

# *The Lavender Cowboy and “The She Buckaroo”: Gene Autry, Patsy Montana, and Depression-Era Gender Roles*

*Stephanie Vander Wel*

Gene Autry, the preeminent singing cowboy of the 1930s, and his famous contemporary, the singing cowgirl Patsy Montana, swept the air-waves with romantic representations of frontier culture just as radio began to transmit the myths of the West to Middle America and a national audience. WLS's *National Barn Dance*, the most prominent radio program to broadcast rural music in the 1930s, launched Autry's career as a singing cowboy who performed sentimental mountain tunes and cowboy songs while figuratively roaming the western prairies. In addition to Montana, the show jump-started a number of prominent singing cowgirls, the Girls of the Golden West (a sister duet) and Louise Massey and the Westerners (also a family ensemble).<sup>1</sup> Alongside Autry, though, it was Montana who often appeared as a solo singing cowgirl in her role as the lead singer of a string band ensemble, the Prairie Ramblers. In performances and promotional material, Montana emerged as a self-determined western heroine whose pursuits of social and material autonomy were comparable to those of the cowboy hero. While Autry crooned his cowboy melodies first on radio, then in film, Montana would establish her musical identity on radio and on record with her signature tune, “I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart,” the first song written and recorded by a female country artist to sell a million copies.

Through the powerful mediums of modern technology, the musical expressions of Montana and Autry met the economic and social conditions, above all the gendered tensions, of the Great Depression. The collapse of the economic foundation of industrial and agricultural America had stripped men of their livelihoods (25 percent nationwide), thereby making it nearly impossible for them to assert their patriarchal status as

doi:10.1093/musqtl/gds026

95:207–251

Advance Access publication November 19, 2012.

The Musical Quarterly

© The Author 2012. Published by Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com

breadwinners.<sup>2</sup> Having first prompted a “crisis in masculinity,” the Great Depression eventually catalyzed a period of “gender strife and change.”<sup>3</sup> While production industries (construction, manufacturing, mining, to name a few) closed their doors, a growing number of married and single women entered the public sphere to secure positions in the increasingly feminized service industries.<sup>4</sup> Within the historical context of unemployed men and working women, and significantly informed by it, Autry and Montana contributed to the shaping of a musical West that responded to the cultural contestations of gender. Autry sang about lone cowboys yearning for the promises of the American West, and Montana presented musical landscapes where cowgirl heroines were confident and free to roam.

Scholars have recognized the general significance of the singing cowboy in country music and popular culture, but few writers have acknowledged the importance of the singing cowgirl.<sup>5</sup> The singing cowboy, it has been shown, provided a new and marketable image for the country music industry, one different from the comedic, backward rube that dominated the genre.<sup>6</sup> At a time when Depression-era listeners craved a romantic image of rurality, the singing cowboy could become, in the words of Bill Malone, “a reassuring symbol of independence and mastery, a collection of traits that the nation had once possessed and might once again assert.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, the singing cowboy, according to Peter Stanfield, may have been the “most important cultural figure to emerge from the tumultuous years of the Great Depression—a character that represented the fantasies, desires, and ambitions of those who felt keenly the economic hardship and threat (and fact) of dispossession and dislocation.”<sup>8</sup> The singing cowboy and, I argue, the singing cowgirl as well offered hope and promise to those suffering the devastating effects of rural poverty, urban unemployment, and migration. In managing the doubts and fears of such realities, they also participated in the construction of a new western musical mythos of gender.

The gendered relationship between western music and the Depression emerged in the expressive musical discourse produced by both Montana and Autry during radio’s investment in promoting romantic settings of the frontier. In radio, Autry first cultivated his well-known identity: the gallant yet emotive cowboy, who could freely give voice to his interior sentiments in both nostalgic tunes and western numbers. Of greatest interest to me are the ways Autry constructed this persona within a musical context of sentimental masculinity that also could embrace the singing cowgirl, specifically Montana’s visions of self-determination. Autry did not promote an uninflected and rugged individualism impervious to the era’s social and economic attacks on masculine

cultural authority. Instead, he embodied the gendered tensions of the Depression by infusing the heroic stance of the cowboy with effusive expressions. Montana, on the other hand, performed music that suggested a longing for a form of independence removed from the confines of domesticity at the same moment that women were increasingly visible in the public sphere. Introducing her songs about self-directed cowgirls to the radio audience of Chicago's WLS, Montana's narratives did not fully abandon gender norms. Rather, her accounts of cowgirls freely roaming the open range often gestured toward traditional heterosexual romance and courtship. Thus, I suggest that the cultural importance of Montana's and Autry's music lay specifically in the ways those singers articulated and assuaged the era's concerns about gender by carefully combining gender norms with musical imagery that simultaneously called those models into question.

What made Autry's and Montana's narratives so compelling to a broad midwestern audience were their artful inclusion of gendered imagery within the musical myths of the West. But because most scholarship has focused almost exclusively on the lyrical content of cowboy songs, music's place in shaping the cultural meaning of the singing cowboy or the singing cowgirl has been underappreciated.<sup>9</sup> As they were reiterating powerful and effective textual conventions in their songs, Montana and Autry were drawing upon the prevalent musical codes and practices of cowboy music to enrich and define their gendered portrayals of the western landscape. Each western star combined the apparent verisimilitude of folk music with the musical idioms of Tin Pan Alley to help authenticate their mass-mediated personas: they linked their strophic ballads to the supposed oral culture of cowboy life on the open range (as exemplified in John Lomax's 1910 collection, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*) and relied upon the tropes of popular music in creating their glamorized pictures of the West.

To his midwestern listeners struggling to hold on to their farms or find employment in urban areas, Autry's early cowboy tunes told sympathetically morose tales of the cowboy's vulnerability to the dangers and hardships of the open range. Yet his Tin Pan Alley cowboy songs provided lush soundscapes that framed the intimate sounds of his vocal delivery over the airwaves of radio. Crooning to his audience, the singing cowboy soothed the concerns of the era as he presented a principled version of masculinity that took the risk of being perceived as effeminate. Montana, on the other hand, performed folk-like ballads and stylized songs that underscored the self-reliance and vitality of the cowgirl without relinquishing the ideals of femininity. She belted out her lyrics and often yodeled to the top of her range in, for example, "I

“Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart,” songs that combined the stylistic features of popular music with vernacular idioms. By refashioning the West into a place where standard models of gender could include emoting cowboys and autonomous cowgirls, Montana and Autry broadened the spectrum of gender for Depression-era audiences.

### **WLS and Its Depression-Era Audience**

The recording industry, like many industries affected by the economic crisis of the Depression, almost came to a standstill during the 1930s. In its place, radio disseminated music to the segment of the American populace that had access to this technology. Listeners could tune their radios to their favorite programs and listen to music without the expense of buying records. It was at this time that Autry and Montana appeared on WLS, one of the most predominant radio stations of the era, and one that included country music in its broadcasts to a wide audience outside of the South.<sup>10</sup> With its clear-channel signal and fifty-thousand-watt transmitter (acquired in 1931), WLS’s programs of country and popular musics reached listeners throughout most of the central part of the country. To complement the medium of radio, the station distributed an annual publication, *WLS Family Album* (beginning in 1929), and later a monthly magazine, *Stand By!*, that provided listeners with photographs of its performers and promotional material of its broadcasts. The program *Smile-A-While*, on which Patsy Montana often performed “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart,” was a daily early morning show advertised to “farm families and other early risers who enjoy lively popular and old-time music to start the day off right.”<sup>11</sup> Saturday afternoons featured the show *Merry-Go-Round*, which transmitted the “whirl of fun and merry music. . . . Harmony teams, male quartets, banjo selections, piano novelties, ‘blues’ numbers, and other features help to make this fast-moving show.”<sup>12</sup>

But the program that cemented WLS’s high standing in radio was the *National Barn Dance*, first broadcast in 1924. The NBC Blue network, beginning in 1933, transmitted a one-hour segment of the *National Barn Dance* (sponsored by Miles Laboratories and Alka-Seltzer) on radio stations throughout the United States. Through the magic of radio technology, the Saturday night barn dance signaled an evening of rural entertainment that cast an eclectic mix of popular and country musics into a variety show format, reminiscent of the traditions of minstrelsy and vaudeville.<sup>13</sup> The broadcasts juxtaposed the raucous music making of the Hoosier Hot Shots’ jazz playing to the Cumberland Ridge Runners’ southeastern string band music and the Prairie Ramblers’

western swing numbers. Its comedic skits included a master of ceremonies, originally George D. Hay (who later established the *Grand Ole Opry*), bantering with characters dressed in blackface and rural garb. The program also reached into the domestic sphere with intimate forms of vocal music: Grace Wilson's popular songs from her former vaudeville days, Bradley Kincaid's ballads from southern Appalachia, the Maple City Four's barbershop arrangements, and Gene Autry's sentimental mountain tunes and cowboy songs.<sup>14</sup>

With this diverse mix of solo artists and ensembles, WLS captured the musical sensibilities of its heterogeneous local and regional audience. Originally owned by Sears, Roebuck, and Co. and later by Burrige D. Butler (the proprietor of the newspaper *Prairie Farmer*), WLS catered to the midwestern farmer or the Chicagoan who had recently left the family farm by publicizing musical acts as having originated in the midwestern region, either the city or the countryside. For instance, Sally Foster, a "Native of Wisconsin," sang "sweet old-fashioned songs"; Carol Hammond was marketed as "A Chicago girl with a grand voice"; and the Three Neighbor Boys, "directly from the farm in Marshall county Illinois," performed in a manner that "never lost its sweetness and simplicity."<sup>15</sup> WLS also tailored its programming to particular communities of European immigrants and southern migrants in the Midwest. Leaving their homes in the German-speaking regions of Europe, emigrants had established family farms in the Midwest over the course of the nineteenth century and later joined other immigrant communities, namely those of Poles and Czechs, to work in the emerging industries of Chicago.<sup>16</sup> With the developments of the radio industry in the Windy City, specific ethnic groups found radio to be a viable way to remain connected with their native culture.<sup>17</sup> One can imagine how those of German-Swiss ethnicity must have tuned their radios to WLS's programs to hear the yodel songs of the Dezurik sisters or Christine "Our Little Swiss Yodeler" or the performances of Sophie Germanich, "The Prairie Farmer Girl."<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, WLS's programming of southern rural music—especially Bradley Kincaid's mountain songs (1926–30) and later the Cumberland Ridge Runners' string band music (1930–37)—reached a growing audience of southern migrants in the Midwest. Since World War I, black and white southerners had been leaving the depressed conditions of the South for the economic promise of manufacturing cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Cincinnati.<sup>19</sup> By 1930, close to three million white southerners (mostly from the Upland South) had settled in the Midwest.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the contemporary sociologist Vivien M. Palmer noticed a "distinct colony" of Tennesseans in the North

Center of Chicago in 1930 that had joined the various ethnic communities of the city.<sup>21</sup>

With an established local and regional audience, WLS was successful in attracting listeners throughout the country as well. According to WLS promotional materials, “More letters of applause from listeners are received weekly as a result of the barn dance than from any other single WLS program. From Maine to California and from Canada to Mexico, tens of thousands of families find in this feature something ‘different.’”<sup>22</sup> Especially during the Depression, WLS’s *National Barn Dance* became the dominant barn dance show on radio until the *Grand Ole Opry* (founded in 1926) gained network status in 1939.<sup>23</sup> What contributed to its success were the ways in which WLS and the *National Barn Dance* had comforted its listeners during the social and material upheavals of the decade. The station rarely mentioned the devastating effects of the Depression to its midwestern audience, unlike the emerging narratives in blues coming out of Chicago. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Big Bill Broonzy’s “Starvation Blues,” Tampa Red’s “Depressions Blues,” and Sonny Boy Williamson’s “Welfare Store,” for example, articulated the angst and the grim reality of the city’s black community fighting to survive the aftermath of the Depression. The genre, according to blues scholar William Barlow, provided a sharp contrast to “the full-scale retreat into fantasy that characterized much of the major networks’ radio programming during the depression years.”<sup>24</sup>

