W

HEN 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 workday cowboy. 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 owning 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 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,’ dreaming out yarns of love and sport and singing ribald songs, until someone strikes up the favorite wail ‘O’ 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 right 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 not 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 beginning of the cow business, it didn’t take the cow- man long to savvy that the human voice gave cattle confidence, and kept ‘em from jummin 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 Painted 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 guard. 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 shakin’ his tail, or just the wind, or all the things might 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 or a trot, and the cattle 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. . . . 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 toil of ambiguity spent at stake. In lonesome londunks, 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 music, became cowboy songs. Thus D.J. O’Malley’s 1883 poem “After the Roundup”—initially printed in the Stock Grower’s journal—was popularized by cowboys who knew 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 warble “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, like the song 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 Chisolm Trail,” reputedly 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.”

Interest in the cowboy and his music has not waned since the 1800s. In 1910 by John Avery Lomax’s landmark Songs of the Cowboy, and the first recorded cowboy music was published in 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. In 1919 T C. Bailey and Records and record players became available in 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 Xylocad Kincaid recorded “I’ll Be Like in Texas (When They Round Up in the Spring)” in those years; Everett Morgan recorded “Cheyenne” in 1935; and “Pride of the Prairie” was recorded by Aaron Campbell’s Mountaineers, Tex Owens, his sister Texas Ruby and her partner Zeka 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 everything traditional music, but it is important to remember that even the most unpopular 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 troops. While the Anglo-American folk song had hundreds of years to develop, cowboy music was roman- ticized 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 1950 authentic cowboy songs had been performed on record by concert singers, beginning with Benny Ball’s “Jesse James”
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 “Oklahomans Singing Cowboy”; and Warn er Baxter, Bob Steele, Speed Smart 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 loo king about with a guitar in his idle hours was in no way a new movie genre. 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 the same extent as that from country music, save its point 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 the same extent as that from country music, save its point 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.

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, 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, whoo” sounds in a song like “The Cat- tle 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 song 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 vaudeville 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, although it may have been introduced to the American stage by blackface entertainer Tom Christian in Chicago as early as 1847, and that the yodel moved from minstrelsy to country and cowboy music via minstrel 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.

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’ almost stopped the show, and won him ‘enough 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 the probable theory. But 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 evocative yodels, “Sleep, Baby, Sleep,” was recorded, with yodeling, as early as 1897 on a Berlin disc by George P. Watson and was recorded a dozen times between 1907 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 powerful 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 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 sungabked music of the cowboy and the west, as did Rogers, Britt, Whitey and maybe 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. Reprinted with permission from Singing in the Saddle: The History of the Singing Cowboy by Douglas Brakeman (c) 2002, published by Vanderbilt University Press/Country Music Foundation Press.