eventually (and mercifully) dropped as a means of categorizing the music, and replaced with the more dignified "folk," then "country and western," attaching the attendant integrity and glamor of the movie cowboy and of the romantic west to the basically rural, southeastern country songs which always dominated the charts. It was again a significant barometer reading when the "and western" was dropped, for it meant that at last country music was ready to stand on its own, having proven sufficient inherent dignity to stand tall, embracing all its many sub-genres, including even western song.

Though we may prefer to think of the singing cowboy as a rather implausable figure from our mutual pasts (it is human nature that it is difficult to take things so integrally entwined with our childhood seriously), we should spend a bit of time re-thinking his importance, for the role the singing cowboy played in bringing country music to a national audience in a manner that gave it worth and dignity cannot be overestimated. Not only did he save the stagecoach from sure disaster, the cattle from stampeding, the mob from lynching an innocent man, but he also propped up, fostered, and gave to country music dignity, sympathy, and credence at a time when these were sorely needed. Let us tip our hats to those men with their flashy suits, fancy guitars, and noble stallions: without them country music might still be in a cultural backwater today, if, indeed, there existed sufficient interest in it to sustain the music at all.