Devoted to a “full-scale retreat into fantasy,” WLS framed its eclectic mix of music nostalgically, as belonging to a bygone era. Even the more urbane popular pieces, such as the Hoosier Hot Shots’ jazz numbers or the popular songs of Grace Wilson, were folded into a rural setting that included old-time music.<sup>25</sup> Contributing to this impression, *WLS Family Album* stated that its artists were “home folks, striving to do their best to lighten your cares by bringing you wholesome fun and entertainment. They hope that you will enjoy their show from the ringing of the first cowbell until ‘Home Sweet Home.’”<sup>26</sup> The performers of the *National Barn Dance*, in essence, belonged to an idyllic past of simpler times for those who were shaken by the chaotic conditions of the present.<sup>27</sup>

In the Midwest alone, the economic catastrophe deeply affected the region’s well-developed agricultural and manufacturing industries. With the price of crops falling to a new low, “only 16 percent of farm households earned incomes above the national median of fifteen hundred dollars per year in the mid-1930s.”<sup>28</sup> Under these dire conditions, farmers struggled to maintain their livelihoods in the midst of bank foreclosures that were snatching away family farms to be sold at

auction.<sup>29</sup> The collapse of the manufacturing industries in midwestern cities could be just as devastating. In Chicago, the steel industry in particular shut down production entirely and turned away its working-class labor force, pushing the unemployment rate in the city up to a staggering 50 percent in the early years of the Depression.<sup>30</sup>

According to Lizabeth Cohen's study of the unemployment crisis in 1930s Chicago, specific demographics of the working class were the most vulnerable—African Americans, Mexicans, and middle-aged men.<sup>31</sup> Of the 50 percent who were out of work in Chicago, 16 percent were African Americans, a disproportionately high rate considering that they made up only 4 percent of the city's population.<sup>32</sup> Mexican factory workers also faced massive unemployment, causing half of the Mexican population to leave the city during the Depression.<sup>33</sup> Because of these circumstances, many black as well as white southern migrants who had found jobs in midwestern cities during the early decades of the twentieth century returned to the South for the first half of the decade, surviving on small plots of land.<sup>34</sup> Others, realizing that the economic standing of the South was likely worse, remained in the Midwest in the face of the grave possibilities for employment.<sup>35</sup>

Middle-aged men, often with families, also bore the brunt of this dramatic downturn in industrial production and commerce. With so many young people (sons and daughters of unemployed fathers) scrambling for work, employers of Chicago's manufacturing industry tended to hire men under the age of thirty-five.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, women, attempting to make up for the loss of family income, secured low-paying service positions (namely as clerks, waitresses, or maids) that had survived the economic conditions of the Depression.<sup>37</sup> In fact, a 1934 government study of workers on relief shows that men were usually out of work longer than women in many urban areas, including Chicago.<sup>38</sup>

Women, emerging as significant contributors to their family's income, assumed or at least shared the breadwinning role usually reserved for men. Though they typically did not compete with men over manufacturing jobs, their increased presence in the workforce created much controversy. Several polls conducted during the period reveal a growing hostility toward employed women, who were seen as the cause of male unemployment, despite the material reality that required women to work in the public sphere.<sup>39</sup> Even federal policies aimed at alleviating the grim state of the economy supported unemployed men and discouraged married women from seeking employment outside of the home.<sup>40</sup> The Depression thus was a contradictory era in which the economic collapse challenged the patriarchal ordering of the family while large parts

of society wished to re-establish men in the market economy and women in their homes without the pressures of earning an income.<sup>41</sup>

In the mist of these heated debates about men's and women's societal positions in the public and private spheres, WLS invoked the idyllic past and provided stable familial imagery. For the 1930 edition of *WLS Family Album*, the cover featured the caption "The Happy Radio Family" with an illustration of a family sitting around the radio in their living room: the father reading the newspaper (still dressed in his business attire), the mother doing needlework, the daughter pretending to feed her doll, and the son playing with a model airplane.<sup>42</sup> The image, chock-full of normative gender roles, gave the impression of how radio was responsible for this cozy family scene by drawing all its members together to listen to their favorite programs.

WLS's portraits of standard gender roles were not limited to the illustrations of its publication, but also appeared in its broadcasts, in which proud, stalwart singing mountaineers and sentimental southern mothers managed the uncertainties of its listeners. As historian Kristine McCusker has argued, WLS presented "the soothing sounds of lullabies sung softly and sweetly by pioneer fathers and virtuous mothers," thereby forging a connection between normative concepts of gender and the sentimentality of old-time music.<sup>43</sup> Just as the economic conditions of the 1930s attacked the social standing of men, the singing mountaineer Bradley Kincaid (who first appeared on WLS in 1926) strove particularly to preserve conventional models of masculinity and femininity. In his radio scripts, Bradley portrayed the courageous feats of pioneering men taming the wilderness of southern Appalachia into a region of morality in which southern mothers devoted themselves to the care of their families.

The singing mountaineer, however, was not alone in the southern region of the United States for WLS's audiences. Various comedic hayseeds joined the WLS cast, namely Arkie the Arkansas Woodchopper, "a farm boy from the Ozarks," and Pat Buttram, who embodied the "backwoods humor of the Old South" with his pronounced nasal speaking voice that constantly broke to his head voice.<sup>44</sup> WLS publicity explained that Buttram "really did come from Winston County, Alabama, and he really does talk most of the time the same way as he does on the stage or on the radio. He was just born with a comical streak."<sup>45</sup> The centrality of the hillbilly figure magnified commercial country music's reliance upon the performance conventions of minstrelsy.<sup>46</sup> Like other country radio shows of the era, WLS's *National Barn Dance* brought together rural burlesques of race and class by promoting comedic skits of the hillbilly and the blackface figure located in the

imagery of the "Old South." Clifford Soubier, originally from a theatrical family of Ontario, Canada, played the role of "Old Pappy," the impersonation of an aging black man who told "animal stories" to children; and Malcolm Clair enacted the character "Spareribs," with his "natural-sounding" southern dialect.<sup>47</sup> With the hillbilly image lying in proximity to the parodies of southern blackness, the illustrations of the mountaineer were meant to invoke an Anglo-Saxon lineage of pioneers separated from any cultural connection to African Americans.

The dialectical struggle between competing images of country music—the noble mountaineer and the comedic rube—unfolded in the late 1920s and early 1930s against a backdrop of heightened attention toward the "Benighted South." For instance, the journalistic focus on the infamous "Monkey Trial" of John Scopes—a Tennessee science teacher tried in court for teaching evolution—helped to circulate H. L. Mencken's vitriolic diatribes against the backwardness of the South throughout the country.<sup>48</sup> These particularly derisive views occurred when numerous national reports made public the widespread poverty in the Upland South and the Cotton Belt. With the closing of the coalmining and timber industries, the rural and working class had few choices but to turn to subsistence farming.<sup>49</sup> In 1934, 75 percent of southern Appalachians were attempting to survive on less than fifty acres.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, the Deep South's economic reliance on cotton, at a time when the price of the crop was plummeting, pushed more farmers off their land into the exploitative system of tenancy or sharecropping. By 1930, 60 percent of southern farmers did not own their own land, and by 1937, two-thirds of the nation's tenant farmers and sharecroppers lived in the South, of which the majority (two-thirds) was white (since many African Americans had migrated to northern and midwestern cities during the early part of the twentieth century).<sup>51</sup> The popular media (*Life* and *Fortune* magazines, for example) documented the conditions of tenancy with illustrations of the depraved living conditions of the white rural poor—photographs that captured the hunched-over laboring bodies of men and the sullen, worried expressions of women.

These particular images of the South coincided with another significant factor that contributed to the perception of southern impoverishment: the Depression-era migration from the Southwest to California, commonly referred to as the Okie migration. The economic hardships of the Depression and the natural disasters caused by drought that scorched the land from Texas up to South Dakota forced tenant farmers of the southwestern region to look for work elsewhere.<sup>52</sup> More than half of the migratory population settled in the rural region of central California, where white families picked cotton and other crops while

living in labor camps or other forms of makeshift housing. By the late 1930s, California residents, resenting the influx of white migrants, viewed the displaced as pejoratively as they did those associated with immigrant farm labor and with poor rural southerners in general. The state legislature even passed antimigrant policies to keep the Okies from entering the Golden State.

The depictions of the backward hillbilly in the many accounts of white rural southern poverty made it close to impossible for the singing mountaineer to maintain his determined individualism in a region known for its social and material deprivations.<sup>53</sup> The dominant images of southern rurality, as Richard Peterson has noted, “alternated between the sullen, displaced farmer and the comedic buffoon.”<sup>54</sup> Given this historical context, the country music industry distanced itself from agrarian imagery associated with southern Appalachia.<sup>55</sup> Thus, when Autry appeared on WLS, the station deliberately shaped Autry’s performance persona into that of cowboy rather than trying to market yet another singing mountaineer linked to the South.

### **Gene Autry and WLS**

Autry’s cowboy identity relied on the myths of the West to reassert the cultural authority of masculinity and rescue the white rural and working class from the stereotypical perceptions of the Depression-era South. Yet Autry’s musical repertory did not necessarily support these ideals. As a recording artist of the blues and sentimental songs, his performances often voiced the vulnerabilities of masculinity during the early years of the Depression. Beginning his career in New York City, Autry recorded covers of Jimmie Rodgers’s “Blue Yodels” and elegiac pieces for a host of budget labels as well as the more prominent labels, Victor Records and the American Record Company (ARC). Autry also recorded the blues-inflected music written by his peers, Frankie Marvin’s “Bear Cat Papa Blues” (1931) and several of his own, “Do Right Daddy Blues” (1931), “Birmingham Daddy” (1931), and “Jailhouse Blues” (1931).<sup>56</sup> Featuring many of the themes central to the genre—rambling, sexual boasting, spending time in jail, conflicts with sexual and romantic partners, heartache, and loneliness—Autry’s songs often relied on sexual language to promote a sense of bravado. Autry’s “Do Right Daddy Blues,” for example, draws from the musical conventions of the blues (a minor pentatonic melody supported by a chord progression of root movement of fifths, I–IV–bVII–bIII) to describe the sexual appetite and the rambling ways of the male protagonist:

I just come down from across the Sioux  
I'm a true loving daddy say will I do  
I'm a do right daddy and I don't deny my name.

Now you can feel on my legs and you can feel on my thigh  
but if you feel my legs you've got to ride me high  
I'm a do right daddy but I can't be treated this way.<sup>57</sup>

Like his peers in country music, Cliff Carlisle's "Tom Cat Blues" (1932) or Jimmie Davis's "Sewing Machine Blues" (1932), Autry's appropriation of the sexual frankness of the genre presents a swaggering racialized masculinity.<sup>58</sup> By the end of the song, however, Autry wails desperately in his higher range as he considers drowning himself in the river over rejection by a sexual partner, "My little baby has done and turned me down." Such a display of machismo dissolving into heartache and desperation suggests that the protagonist's confident strut was simply a thinly veiled guise meant to conceal his fragility.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to the use of sexual metaphors to depict the underlying tensions of masculinity, Autry continued to emphasize the vulnerability of male subjects in songs that expressed a longing for the pastoral. As in the country music of his contemporaries (Carter Family's "My Dixie Darling," for example), Autry's repertory maintained the traditions of the singing mountaineer performing minstrel and sentimental songs to illustrate an idealized South. In fact, his first hit song "That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine," co-written by Jimmy Long, was a lament that extended the conventions of antebellum minstrel songs found in Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home" (1851) and "My Old Kentucky Home" (1853). Autry's setting of a protagonist mourning over an aging bereft father, who lives in a "vine-covered shack in the mountains," links a male protagonist to the musical tropes of nostalgia—pentatonic melodies supported by simple harmonic progressions (ex. 1). Yet Autry's rustic narrative was not simply tied to the rhetoric of folk music. His most bucolic songs often combined folk-like idioms with the stylized language of popular music—a common practice that can be heard in previous portrayals of the South; for example, James Bland's "Carry Me Back to Old Virginia" (1875).<sup>60</sup> With a more varied melodic language supported by secondary dominants, the chorus's bridge in "That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine" magnifies the subject's expressed desires to atone for past mistakes that have aged his forsaken father: "If I could erase those lines from your face and bring back the gold to your hair." Thus, Autry's initial commercial success as a recording star lay with a sentimental song that fused the musical codes of the folk with those of

Chorus

A If I could re-call all the heart-aches— Dear old dad-dy I caused you to bear,— If

B I could e-rase those lines from your face, and bring back the gold to your hair,— If

A' God would but grant me the po-wer— just to turn back the pa-ges of time,— I'd

A'' give all I own, if I could but a-tone to that sil-ver-haired dad-dy of mine.—

*Example 1.* “That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine,” words and music by Gene Autry and Jimmy Long. Recorded by Gene Autry and Jimmy Long with Frankie Marvin on violin and Roy Smeck on steel guitar, 1931. Copyright © 1932 (Renewed). The Gene Autry Music Company and Universal Music Corp. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

popular music to express the depth and pathos of masculine yearning for a past far removed from the grim realities of the present.

In acknowledging the fragility of 1930s rural culture and masculinity, Autry’s music must have resonated with WLS listeners. Midwestern farmers were attempting to hold on to their family farms, while many southern migrants yearned for a South unmarked by a depressed economy, draught, and poverty. Indeed, Autry’s maudlin songs led to his career in radio. “That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine” initially attracted the attention of Art Satherley of ARC. Realizing the potential in Autry’s recordings, Satherley persuaded Autry to record exclusively for ARC by promising the country musician a spot on one of the most successful radio stations, WLS.<sup>61</sup> Though Autry continued to record blues songs for ARC, “That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine” appeared more appropriate to WLS’s programming of nostalgia. As the 1930s continued, Autry distanced himself from his blues repertory (and advised others to do the same). In a 1933 publication, *The Art of Writing Songs and How to Play a Guitar*, Autry said, “The racy risqué song just doesn’t last. Regardless of what kind of a song you write, keep it clean and wholesome. . . . Nine out of ten requests that I receive both on radio and on the stage are for the simple wholesome type of song.”<sup>62</sup> Rather than catering to the demands of the recording industry, Autry turned his

attention to the dictates of the radio industry, including those of radio sponsors who wanted appropriate music for selling their wares to an audience mostly composed of women.<sup>63</sup>

"That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine," invoking a bucolic southern mountain culture, certainly adhered to the musical requirements of the radio industry. Despite the sentiments expressed in Autry's song, WLS did not indicate that Autry was a performer of mountain ballads but rather a singer of the open prairie. "A cowboy sitting in the saddle just watching the herd at night frequently would sing one of those long-drawn-out songs as a means of keeping the cattle reassured and quiet." Within this western setting, "one song written by Gene Autry stands out as a favorite. 'That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine' seems to have universal appeal, and no program with Gene Autry is quite complete until he sings it."<sup>64</sup> Even though Autry's hit wasn't necessarily a song meant to lull the cattle into quiet repose on the open range, WLS promoted Autry as a western figure from the very beginning of his radio career.

With his sentimental songs mapped onto the topography of the West, Autry infused his cowboy persona of independence with tender idioms, thereby bringing together a heroic representation of masculinity with perceivably "feminine" modes of expression. That is, his music appeared to encapsulate the shifting definitions of masculinity during the 1930s. Autry's initial radio performances, for example, were on a WLS program called *Tower Topics Time* that appeared to be part of an emerging strategy of treating men as viable consumers. Since men's gender status was no longer clearly linked to notions of work and "manly production," capitalist structures of the 1930s began to align men with "feminized" consumerism.<sup>65</sup> *Tower Topics Time*, an early morning radio show, was initially designed in 1925 to accommodate the interests of women.<sup>66</sup> But by the time of Autry's radio debut, the broadcast had extended its programming to market the household products of its sponsor Sears, Roebuck to men while maintaining its appeal to women. The hosts of the show, Ann Williams and Sue Roberts, specialized in "women's styles" and "home decoration" while addressing various topics—"recipes, child welfare, neighborly news, decorating shop and Junior Time."<sup>67</sup> In addition to catering to female listeners, Williams and Roberts also claimed "the distinction of having the only household program for men on the air in the Middle West."<sup>68</sup> Thus, Autry first appeared as a singing cowboy on a program that linked men not only to consumerism but also to domesticity.

Williams, who usually introduced Autry to radio listeners, was instrumental in shaping Autry's cowboy persona to male consumers and women in the audience. According to Autry (years later in 1950), Williams would announce his radio performances with "bright talk of

the wind-swept plains, of coyote howls in the moonlight, and cowboys on galloping horses.”<sup>69</sup> But Williams’s preambles did more than establish a western backdrop for Autry’s performances. She also stressed the cowboy’s alluring qualities, molding Autry into a desirable commodity for his women fans. On the last page of Autry’s 1933 songbook, *Gene Autry’s Sensational Collection of Famous Original Cowboy Songs and Mountain Ballads* (which Williams assisted in publishing and promoting), Williams described Autry (see fig. 1):

A tall, slender chap, guitar slung over his shoulder, standing close to the microphone yodeling a song of the range. A gray sombrero tipped slightly back, almost, but not quite, hiding his blond hair. A gaily-colored scarf, knotted loosely around his neck, emphasizing the permanent suntan. . . . Blue eyes—bright, and oh, so friendly, and a smile that takes in the whole world!

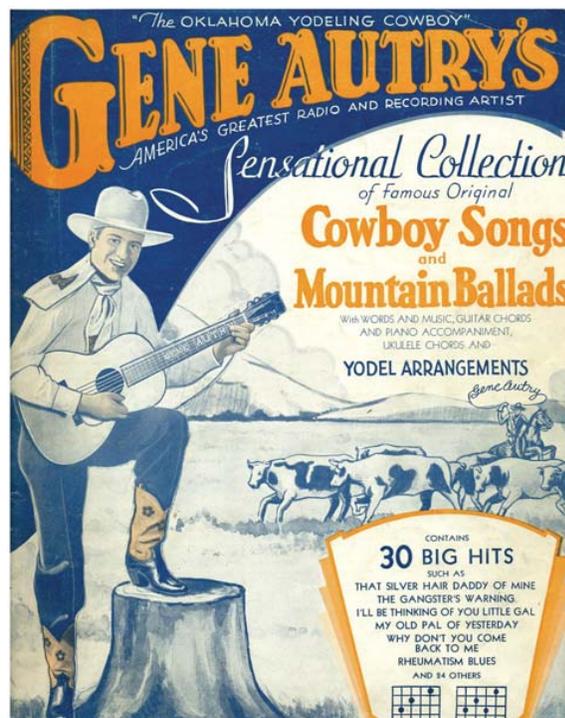


Figure 1. The Front cover of Gene Autry’s *Sensational Collection of Famous Original Cowboy Songs and Mountain Ballads*.

Williams’s depiction of the physical attractiveness of the singing cowboy gestured to the exoticism of the Spanish or Latino cowboy with Autry’s “blond hair” appearing under his “gray sombrero.” The publicity for his songbook further promoted Autry’s desirability in relation to his emotive idioms and the romance of cowboy culture, “If it’s adventure you want—Gene Autry brings you a rollicking song of the round-up. But if you want a dreamy, soothing tune just turn to one of Gene’s lilting ballads—and dream on.”<sup>70</sup> In essence, Autry’s early publicity attempted to mediate his tender emotionalism with a standard model of masculinity (fig. 2).

Though Autry appeared to alternate easily between “rollicking songs” of the round-up and “lilting ballads” of the heart, his early recordings of cowboy songs tended to emphasize the latter by continuing the maudlin expressions that characterized “That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine.” In his first recording session devoted primarily to cowboy songs, in 1933, Autry recorded “Cowboy’s Heaven” (written and previously recorded by Frankie Marvin), “The Little Ranch House on Old

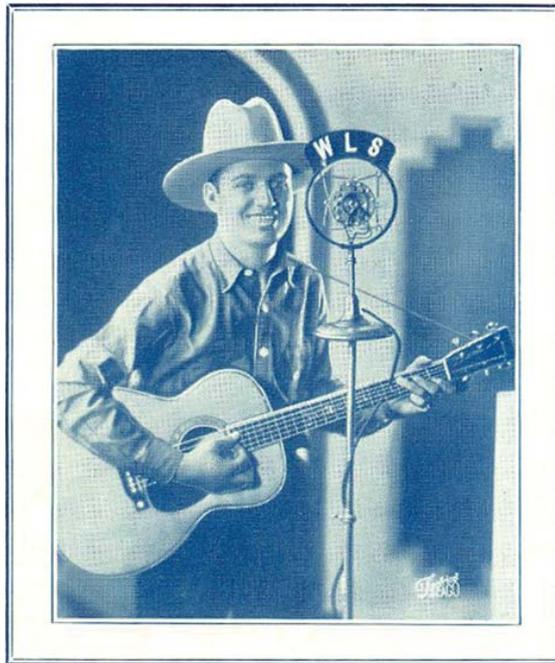


Figure 2. Photograph of Gene Autry in *Gene Autry’s Sensational Collection of Famous Original Cowboy Songs*.

Circle B" (written by Volney Blanchard), and "The Yellow Rose of Texas," a nineteenth-century minstrel song that had transformed into a cowboy number. Changing the lyrics from "no other darky [*sic*] knows her, no darky only me" to "no cowboy knows her, no cowboy only me," Autry pines for his home in Texas where his beloved awaits. As Stanfield demonstrates, cowboy tunes were often reworked minstrel laments of loss, love, and death that pointed to an idyllic South.<sup>71</sup> For example, the well-known cowboy ballad "When the Work's All Done This Fall" is about a cowpuncher who longs for his family home in "Dixie," before he dies tragically in a cattle stampede.

Autry's recordings of newly composed cowboy ballads also continued the performance traditions of elegiac themes of death and salvation, thereby placing the cowboy figure in sentimental settings instead of the rugged West. "Cowboy's Heaven," for example, presents a tired weary cowboy whose only refuge from his tedious life on the open range is through reaching the "promised land." During his long and laborious days of chasing after stray cattle, the cowboy anticipates that he will someday "ride on that other shore" to join "the souls of cowpunchers" in an afterlife that pledges relief for the discontented, a common nineteenth-century notion.<sup>72</sup>

Influenced by the musical traditions of piety and folk culture, "Cowboy's Heaven" incorporates a common melody and general narrative shared by the cowboy ballads, "The Cowboy's Sweet By and By," "The Cowboy's Dream," and "The Grand Roundup," found in John Lomax's 1910 seminal collection, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (ex. 2). Lomax's anthology represented a repository of American cowboy balladry supposedly tied to the music making of the frontier, thereby promoting the figure of the Anglo-Saxon singing cowboy. Yet instead of collecting music directly from the cowboys of the western range, Lomax selected many of the cowboy ballads from print media, in which cowboy songs had been in circulation.<sup>73</sup> Variations of "The Cowboy's Dream," for instance, had appeared in magazines and fictional short stories before Lomax included it in his anthology.<sup>74</sup> Regardless of its ties to commercial culture, Lomax explained that "Cowboy's Dream" was integral to the music of Texas camp meetings in convincing cowboys to embrace Christian theology.<sup>75</sup> Drawing from New Testament imagery, the ballad warns itinerant cowhands that their faith and morality will be judged on that fateful day. Without the appropriate marking from the "Riders of Judgment," the cowboy will travel the "blazed" road "to perdition" rather than the saintly, "narrow trail . . . to the bright mystic region."

Last night as I lay on the prai - rie, and looked at the stars in the sky, I  
 5  
 won - dered if ev - ver a cow - boy could drift to that sweet by - and - by.  
 9  
 Roll on, roll on, Roll on, lit - tle do - gies, roll on, roll on,  
 13  
 Roll on, roll on, Roll on, lit - tle do - gies, roll on.

Example 2. "The Cowboy's Dream," in John Avery Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1966). Transposed from C major to F major and from 3/4 meter to 6/8 meter for the ease of comparison.

In contrast to the cowboy ballads, "Cowboy's Heaven" isn't about moral uncertainty. Instead, it underscores the cowboy's fragile position in his material life as well as his assumed place in the divine hereafter. The western protagonist is not a valiant hero, taming and settling the West, but rather a character who verges on the tragic because of his long and exhausted days of toiling on the land. In realizing such a tale, the songwriter, Frankie Marvin, modifies the musical setting of the original ballad by blending folk music with a Tin Pan Alley song form. Though "Cowboy's Heaven" continues to be in strophic form, where each stanza is set to the same music, the phrase structure of each section is in an AABA form (ex. 3).<sup>76</sup> The A phrases borrow from the music of the cowboy ballads, whereas the bridge consists of a newly composed phrase that emphasizes the vulnerable position of the cowboy.<sup>77</sup> The bridge's conventional heightened language of dominant harmonies and a rising melodic line focuses the listener's attention on the mounting dejection of the cowboy and his horse companion, "Old Paint." As in "That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine," "Cowboy's Heaven" signals the tenuous relationship between masculinity and agrarian life. For most men of the 1930s, rural labor—southern tenancy or midwestern farming—did not produce economic security or masculine authority. This ballad's portrayal of the cowboy, nevertheless, implies that the West could still be a place in which the male figure emerges as a model of virtue. In the concluding A phrase, the pious cowboy understands that his arduous course on earth will ensure his heavenly existence. Thus, if economic standing could no longer define a sense of manliness

A

To - night I'm a tired wea - ry cow - boy, I've been in the sad - dle all day,

5

Search - ing the hills and the val - leys for cat - tle that strayed a - way. 'Old

9

B

'Paint' is tired and leg wea - ry, His feet are bro - ken and sore, But

13

A

some day our work will be o - ver and we'll ride on that o - ther shore.

*Example 3.* “The Cowboy’s Heaven,” words and music by Frankie Marvin and Gene Autry. Recorded by Gene Autry with guitar accompaniment, 1933. Copyright © 1933 (Renewed). The Gene Autry Music Company and Universal Music Corp. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

in the 1930s, then Victorian principles recast in the myths of the West perhaps could.

In his 1933 songbook *Rhymes of the Range*, Autry included “Cowboy’s Heaven” with other standard cowboy songs, such as “The Cowboy’s Meditation” and “When the Work’s All Done This Fall,” popularized by Lomax’s *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*. Connecting “Cowboy’s Heaven” to the music that represented the folk culture of the cowboy, the publicity of *Rhymes of the Range* reshaped Autry’s song of masculine vulnerability into an unadulterated musical relic of the past:

In reviving the popularity of the long forgotten music of the cow country and the frontier, the author of this little book has made a distinct contribution to American music. The songs he writes and sings, are as fresh and clean as the open prairies from which they spring.<sup>78</sup>

Autry, appearing as an “authentic” cowboy, preserved a performance tradition tied to the “fresh and clean” open prairies.<sup>79</sup> In doing so, the singing cowboy continued a well-established practice of circulating the songs of Lomax’s collection in popular culture. For example, the first commercially recorded cowboy songs, Bentley Ball’s 1919 renditions of “Jesse James” and “The Dying Cowboy,” were drawn directly from *Cowboys Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*. Radio’s “The Original Cowboy

Singer," Carl T. Sprague (who sold close to nine hundred thousand copies of his 1925 recording of "When the Work's All Done This Fall") also turned to Lomax's anthology to record and perform "legitimate" songs of the West.

The irony of many cowboy ballads lies in the way they tell maudlin tales that are at odds with the romantic accounts held dear by the popular imagination. In standard ballads, such as "The Dying Cowboy" and "When the Work's All Done This Fall," the cowboy meets death while driving cattle across the lone prairies or welcomes his arrival to the "promised land," as in Autry's ballad "Cowboy's Heaven." In contrast to these narratives, Tin Pan Alley songwriters molded the West into a bucolic enclave or a pastoral backdrop to courtship and love. An early example, "Cheyenne" (written by Egbert Van Alstyne and Harry Williams in 1905) is about a cowboy from Cheyenne, Wyoming, who convinces the young maiden "Shy Anne" to be his wife.<sup>80</sup> But more significant were the songwriters of the Golden Age of Tin Pan Alley (1920–40) who wrote some of the most memorable tunes of life on the open range: "When It's Springtime in the Rockies" (by Mary Hale Woolsey, Robert Sauer, and Milt Taggart, 1923) or "The Last Round-Up" (by Billy Hill, 1933). Tin Pan Alley's idyllic settings for cowboy songs presented a heightened lyricism rendered by popular and country performers (namely Bing Crosby, Gene Autry, the Girls of the Golden West, and the Sons of the Pioneers). The genre thus brought cowboy songs closer to the aesthetics of popular music, consumed largely by an audience of white middle and upper classes.<sup>81</sup> As musicologist Charles Hamm has demonstrated, 1920s and 1930s popular songs—notably Irving Berlin's "How Deep Is the Ocean?" (1932) or Gene Austin's performance of "My Blue Heaven" (1927)—were "slower in tempo with more lyrical melodic lines," in contrast to the rhythmic improvisation of earlier New Orleans jazz numbers.<sup>82</sup> Expressive melodies rendered by popular crooners, Gene Austin or Bing Crosby, or by "sweet" dance bands, such as Guy Lombardo and his Royal Canadians, swept away the concerns and distress of Depression-era listeners.<sup>83</sup>

As Autry emerged as a singing cowboy over the airwaves of WLS, he incorporated the aesthetics of popular music in his western songs. Before he launched his film career, Autry recorded in 1934 his first Tin Pan Alley cowboy song, "Dear Old Western Skies," written by Smiley Burnette (who adopted the idioms of popular music in a number of his cowboy and country songs and would later become Autry's famous sidekick in film). The verse begins in a similar manner to a cowboy ballad, with a basic harmonic progression and repetitive and stepwise melodic movement set in triple meter. Initially, Autry sounds as if he is singing

another one of his folk-like ballads, demonstrating his authenticity as a cowhand. What follows, though, is an elaborate chorus, in which Autry voices his longing for the mythic West. The chorus's graceful melodic lines shaped by an assortment of differing rhythmic motives and colored by varied harmonic language mold the West into a glamorous space where the cowboy freely roams. Specifically, the chorus begins with an ascending melody that gradually rises to the phrase's apex—an added sixth of the subdominant, typical of Tin Pan Alley songwriting. Giving the impression of reaching for and holding on to those western skies, Autry lingers over the appoggiatura on the word “skies” until his vocal line gracefully tumbles down an octave. The melodic fluidity suggests the unfettered movement of the cowboy on the open range. Rather than depicting the plights of the overworked cowboy (as in “Cowboy’s Heaven” or a number of cowboy ballads), the western figure appears free to search for those “dear old western skies.” The opening harmonic progression of the chorus, I–III–IV–iv, further underlines the mobility of the cowboy. The mediant implies momentarily a harmonic direction away from the tonic to the submediant before it moves to the subdominant. Relying upon the musical practices of Tin Pan Alley, Autry leaves behind his identity as a laboring or morose cowhand, demonstrated in his earlier songs, to promote the western hero’s ability to transcend the class and material limitations of the era (ex. 4).

In addition to his recording, Autry performed “Dear Old Western Skies” on radio and film at a time when the electrical technology of the microphone encouraged singers to croon their melodic lines. In its ability to pick up the soft whispers and murmurs of the artist, the microphone enabled singers to provide intimate forms of vocal expression. This was in contrast to previous manners of delivery in which popular music vocalists “belted” their sung lines over accompanying ensembles. Thus, it was in the late 1920s and early 1930s that crooning became a “major cultural phenomenon” with a nationwide following for singing stars such as Rudy Vallee, Gene Austin, and Bing Crosby. But the particular singing style also gave rise to public debates about the cultural and aesthetic merits of crooning.<sup>84</sup>

Initially, crooning was associated with the singing of women, minstrel, and black performers on the vaudevillian stage. Historian Allison McCracken explains in her study of Rudy Vallee and Bing Crosby that “as long as the term ‘crooner’ was applied to women and male minstrel singers it was not controversial. But when band singers in the mid-to-late 1920s began to be called crooners, it was meant to suggest the emasculation and artlessness of the singer.”<sup>85</sup> At a time when society questioned the cultural authority of masculinity and “homosexuality

Verse

9

Chorus

17

25

33

41

Example 4. "Dear Old Western Skies," words and music by Smiley Burnette and Gene Autry. Recorded by Gene Autry with mandolin, guitar, violin, and string bass, instrumentalists unknown, 1935.

hovered like a specter,” white men’s quiet and sincere deliveries appeared to flout all gender and racial norms, causing conservative cultural critics to denounce the popular singers of the day as emasculated dandies.<sup>86</sup>

In his research on the aesthetic debates of crooning, Jonathan Greenberg delineates the constitutive elements that defined the style: soft singing in the falsetto range, nasality, slurring to and from pitches, and the “sonic impression of effortlessness.”<sup>87</sup> In “Dear Old Western Skies,” Autry employs many of these vocal practices. From the beginning of the song, Autry signals that he is a crooner by sliding up a fourth from the opening pitch. He further emphasizes this vocal technique with elongated vocal slides to and from sustained pitches, underlining the words “roam” and “lowing” in the chorus. In addition to his use of *portamento*, Autry often nasally sings the higher notes of the melody. By pushing air through the nasal chamber, he provides a thin, quiet sound—a vocal sonority that many cultural critics and vocal pedagogues referred to as effeminate whining.<sup>88</sup> But unlike popular crooners such as Rudy Vallee, known for high, light singing, Autry does not extend the use of nasality to the lower range of his chest voice. Rather, Autry’s lower register provides a sonorous quality of security and warmth, differing from his airy-sounding upper range.

It appears that Autry developed the lower part of his baritone register to render artfully the melodic breadth of his Tin Pan Alley songs. In many of his early blues recordings, such as “Blue Yodel No. 4,” and sentimental numbers, such as “No One to Call Me Darling,” Autry often constricted the tone nasally and sang in a limited range of a fifth that was located within the upper part of his baritone register. But in his lyrical songs of the West, Autry produced round, reverberating tones that enriched the embellished melodic language. In general, his vocal range was more similar to that of the popular crooner Bing Crosby. Both Crosby and Autry recorded Billy Hill’s “The Last Roundup” in the same key, for instance. As the vocal practice of crooning was under contestation, Crosby’s baritone voice presented a sonically conventional version of masculinity, which contrasted the “effeminate” sounds of Vallee’s high tenor range.<sup>89</sup>

Autry was also successful in maintaining his masculinity with a vocal register that sounded like a “proper” man. Yet rather than asserting a strong voice of power, Autry, in “Dear Old Western Skies,” demonstrates a quiet confidence as his high, nasal sound dissolves into the warm rounded tones of his lower range. His cultivated manner of singing gives the impression of effortlessness, enhanced by his relaxed treatment of the beat. He falls behind and pulls ahead of the guitar’s steady pulse

with an unhurried ease. Autry's vocal style, developed in radio and on record, contributed to his fame as a poised singing cowboy, capable of handling society's wrongdoers but sensitive enough to express his inner thoughts and feelings through song. In essence, he placed his vocality closer to the codes of popular music. Though the 1930s were an era when the aesthetic merits of crooning were debated and its representations of masculinity were disputed, Autry's performance practices and choice of repertory instilled a sense of respectability and glamour in country music. In essence, the cowboy positioned his musical narratives of an agrarian utopia in the mainstream of the popular imagination.

On WLS, Autry was not alone in singing intimately to a radio audience. Not only did the *National Barn Dance* evoke the raucous music making of the Saturday evening barn dance, it had become an extension of the domestic sphere through heartfelt forms of vocal music (Three Neighbor Boys' "sweet" harmonies and Grace Wilson's popular melodies of yesteryear, for example). As previously mentioned, WLS cultivated an extensive array of music, including popular songs and old-time ballads performed by small vocal ensembles or soloists. As Paul Tyler explains, it was this blending of the "intimacy of radio and the familiarity of old-time music" that made it possible to incorporate urban popular-song artists with rural musicians.<sup>90</sup> Within a setting of rural conviviality, WLS was able to broadcast popular music, including Autry's stylized crooning, alongside sentimental ballads into the parlors and living rooms of its radio listeners.

Autry's prominence on a host of WLS programs, which included the coast-to-coast broadcasts of the *National Barn Dance*, convinced Republic Studios in Hollywood to produce films that featured the radio star. In his western films, Autry simply enacted his well-known persona, a singing cowboy who risked appearing effeminate.<sup>91</sup> In his first feature-length film, *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* (1935), for example, Autry plays the role of a singing cowboy who performs with a traveling medicine show to rural and small towns in the Southwest. During a performance of his hit song, "That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine," a cowboy yells to Autry, "We ain't got no use for lavender cowboys in this town."<sup>92</sup> Though Autry's music making is viewed as a sign of effeminacy, the singing cowboy manages to maintain his masculinity by unraveling the mysteries of the elite's corruption and greed, plaguing the rural community. Apart from the typical fight and chase scenes, the singing cowboy's ethical standing is apparent in the ways he strives to protect the underclass from the law-breaking schemes of the landowning lords. Similar to the themes of his early repertory of cowboy songs, Autry proves that virtue

and morality—in effect, his Victorian principles—make him a valiant cowboy.<sup>93</sup>

Though Autry was far from the only figure portraying the myths of the West, few singing cowboys could compete with Autry's mass-mediated popularity in the 1930s. Even his more illustrious contemporary, Tex Ritter, who sang on various regional radio programs in New York City, appeared on Broadway in Lynn Riggs's play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, signed a recording contract with ARC in 1933, and then starred in myriad westerns, could not compare with Autry's success.<sup>94</sup> As a "real cowboy," who had been "collecting western and mountain songs" since he was a "youngster," Ritter's pseudo-authentic portrayals of frontier culture did not easily extend to the aesthetics of popular music that appealed to a heterogeneous audience.<sup>95</sup> In "traditional" ballads, such as "A-Ridin' Ole Paint" and "Get Along Little Doggies," Ritter belts out the melody in his bass range as if he has no need for a microphone.<sup>96</sup> In the Tin Pan Alley number "Take Me Back to My Boots and Saddle," Ritter's gravelly voice fails to provide the artless phrasing that the song requires to transport the listener to the mythic West.<sup>97</sup> His manner of singing may have prevented him from securing a position on a radio station with a broad regional and national following. Autry, on the other hand, had built a national fan base of radio listeners, who flocked to the theaters to watch their favorite crooning cowboy on film.<sup>98</sup>

Despite the fact that Autry was the leading singing cowboy of the 1930s, the Sons of the Pioneers were integral in glamorizing the West in their radio broadcasts on Hollywood's KFWB, on recordings for Decca Records, and in western films. The members of the ensemble, Bob Nolan, Tim Spencer, and Leonard Slye (who would later adopt the stage name Roy Rogers), blended their individual voices in mellifluous harmonies, shaping the West to be a place of homosocial camaraderie. But besides their musical performances, the prolific songwriters Nolan and Spencer provided western singers with a repertory influenced by the practices of Tin Pan Alley. Nolan's "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" (1932), for instance, gives the sonic impression of the cowboy languidly "drifting along with the tumbling tumbleweeds." In a slow tempo, the chorus begins with a descending sequential chromatic melody and a harmonic progression, IV–III–IV–I. Similar to the harmonic language of "Dear Old Western Skies," the borrowed major mediant implies a possible move away from the home key to the submediant.<sup>99</sup> The harmonic writing combined with a melodic sequence that descends chromatically for eight measures before settling on the first scale degree depicts musically the cowboy's roaming ways. Gene Autry popularized Nolan's song in *Tumbling Tumbleweed* (1935), a film that questioned the masculinity

of a western hero who croons dreamily of wandering the western frontier.

### The Singing Cowgirl Patsy Montana

Within the musical context of the singing cowboy, the singing cowgirl Patsy Montana also established her artistic voice by expanding the possibilities of gender identities. In general, Montana's fame resounded in her ability to negotiate heterosexual norms with the cowgirl's desires for independence in the mythic West. Beginning her radio career in California in the late 1920s, Montana honed her singing cowgirl persona as a member of the Montana Cowgirls with two other women performers, Lorraine McIntire and Ruth DeMondrum. Stuart Hamblen, a songwriter and performer who hosted his own radio show of country music, managed the ensemble and encouraged the trio to adopt the familial imagery popular in country music.<sup>100</sup> Under Hamblen's tutelage, the Montana Cowgirls performed on his Inglewood radio program in addition to several radio stations throughout California and Oregon (KMTR, KHJ, and KGW), starred in the movie short *Lightning Express* in 1932, and accompanied the roping and riding personality Montie Montana in live shows, where the cowgirl trio displayed their skills at horseback riding.<sup>101</sup>

Their success as an ensemble ended when McIntire and DeMondrum chose marriage over their performance careers. Montana, however, continued to pursue her calling as a radio and recording star. After returning home to Arkansas during the summer of 1933, Montana followed her mother's advice to meet the Girls of the Golden West, a featured sister duet on WLS with whom Montana's mother had been in correspondence.<sup>102</sup> From the cowgirl duet, Montana found out that WLS was looking for a lead singer for the popular string band ensemble, the Prairie Ramblers. With her singing, yodeling, and burgeoning songwriting skills, Montana secured the position, "sweeping in like a prairie breeze from the West," as stated in the 1936 *WLS Family Album*.<sup>103</sup>

In publicity photos, Montana either appeared with the Prairie Ramblers or as a solo performer in the guise of a singing cowgirl who purposely sought the cultural freedoms of the West. In a 1935 publicity shot, for example, Montana stands by a campfire, one foot hoisted up on a tree stump, her guitar resting against her leg (a similar pose to that of Autry on the front cover of his songbook). Montana's stance implies not merely that she takes pleasure in the freedoms of the open range but that her experience and inclination equip her to roam the plains on equal footing to the cowboy (see fig. 3). As Montana stated in an



Figure 3. A 1930s publicity photograph of Patsy Montana.

interview, “I didn’t want to look too sissy. To me a cowgirl wasn’t supposed to look sissy. I’d roll my sleeves up . . . and I wore a gun.”<sup>104</sup>

Her embodiment of independence, framed in the romance of the West, extended to her musical repertory. Montana and the Prairie Ramblers performed on radio and recorded her famous 1935 song “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart.”<sup>105</sup> The title of the song appears to signal that the cowgirl’s access to the symbolic advantages of the West might depend, in fact, on heterosexual romance. The song’s lyrics and Montana’s musical performance, however, point in a different direction: toward the realization of a cowgirl’s life in a realm not limited by the constraints of societal normativity. Though Montana opens and ends the first verse with the nominal phrase, the cowgirl does not develop a narrative of romantic love. Rather, she elaborates upon her longing for the metaphoric freedoms of frontier culture: rope and ride, yodel, and strum a guitar before retiring next to a sleeping herd of cattle. Thus, Montana’s cowboy serves less as an idealized sexual partner than as a conduit to all the promises of “the West.”

Montana’s musical narrative of the capable cowgirl fits with the musical sensibilities of her midwestern audience. “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart” is a jazz-inflected polka replete with yodels, gesturing to the musical cultures of northern and central Europe.<sup>106</sup> Well aware of her audience of European immigrants, Montana explained, “We always had a good following right in the city of Chicago, because of a lot of Polish people there and Irish and, you know, just all kinds of nationalities.”<sup>107</sup> Montana and the Prairie Ramblers rendered the polka with the dance rhythms popular in the 1930s, a necessary component to sell records. Montana, who had secured a recording contract with ARC, recalled Art Satherley’s guidance in the recording session of “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart”: “My songs had to have a definite beat or they didn’t sell. Remember, that was the western-swing era. But there would be two mikes in the studio. I would be on one side with a bass fiddle, and Art would be on the other side of my mike. . . . If he couldn’t feel that beat, the number was out.”<sup>108</sup> In Montana’s song, the violin plays syncopated melodic lines to the prominent bass part that provides the typical oompah pattern of the polka. The string bass’s steady tonic and dominant movement on the downbeats is reinforced by the guitar’s bass notes alternating with full chords on the upbeats, providing a strong pulse that must have pleased Satherley.

In this lively polka, Montana begins her song with one of the most virtuosic yodels in 1930s country music. Invoking the Alpine tradition of yodeling, Montana yodels a major-mode melody that demonstrates her extensive upper register (ex. 5). Yodeling is a vocalization that uses the larynx muscles and glottal stops to accentuate the abrupt change of vocal register between the chest and head voice.<sup>109</sup> Even though women have three distinct registers—chest, an extensive midrange, and head—the vocal break occurs between the chest and head voice. As the vocal pedagogue Richard Miller explains, a woman singer “is capable of making a shift in registers from chest to head, in the lower range of her voice, but she cannot produce the marked transition sound from middle

ee - yo - de - lay - ee - ee - ay - de - lee - de - lay hee-hee - oh - de - lee - de - lay-hee-hee - ay -

o - lee - de - lay-hee-hee - oh - lee - de - lay-hee-hee - aye - a - lee - de - lay - ee -

Example 5. Patsy Montana’s opening yodel in “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart.”



Example 6. Gene Autry's opening yodel in "Cowboy's Heaven."

voice into head voice."<sup>110</sup> Even if a woman yodels from the midrange (where she can sing notes in either her chest or head range), she is still featuring a break between the chest and head voice, not between the head register and the higher "whistle" range (where a laryngeal whistle is all that most women can produce), as some musicologists have claimed.<sup>111</sup> Unlike many male vocalists who sing mainly in the chest register, women often yodel to vibrant-sounding head registers, cultivated through singing.

This was certainly the case on WLS, where women performers were known for their Alpine yodels. Christine, "The Little Swiss Yodeler," rendered yodel songs that could "go almost as high as the Swiss Alps where her ancestors used to live."<sup>112</sup> Likewise, the DeZurik Sisters, invoking the nineteenth-century yodeling family, appeared in traditional German dress and were known for their acrobatic yodeling in harmony in which their voices often demonstrated the extreme ranges of their head registers.<sup>113</sup> In contrast to such virtuosic yodeling, few male yodelers, especially in 1930s country music, could or tried to yodel in such a manner. Extending the yodeling practices of vaudeville to country music, Jimmie Rodgers was known for popularizing the yodel in his recordings of the blues, sentimental music, and cowboy songs.<sup>114</sup> But unlike the extended range of Montana's yodels and those of her female peers on WLS, Rodgers's yodels usually unfold in a limited range of sequential sixths, in which he ascends to and descends from the sustained notes of his thin-sounding falsetto range.<sup>115</sup> With the sonic impression of loneliness in his sentimental tunes or bravado in some of his blues songs, Rodgers's vocalizations influenced his contemporaries and successors in country music, including the singing cowboy Autry. In "Cowboy's Heaven," for example, Autry's opening yodel demonstrates a narrow range of descending sixths, in which his sonorous chest voice differs in timbre from his airy-sounding upper register (ex. 6).

But there were some male yodelers of Montana's generation, namely Elton Britt, who could demonstrate the brilliance of Alpine yodeling. Britt, who started his career in California as a member of the Beverly Hillbillies at the same time that Montana started performing as one of the Montana Cowgirls, developed a reputation as the "World's

Highest Yodeler."<sup>116</sup> In the conclusion of his signature piece "Chime Bells" (1934), Britt yodels in double time before he leaps an octave to a resounding high F<sub>5</sub> that he sustains for an entire minute.<sup>117</sup> Though Montana doesn't yodel in double time or hold the concluding note of her yodel for such lengths, she repeatedly reaches the high G<sub>5</sub>. In fact, she ends her yodel with a show-stopping octave leap to G<sub>5</sub>, a step higher than Britt's concluding F<sub>5</sub> in a dramatic move to challenge Britt's legacy and promote her own performance abilities in a song concerning a woman's yearning for the societal freedoms usually reserved for the cowboy.

But the popular imagination may have understood the high-reaching yodels of Britt, Montana, and others as expressions that signaled a "feminized" vocality, albeit a virtuosic one. In the late 1940s, Britt teamed up with Rosalie Allen (who launched her recording career by covering "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart," replete with yodels). They performed a number of yodel tunes, such as "Tennessee Yodel Polka" and "Beyond the Sunset" in which they exchanged elaborate yodeling passages.<sup>118</sup> In "Tennessee Yodel Polka," Allen begins the song about a "handsome boy" who lives in a "little town in Tennessee among the mountain tide." She sings he "loved to do the polka" and "what they called the girlie sigh with his." Yet before Allen can complete the phrase, Britt interjects an extravagant yodel, showcasing frequent vocal breaks to the upper register, which are meant to represent the sighs of a young woman. Indeed, his yodeling seemed to be often linked to the feminine. His 1941 recording of "She Taught Me to Yodel" explains that he learned to yodel from a "yodelin' gal in a Swiss chalet" located on the hilltops of Switzerland.<sup>119</sup>

Though Montana's yodeling in "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart" may have challenged Britt's reputation as the "World's Highest Yodeler," her vocalizations suggested an acceptable performance mode for a woman singer. Just as Autry mitigated the perceived effeminacy of the crooner with a manly sounding baritone register, Montana negotiated her portrayals of gender through her vocal delivery. Not only did her yodeling emphasize the upper register, a conventional range for women, she also invoked a nostalgic setting. She performed in a musical context with other women performers—such as Christine, "The Little Swiss Yodeler," or the DeZurik Sisters—whose yodels to the heights of their upper range represented the music making of the Alpine region. Thus, Montana translated the vocalizations that represented the vastness of the Alps into a sonority that evoked the openness of the American western range, where a "singing cowgirl" like Montana could be free to roam. By merging the cowgirl's agency engendered by her

vocal virtuosity with the pastoral, the singing cowgirl could provide an idealized portrayal of femininity.

In addition to establishing her talents as a vocalist in “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart,” Montana demonstrated her abilities as a songwriter. Incorporating an intertextual web of song sources, Montana carefully blended “traditional” music with popular idioms to emphasize further the western heroine’s longing for the commonly perceived promises of frontier culture. Montana begins her tune in a manner resembling Stuart Hamblen’s 1932 “Texas Plains,” a song that portrays a cowboy’s desires for a life not dictated by societal constraints, while he listens to the “the song of a whippoorwill” and “a coyote cry” (ex. 7). “Texas Plains” is also a polka with a repeated harmonic progression (I–V7/V–V7–I) that shapes the song into an ABAB form, a common pattern of the Tin Pan Alley chorus. But the repetitive structure of “Texas Plains” combined with the straightforward harmonic progression of three chords and the narrow melodic range signals the idioms of “hillbilly” or folk music of this period (ex. 8).

Drawing upon the sonic qualities of a “traditional” cowboy song, Montana includes the A and B phrases of Hamblen’s tune for the opening two phrases of her piece. In the following phrase, Montana departs from Hamblen’s ABAB pattern, repetitive harmonic progression, and limited melodic movement. Instead, she writes an expansive

A  $G$   $A^7$   
I want to be a cow-boy's sweet - heart, I want to learn to rope and to ride.

9  $D^7$   $G$   
I want to ride o - ver the plains and the de - sert out west of the Great Di - vide.

17  $G$   $C$   
I want to hear the coy - otes howl - ing while the sun sinks in the West.

25  $G$   $E^7$   $A^7$   $D^7$   $G$   
I want to be a cow-boy's sweet - heart that's the life that I love best.

*Example 7.* “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart,” words and music by Patsy Montana. Recorded by Montana with the Prairie Ramblers: Tex Atchinson, violin, Chuck Hurt, mandolin, Salty Holmes, guitar, and Jack Taylor string bass, 1935. Copyright © 1935 Songs of Universal, Inc. Copyright renewed. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

*Example 8.* “Texas Plains,” words and music by Stuart Hamblen. Recorded by Gene Autry with the Prairie Ramblers, 1935. Copyright © 1935 Songs of Universal, Inc. Copyright renewed. All rights reserved. Used by permission. Transposed from C major to G major for the ease of comparison.

melodic line that molds each section into an ABAC pattern, in which the last two phrases demonstrate a more adventurous harmonic progression. The song ends with a circle-of-fifths movement, common in many Tin Pan Alley tunes.

Including the rhetoric of popular music, Montana may have turned to another source to shape her musical narrative: the 1933 song “You Gotta Be a Football Hero (To Get along with the Beautiful Girls),” written by Tin Pan Alley songwriters Al Sherman, Buddy Fields, and Al Lewis. Introduced on radio by Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians, “You’ve Gotta Be a Football Hero” became one of the most often heard football anthems at college games. The song was also used in a 1933 Popeye cartoon, in which Popeye scores touchdown after touchdown to win back the heart of his beloved Olive Oyl from his contender Brutus. During halftime, Olive Oyl sings the last two phrases of the chorus, dressed as a cheerleader.

The cowgirl tune adopts the music to the title phrase of the chorus “You gotta be a football hero” for its melody that accompanies the lyrics “I want to be a cowboy’s sweetheart” (ex. 9). But the moments of greatest similarity between the two songs are the concluding phrases, where Montana departs from the harmonic design of Hamblen’s song and follows both the melodic and harmonic pattern of the very phrases that Olive Oyl sings in the Popeye cartoon. In particular, both songs move from the tonic to the subdominant in their respective A’ phrases before launching into the conventional circle-of-fifths progression that ends each piece. The return of the opening melody, supported by a slower harmonic rhythm, frames the dramatic conclusion created by the eventual resolution of the secondary dominants. As in the football anthem, Montana constructs a similar musical affect of exhilaration in her final

Chorus

A G F#7 Am E7  
 YOU GOT-TA BE A FOOT-BALL HE - RO To get a - long With the beau-ti - ful girls.

9 Am Am7 D7 G F#7 Bm D7  
 — You got-ta be a touch-down get-ter you bet. If you wan-na get a ba-by to pet.

17 G D7 G7 C E7  
 — The fact that you are rich or hand - some Won't get you a - ny - thing in curls.

25 Am C F#7 G D7 E7 A7 D7 G  
 — YOU GOT-TA BE A FOOT-BALL HE - RO To get a - long with the beau-ti - ful girls.

*Example 9.* From the chorus of “You Gotta Be a Football Hero,” words and music by Al Sherman, Buddy Fields, and Al Lewis. Published by Leo Frist, 1933. Transposed from C to G for the ease of comparison.

statement. The cowgirl’s desires seem to direct her audiences to rally behind the protagonist’s wishes for the mythical West, where female autonomy and gestures toward idealized love can easily coexist.

Montana’s signature song presented a model of femininity with options—independence or even a mediation of autonomy through romantic love. Just as Autry’s western music responded to the concerns of masculinity, the image of the cowgirl engaged with the 1930s debates of gender. She could roam the open range without completely abandoning feminine norms. That is, Montana’s song suggested that women could indeed strive for roles that had been gendered masculine—such as the breadwinner—without relinquishing all societal norms. Her radio audience appeared to embrace Montana’s cowgirl song. Montana and the Prairie Ramblers introduced “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart” to regional audiences of WLS and of New York’s WOR (where they performed for part of 1935 in a show sponsored by Kolor Back). While in New York, they recorded the song for ARC in 1935, and then returned to WLS to broadcast it nationally from the stage of the *National Barn Dance*. In 1936, Montana and the Prairie Ramblers emerged as one of the most popular acts on WLS, declared by a competition in which listeners voted for their favorite performers.<sup>120</sup> Montana even performed the song in Autry’s 1939 western *The Colorado Sunset*, where she played a waitress searching for the symbolic freedoms of the West.<sup>121</sup>

### Cowboy Balladry and "The She Buckaroo"

From the success of "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart," Montana continued to write and record material that portrayed the western heroine. Unlike Autry, her initial fame wasn't from performing maudlin songs that bemoaned the loss of family, home, and a rural past, even though she did record some sentimental numbers such as "I Love My Daddy Too" (1932), a song that reminisces about the love of one's father, and "The Wheel of the Wagon Is Broken" (1936), a mournful account of bidding farewell to ranch life. But the musical and cultural significance of Montana's career lay in the ways she imparted the myths of the West with a distinctly women's perspective. In addition to her pop-infused cowgirl songs, she also wrote and performed strophic ballads that invoked "authentic" portrayals of the music making of the open range. Several of Montana's folk-like ballads, "The She Buckaroo" (1936), "A Rip Rip Snortin' Two-Gun Gal" (1939), "Texas Tomboy" (1941), and "Wench from Wyoming" (1941), placed the self-directed cowgirl in the "Wild West," where she adopted the prowess of her predecessors, the sharpshooter Annie Oakley, or the outlaw Calamity Jane.

Montana's "The She Buckaroo" appears to be an autobiographical narrative about the cowgirl's pursuit of a western life, in which she prefers taming wild horses and defeating cowboys at roping contests to the trappings of domesticity. Montana begins the song in her chest register with the declamatory line: "Some gals they like babies and houses and things." By using her chest voice in a neutral manner to state the assumed desires of women, Montana creates a distance between the usual constructions of femininity and her own self-fashioning. Yet when she voices her wish to participate in cowboy culture, she leaves behind her declamatory vocal line to sing a more lyrical melody in her head voice: "But give me the feel of a horse that has wings. I'd ride him straight up like all cowboys do." As the ascending melody reaches its climax on the word "up," the music provides the image of Montana on a rearing horse, a musical enactment usually reserved to suggest a cowboy's virility. In fact, Montana works to undermine the cowboy's prowess at the local rodeos, where she wins the roping and riding competitions, leaving the "he-men to feel blue." Certain of her talents, Montana pines to ride and tame the unruly stallion Strawberry Roan. She'll "make him hop out like an ol' kangaroo, I'm a tough ridin' lassie, a she buckaroo" (ex. 10).

What makes the song about a "she buckaroo" convincing as a cowboy ballad is that Montana's musical and narrative source is a familiar cowboy song: "The Strawberry Roan," written in 1915 by Curly

Some gals they like ba-bies and hous-es and things, but give me the feel of a horse that has wings. I'd  
 ride him straight up like all cow-boys do, I'm a straight-rid-ing las-sie, a she buck-a-roo.

*Example 10.* “The She Buckaroo,” words and music by Patsy Montana. Recorded by Patsy Montana and the Prairie Ramblers, 1936. Copyright © 1936 Songs of Universal, Inc. Copyright renewed. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Fletcher (1892–1954).<sup>122</sup> It tells a humorous tale of an experienced bronco’s failed attempts to tame a wild stallion. This overly confident cowboy has never met a horse he couldn’t tame until he attempts to break the Strawberry Roan, who bucks the cowboy into the stratosphere, leaving him “sitting way up on the sky.” When the bronco eventually falls “back to earth,” he declares, “I bet my money there’s no man alive, that can stay with ole Strawberry when he makes his high dive.” By the time Montana wrote and recorded her song, she must have heard at least one of the many renditions of “The Strawberry Roan.” The Arizona Wranglers had performed the tune on radio in the late 1920s, Ken Maynard sang a version of it in the eponymous 1933 film, and it also appeared in Lynn Riggs’s 1930 play *Green Grow the Lilacs* (ex. 11).

Montana, however, wasn’t the only one to write a song relating to “The Strawberry Roan.” A number of tunes demonstrated a distinct pre-occupation with Fletcher’s humorous portrayal of the cowboy’s impotency.<sup>123</sup> Several ballads, “The Man Who Rode the Strawberry Roan,” “Good-bye Old Strawberry Roan,” and “The Fate of the Strawberry Roan,” continued the stories of the wild stallion challenging the riding skills of local cowhands. Further, Tin Pan Alley songwriters Fred Howard and Nat Vincent modified Fletcher’s original ballad by adding a twenty-measure chorus in 1932. It was this rendition that appeared in the *Strawberry Roan* films starring Ken Maynard in 1933 and Gene Autry in 1948, where the themes of masculine anxiety illustrated in the song shaped the plots of these westerns.

Fletcher himself wrote three distinct songs in the 1930s and early 1940s that embellished upon the tale of the original. “The Ridge-Running Roan” continues the story of the protagonist’s failure in taming the wild stallion; and “The Bad Brahma Bull” simply extends the narrative to a wild bull refusing to be ridden at a rodeo. Fletcher’s following song, “The Castration of the Strawberry Roan,” however, realizes

I was hang-ing round town just spend-ing my time, out of a job and not mak-ing a dime, when a  
 fel-low steps up and he says, 'I sup-pose that you're a bronc rid-er from the looks of your clothes'.

*Example 11.* “The Strawberry Roan” (1915), by Curly Fletcher, Fred Howard, Nathaniel H. Vincent. Copyright © 1931 by Southern Music Publishing Col, Inc. for the USA only. Copyright renewed. Used by permission. Recorded by the Arizona Wranglers. Originally released as a special limited edition Christmas record, Merry Xmas, Unnumbered, 1931. Transposed from C major to A major for the ease of comparison.

explicitly the theme of emasculation in a musical setting that includes the twenty-measure chorus of the Tin Pan Alley rendition of “The Strawberry Roan.”<sup>124</sup> In this version, a penniless cowboy accepts an offer of employment from a rancher who owns the infamous Strawberry Roan and his progeny, proving to be just as difficult to ride as their sire. The rancher retaliates by convincing the cowhand to help him castrate the stallion. But during the cowboy’s attempts, he suddenly hears “blood-curdling squalls” and discerns those cries are coming not from the horse but from the rancher: “The Strawberry Roan had the boss by the balls.” The cowboy concludes, “The boss’s voice changed, and I knew we was beat.”

Borrowing from a song riddled with images of masculine impotency to emphasize the prowess of the cowgirl, Montana magnifies the gender strife and anxieties of the 1930s. The cowgirl’s desires to upstage the cowboy realized society’s fears—capable women usurping men’s cultural authority.<sup>125</sup> Appearing as a swaggering broncobuster, the cowgirl is confident in not suffering the cowboy’s humiliating fate of failing to break the wild stallion. Indeed, Montana even declares her disregard for men in the refrain of the fourth verse: “I am a man-hating lassie, a she buckaroo.” By the end of the song, however, Montana entertains the possibility of giving up her life as a cowgirl for domesticity. She will lasso a “cowpoke who has never been thrown,” someone with skills equal to her own deftness in horsemanship. Once she finds that particular man, she’ll “hog-tie him tight ’til he swears he’ll be true.” Afterward, Montana will “throw ’way my chaps and get dressed instead,” “learn to make biscuits and maybe cornbread,” “live in town,” and “then good-bye to Patsy, the she buckaroo.” Thus, in a romantic union where Montana finds a suitable husband, the independent cowgirl will relinquish her

“man-hating” ways of roping and riding wild stallions to remain in the private sphere, leaving the “Wild West” to the men.

If this song is meant to be an autobiographical account of Patsy Montana, then the conclusion appears ironic in how it differs from her professional and personal life. Montana did not end her singing cowgirl career even after she married Paul Rose in 1935. Though she “lived in town” (as stated in the song) with her husband and daughters, the singing cowgirl continued to perform on WLS and wrote and recorded songs about the autonomous western heroine. Thus, this last section of “The She Buckaroo,” where the cowgirl ponders a domestic life, seems to be a cursory nod of sorts to conventionality. With the majority of the strophic song shaping the cowgirl into an experienced wrangler, the lyrical narrative’s abrupt switch to the protagonist’s consideration of marriage leaves the listener wondering whether the “she buckaroo” could find contentment as a wife or mother. The song’s conclusion may imply that as long as the cowgirl gestures to gender norms, she is free to pursue the symbolic promises of the western frontier.

### **Singing Cowgirls and the Romance of the West**

Montana was not the only singing cowgirl to depict an independent model of femininity during the gender anxieties that marked the Depression era. In the 1938 film *The Singing Cowgirl*, Dorothy Page played the role of the cowgirl in a typical populist narrative, battling the elite who threatened to exploit a local farming community.<sup>126</sup> From the stage of the *National Barn Dance*, the Girls of the Golden West, Millie and Dolly Good, emerged as a prominent cowgirl act.<sup>127</sup> Though the duet did not specialize in depicting the West from a distinctly female perspective, as did Montana, they did sing a few songs promoting the cowgirl’s subjectivity. For instance, the duet recorded “I Want to Be a Real Cowboy Girl” in 1935, the same year that Montana had recorded her signature song. But unlike Montana’s invigorating performance in “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart,” the Girls of the Golden West portrayed the cowgirl’s deep desire for the freedoms of the frontier with sentimental expressions: lilting vocal harmonies accompanied by the quiet strumming of the guitar.

Providing the effect of an intimate musical setting, the duet borrows a musical phrase from one of the most popular nostalgic songs of the 1930s, Autry’s “That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine.” In the chorus, the Girls of the Golden West sing the lyrics “And know how it feels to wear spurs on my heels then strut about in my chaps” to the music of Autry’s bridge: “If I could erase those lines from your face and

bring back the gold to your hair" (ex. 1). Linking their performance identities to the music of the singing cowboy, the duet depicts the cowgirl's longing to play the part of the cowboy, to dress and behave in a manner that resembles the western hero: "to tote a six-shooter too, wear a belt that is four inches wide, then ride like the deuce on a buckskin cayuse." Rather than yearning for the cultural authority of the virile western hero, the cowgirl duet negotiates an image of independence with music that invokes nineteenth-century sentimentality. The duet hence demonstrates the fluidity of gender in the 1930s by adopting the music of one of the most preeminent cowboys of the era to suggest the heartfelt desires of the western heroine.

Just as Montana provided models of femininity that embodied the bucolic fantasies of the American West, the Girls of the Golden West suggested that women could acquire certain cultural freedoms without straying too far from gender norms. For many women, though, shouldering the economic burdens of their families did not entail any sense of freedom or romance but rather drudgery and grave concern. Society often blamed women for the massive unemployment of men, even though women entered an increasingly stratified job market of "feminized" service positions. While urban women worked as office clerks or waitresses, midwestern farmwives and (displaced) southern rural women labored in the fields harvesting crops next to their husbands. Besides sharing the breadwinning role, women's responsibilities in the home increased as well. Since it was usually women (80 percent) who managed the household budget, wives and mothers were the ones who planned and schemed to stretch the family's earnings during the Depression by growing fresh vegetables, shopping strategically, baking everything from scratch, and sewing clothes.<sup>128</sup> The singing cowgirl could offer not only an escape from the material concerns that plagued most women but also offer hope in meeting the era's economic and social challenges. As in her 1935 publicity photo (fig. 3), Montana, armed with guns, appears capable of warding off any dangers of frontier life with her performance identity and femininity still intact as a "cowboy's sweetheart."

### Conclusion

As the musical image of the singing cowgirl intertwined with the cowboy's in films, recordings, and radio broadcasts, Gene Autry and Patsy Montana emerged as prominent figures whose music simultaneously voiced and soothed the gender concerns that characterized the era. In the midst of the "masculine crisis," Autry's genteel western

persona, initially introduced through the intimate medium of radio, embodied the tensions that surrounded masculinity. Instead of simply recalling the heroic stance of the cowboy, Autry's musical imagery shaped the singing cowboy into a sentimental figure who underscored the vulnerability of men in the 1930s. More than this, his nostalgic expressions, which relied on the idioms of popular music, shaped the West into a site of longing and escape, an enclave of limitless opportunities. While Autry crooned about riding under the western skies, Montana yodeled about cowgirls roaming the open prairies, the "masculinized" West. Her folk-like numbers and more stylized settings relied upon the musical codes of cowboy music, legitimizing her persona as a singing cowgirl. But she mediated her self-directed persona with the ideals of romantic love couched in the pastoral. With her depictions of the open range, her listeners found solace in a western heroine able to fend off the material and social uncertainties of the time by adopting the stance of the cowboy while cloaked in the ideals of femininity. In essence, the singing cowboy and cowgirl offered the delicate solution of expanding the norms of gender in the mythologized West—where anything is possible.

### Notes

Stephanie Vander Wel is an assistant professor for musicology at the University at Buffalo, where she teaches courses Music and Gender, American Music, Popular Music, and Twentieth-Century Experimental Music. She is a contributing author to *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, second edition, and is working on a book that considers women, musical style, and commerce in country music. E-mail: slv5@buffalo.edu. Several people generously offered insightful comments and suggestions on various incarnations of this essay. I would like to thank Lester Feder, Michael Long, Glenn Pillsbury, Margarita Vargas, and the readers at this journal for their help.

1. As the historian Don Cusic points out, "The roots of the singing cowboys go back to WLS and the *National Barn Dance* in Chicago in the early 1930s." Cusic, "Cowboys in Chicago," in *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance*, ed. Chad Berry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 169.
2. Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 192.
3. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of the American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 30.
4. For a history of women's employment during the Great Depression, see Louis Scharf, *To Work and To Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), 107; and Ruth Milkman, "Women's Work and Economic Crisis: Some Lessons of the Great Depression," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 8 (April 1976): 71–97.

5. Kristine McCusker, "Will There Be Any Yodelers in Heaven?," in *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels: The Women of Barn Dance Radio* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 68–81, focuses on the radio career of the Girls of the Golden West.
6. Richard Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 81–87.
7. Bill Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers: Southern Cultures and the Roots of Country Music* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 91.
8. Peter Stanfield, *Horse Operas: The Strange History of 1930s Singing Cowboy* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 3.
9. Richard Peterson, in *Creating Country Music*, finds that "cowboy songs had little impact on the development of commercial music" (83).
10. For a history of WLS and the *National Barn Dance*, see James F. Evans, *Prairie Farmer and WLS* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1969); and Chad Berry, ed., *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance*.
11. Patsy Montana and the Prairie Ramblers often appeared on WLS's early morning show *Smile-A-While*. *WLS Family Album*, 1930, 18; and *WLS Family Album*, 1938, 14–15.
12. *WLS Family Album*, 1930, 18.
13. For further details about barn dance radio, see Charles Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press, 1999); and Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).
14. Paul Tyler, "The Rise of Rural Rhythm," in Berry, *The Hayloft Gang*, 35.
15. *WLS Family Album*, 1935, 35; and *WLS Family Album*, 1937, 45.
16. For a discussion of the various ways a shared ethnic Germany identity materialized in the Midwest, see Sonya Salamon, *Prairie Patrimony: Family, Farming and Community in the Midwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 17–33.
17. Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), provides a detailed historical account of the different ethnic working-class communities in Chicago before the Depression (11–52) and their relationship to the emerging radio industry in Chicago (133–37).
18. *WLS Family Album*, 1936, 14; *WLS Family Album*, 1933, 17.
19. For historical accounts of white southern migration to the Midwest, see Chad Berry, *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000); and James Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
20. In the 1930s, over five thousand southerners worked in the fields of the Midwest. Berry, *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles*, 20.

21. Vivien Marie Palmer, *Social Backgrounds of Chicago's Local Communities* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1929), 33.
22. *WLS Family Album*, 1930, 17.
23. Though the *National Barn Dance* was initially the most prominent barn dance, WLS was not the first to air such a program. In 1923, Forth Worth's WBAP featured a variety show originating from the format of vaudeville. Soon afterward, WSB in Atlanta and KDKA in Pittsburgh had also started airing country shows at the same time as that of WLS.
24. William Barlow, "Looking Up at Down": *The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 311.
25. Tyler, "The Rise of Rural Rhythm," 36.
26. *Souvenir WLS Program*, 1939, 3.
27. Michael T. Bertrand, "Race and Rural Identity," in Berry, *The Hayloft Gang*, 135.
28. David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 192.
29. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 197.
30. Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 243.
31. Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 213–49.
32. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 87.
33. Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, explains that many unemployed Mexicans faced repatriation back to Mexico (242).
34. There is a lack of data on how many former southerners left midwestern cities except for a special household census that was conducted in Flint, Michigan, in 1934. The city lost 35 percent of its white population and 18.9 percent of its black population during the years 1930 and 1934. See Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, 29.
35. Berry, *Southern Migrant, Northern Exiles*, 60–61.
36. Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 246.
37. Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 26.
38. Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 247.
39. Ware, *Holding Their Own*, 27.
40. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 51.
41. May, *Homeward Bound*, 40.
42. *WLS Family Album*, 1930, front cover.
43. Kristine McCusker, "Patriarchy and the Great Depression," in Berry, *The Hayloft Gang*, 153–67.
44. *WLS Family Album*, 1937, 47; *WLS Family Album*, 1941, 40.

45. WLS Family Album, 1941, 40.
46. Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music*, 17.
47. WLS Family Album, 1932, 41; and WLS Family Album, 1935, 19.
48. James Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 106.
49. For how the economic downfall of the Depression affected the coal industry in southern Appalachia, see Crandall A. Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880–1960* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 200–2.
50. Berry, *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles*, 41.
51. Betty L. Nies, “Defending Jeeter: Conservative Arguments against Eugenics in the Depression-Era South,” in *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s*, eds. Susan Currell and Christina Cogdell (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 122.
52. President Roosevelt’s New Deal relief measure of offering cash subsidies to those who agreed to stop farming also caused landlords to evict their tenant farmers in a region dominated by tenancy. See Gregory, *American Exodus*, 11.
53. Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers*, 90.
54. Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 81.
55. Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 95.
56. It is not clear whether Autry had written the songs or acquired the copyright from the original songwriters for “Do Right Daddy,” “Birmingham Daddy,” and “Jailhouse Blues.”
57. Gene Autry, *That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine*, BCD 15944 IL, 2005, 9-CD set. “Do Right Daddy Blues” by Bill Nettles. Copyright © 1952 by Peer International Corporation. Copyright Renewed. Used by Permission.
58. Bill Malone, in *Don’t Get above Your Raisin’: Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), explains that many blues songs in country music appropriated the music making of African Americans (128).
59. Additional examples of Autry’s use of sexualized language in his blues songs are: “Bear Cat Papa Blues” (1931) and “High-Steppin’ Mama Blues” (1931).
60. Lee Glazer and Susan Key, “Carry Me Back: Nostalgia for the Old South in Nineteenth-Century Popular Culture,” *Journal of American Studies* 30 (1996): 1–24.
61. For further details about Autry’s initial association with ARC, Sears, Roebuck, and WLS, see Don Cusic, *Gene Autry: His Life and Career* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007), 173; and Holly George-Warren, *Public Cowboy No. 1: The Life and Times of Gene Autry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 75.
62. As quoted in George-Warren, *Public Cowboy No. 1*, 111.

63. Pamela Grundy, "'We Always Tried to Be Good People': Respectability, Crazy Water Crystals, and Hillbilly Music on the Air, 1933–1935," *Journal of American History* 81 (March 1955): 1591–620.
64. *WLS Family Album*, 1933, 33.
65. David M. Lugowski, "Queering the (New) Deal: Lesbian and Gay Representation and the Depression-Era Cultural Politics of Hollywood's Production Code," *Cinema Journal* 38 (Winter 1999): 4.
66. Evans, *Prairie Farmer and WLS*, 187. Conqueror Records was an American Record Company budget label that Sears, Roebuck, and Co. distributed.
67. "Anne and Sue Bring Tower Topics," *WLS Family Album*, 1931, 40.
68. *WLS Family Album*, 1931, 40.
69. Gene Autry, "3 Pals," *Country Song Roundup*, June 1950, 15.
70. Gene Autry, *Gene Autry's Sensational Collection of Famous Original Cowboy Songs and Mountain Ballads* (Chicago, IL: M. M. Cole, 1932).
71. Stanfield, *Horse Opera*, 56–57.
72. Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 214.
73. Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 32.
74. Stanfield, *Horse Opera*, 50.
75. John Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 44.
76. Later in 1933, Autry also recorded "There's an Empty Cot in the Bunkhouse Tonight," a song comparable to "Cowboy's Heaven" in theme, form, and melodic and harmonic writing.
77. Frankie Marvin may have been acquainted with Carl T. Sprague's 1926 recording "The Cowboy's Dream," which is in a similar AABA form.
78. Gene Autry, *Rhymes of the Range* (Evanston, IL: Frontier Publishers, 1933).
79. For a discussion of how John Ford incorporated folk music into his western films to point to an Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic past, see Kathryn Kalinak, *How the West Was Sung: Music in the Westerns of John Ford* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2007), 49–75.
80. Van Alstyne and Williams were both from the Midwest and performed in vaudeville before moving to New York and working as songwriters. Billy Murray recorded their song "Cheyenne" in 1906 for the Victor Talking Machine Company. See Jim Bob Tinsely, *For a Cowboy Has to Sing: A Collection of Sixty Romantic Cowboy and Western Songs* (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1991).
81. Hamm, *Yesterdays*, 379. For further details of how Tin Pan Alley included the sensibilities of an urban white middle-class audience, see Ulf Lindberg, "Popular Modernism? The 'Urban' Style of Interwar Tin Pan Alley," *Popular Music* 22 (October 2003): 283–98.

82. Hamm, *Yesterdays*, 334–35.
83. H. Wiley Hitchcock and Kyle Gann, *Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 252. For a discussion about the musical differences and racial significance of "sweet" jazz and "hot" jazz, see Andrew Berish, "I Dream of Her and Avalon': 1930s Sweet Jazz, Race and Nostalgia at the Casino Ballroom, *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2 (2008): 531–67.
84. Jonathan Greenberg, "Singing Up Close: Voice, Language and Race In American Popular Music, 1925–1935" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2008), 102.
85. Allison McCracken, "'God's Gift to Us Girls': Crooning, Gender, and the Re-Creation of American Popular Song, 1928–1933" *American Music* 4 (Winter 1999): 365–95.
86. Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 203.
87. Greenberg, "Singing Up Close," 135.
88. Greenberg, "Singing Up Close," 105.
89. McCracken, "'God's Gift to Us Girls,'" 365–85.
90. Tyler, "The Rise of Rural Rhythms," 35.
91. Stanfield, *Horse Opera*, 83–84, points out that the owner of Republic Studios, Herbert J. Yates, was also the head of the American Record Corporation (ARC) with whom Autry had a recording contract. Consequently, it was in Yates's best interest to promote Autry's film career as an extension of his recording success.
92. *Tumbling Tumbleweeds*, dir. Joseph Kane, Republic Pictures Corporation, 1935.
93. Kalinak, in *How the West Was Sung*, argues that John Ford's western films created plots where male leads sang without compromising their masculinity. Rather, the inclusion of music making—singing and dancing—redefined the narrow parameters of masculinity (122–57).
94. Stanfield, in *Horse Opera*, explains that it wasn't until the early 1940s when Autry enlisted in the army that Roy Rogers was able to rival Autry's dominance in film (88).
95. Tex Ritter, "The Story of Tex Ritter," in *Tex Ritter: Mountain Ballads and Cowboy Songs* (Chicago, IL: M. M. Cole, 1941).
96. Tex Ritter, "A-Ridin' Old Paint," *Back in the Saddle Again*, New World Records 80314-2, 1983, 2-CD set.
97. Tex Ritter, "Get Along Little Doggies," "Take Me Back to My Boots and Saddle," *An Introduction to Tex Ritter: Sing Cowboy Sing*, Proper Records 2049, 2004, CD.
98. See Stanfield, *Horse Opera*, 89–92, for more details of how Ritter's radio career affected his film career.
99. Sons of the Pioneers, "Tumbling Tumbleweeds," *Classic Country Music: A Smithsonian Collection*, vol. 1, Smithsonian Collection of Recordings RD 042-1, 1990, CD.

100. Originally from Texas, Stuart Hamblen moved to the West Coast in 1930 to participate in the radio industry's newfound focus on country music in California. In 1931, he started hosting his own broadcasts of country music, facilitating the careers of other performers and writing some of the most memorable western-themed music: "My Brown-Eyed Texas Rose" and "Texas Plains."
101. Patsy Montana, interview with John Rumble, 9 June 1984, transcript OHC195-LC, Country Music Foundation Oral History Project (Nashville, TN: Country Music Hall of Fame Library), 6–18; and *Stand By!*, 30 November 1935, 11.
102. Patsy Montana with Jane Frost, *Patsy Montana: The Cowboy's Sweetheart* (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland, 2002), 49.
103. *WLS Family Album*, 1936, 22.
104. Montana, interview with John Rumble, 6.
105. Montana started to appear with the Prairie Ramblers on WLS's program *Smile-A-While* in 1933. The sponsors, Kolor Back, moved Montana and the Prairie Ramblers to New York's WOR for part of 1935, before returning to WLS. While in New York, Montana and the Prairie Ramblers recorded "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart." See Montana, *Patsy Montana*, 71.
106. The bandleader Adolph Hofner popularized polkas and waltzes in western-swing numbers.
107. Montana, interview with John Rumble, 65.
108. Montana, interview with John Rumble, 79.
109. For more detailed accounts about the physiological demands of yodeling for male singers, see Bart Plantenga, *Yodel-Ay-Ee-Oooo: The Secret History of Yodeling Around the World* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 12–15; and Timothy Wise, "Yodel Species: A Typology of Falsetto Effects in Popular Music Vocal Styles," *Radical Musicology* 2 (2007): 57 pars, 17 January 2008, <http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk>.
110. Richard Miller, *The Structure of Singing: System and Art in Vocal Technique* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1986), 132.
111. Timothy Wise, in "Yodel Species," claims that the vocal break for women occurs between the head register and whistle register.
112. *WLS Family Album*, 1937, 40.
113. *WLS Family Album*, 1939, 30.
114. See Timothy Wise, "Jimmie Rodgers and the Semiosis of the Hillbilly Yodel," *Musical Quarterly* 93 (2010): 6–44, for a discussion of the melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic patterns in Rodgers's yodels, which influenced the yodeling of country musicians.
115. For further discussions of Jimmie Rodgers and the yodel, see Jocelyn Neal, *The Songs of Jimmie Rodgers: A Legacy in Country Music* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 19–25.
116. See Montana, *Patsy Montana*, 200, for her praise of Elton Britt's yodeling.
117. Elton Britt, "Chime Bells," *The RCA Years*, BMG Collectors' Choice Music CCM-031-2, 1997.

118. Rosalie Allen, *The Versatile Rosalie Allen*, JASMCD 3598/9, 2010.
119. Elton Britt, *Country Music's Yodeling Cowboy Crooner*, vol. 1, JASMCD 3565, 2005.
120. *Stand By!*, 11 July 1936, 12. Other acts and soloists also voted most popular were: Girls of the Golden West, Ramblin' Red Foley, Hoosier Hot Shots, Pat Buttram, Cumberland Ridge Runners and Linda Parker, Uncle Erza, Arkie, Hoosier Sod Busters, Maple City Four, and Otto and the Novelodeons.
121. *Colorado Sunset*, dir. George Sherman, Republic Pictures, 1939.
122. For a historical account of the publication and performances of "The Strawberry Roan," see John I. White, *Git Along Little Dogies: Songs and Songmakers of the American West* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 137–47.
123. For the different parodies of the original song, see Austin E. Fife, "The Strawberry Roan and His Progeny," *JEMF Quarterly* 8 (1972): 149–65.
124. Using the Tin Pan Alley setting for his "Castration" song, Fletcher may have been retaliating against the songwriters Howard and Vincent for plagiarizing his ballad in their Tin Pan Alley version. See Logsdon, "The Whorehouse Bells Were Ringing" And Other Songs Cowboys Sing: *Music in American Life* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 87.
125. Ware, *Holding Their Own*, 27–35.
126. *The Singing Cowgirl*, dir. Samuel Diege, Grand National Pictures, 1938.
127. For further details about the radio career of the Girls of the Golden West, see McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels*, 68–81.
128. May, *Homeward Bound*, 51.