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Sounding the American West: Nostalgia, Patriotism, and National Identity in Rodeo's  
Musical Landscape

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Music

by

Lauren Olivia Vanderlinden

Committee in charge:

Professor Scott Marcus, Chair

Professor Stefanie Tcharos

Professor Beth Levy, UC Davis

Professor Jonathan Dueck, Canadian Mennonite University

June 2022

The dissertation of Lauren Olivia Vanderlinden is approved.

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Jonathan Dueck

---

Beth Levy

---

Stefanie Tcharos

---

Scott Marcus, Committee Chair

May 2022

Sounding the American West: Nostalgia, Patriotism, and National Identity in Rodeo's

Musical Landscape

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by

Lauren Olivia Vanderlinden

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VITA OF LAUREN OLIVIA VANDERLINDEN  
May 2022

EDUCATION

Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology and Music, Lawrence University, June 2017  
Master of Arts in Music, University of California, Santa Barbara, December 2019  
Doctor of Philosophy in Music, University of California, Santa Barbara, June 2022

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

2018-2021: Teaching Assistant, Department of Music, University of California, Santa Barbara  
2019-2020: Instructor of Record, Department of Music, University of California, Santa Barbara  
2019-2022: Graduate Teaching Fellow, Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, University of California, Santa Barbara

PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT

2017-2019: Historical Sound Recordings Processing Assistant, Special Collections of the Library, University of California, Santa Barbara  
2021: Music Library Assistant, Music and Performing Arts Library, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign  
2021: Music Education and Editorial Intern, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, Smithsonian Institute  
2022: Special Projects Assistant, University of Illinois Press

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

2017-2022. Chancellor's Fellowship, Central Campus; University of California, Santa Barbara.  
2018. Student Paper Prize, 2<sup>nd</sup> place, for a co-authored paper with Eugenia Siegel Conte; Society for Ethnomusicology – Religion, Music, and Sound Section  
2019. Outstanding Graduate Student in Ethnomusicology, Scholarship; University of California, Santa Barbara.  
2019. Stanley Krebs Memorial Paper Prize in Musicology, University of California, Santa Barbara.  
2021. Graduate Student Internship Fellowship; University of California, Santa Barbara.

## ABSTRACT

### Sounding the American West: Nostalgia, Patriotism, and National Identity in Rodeo's Musical Landscape

by

Lauren Olivia Vanderlinden

In this dissertation, I utilize a mixed-methods approach consisting of ethnographic research, archival and historical work, media analysis, and virtual fieldwork to lay out the constellation of music, media, identity, and sport that defines rodeo in the twenty-first century. To accomplish this, I first outline a brief musical history of rodeo, beginning with Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows and ending with the present day, the first compilation of rodeo's musical history in print to date. I discuss the foundational relationship between rodeo and popular music that began with Wild West shows and continued throughout the twentieth century. This history reveals both a reliance on nostalgic whiteness as a foundational identity marker for audiences and the prevalence of military and hyper-patriotic influence in rodeo's inception as a sport. I further argue that the rodeo cowboy, increasingly the only "real" cowboy left in the United States as the proverbial frontier continued to disappear in the twentieth century, came to represent this nexus of influences and sentiments, both in the rodeo contest and in the music accompanying it. I also argue that

country music, the genre most consistently associated with rodeo through its history, plays a particularly important part in how that identity has been constructed and maintained.

I also undertake a close analysis of the 2020 National Finals Rodeo as the central case study in this dissertation. Using a selection of the opening ceremonies, I argue that these rodeo rituals work to define a specific iteration of cowboy—and, by extension, American—identity that is rooted in patriotism and a willingness to act to protect (or use) individual or national freedoms. This is accomplished through visually collapsing the distinction between cowboy and soldier in rodeo media during opening ceremonies, and through the deployment of differing styles of music to incorporate audiences into the spectacle of the rodeo. The overlapping values and audiences between rodeo and country make this ritual legible for participants, and both spheres’ histories of patriotism and invisible, nostalgic whiteness link them together in a shared performance of the Old West that stakes a claim to a particular iteration of cowboy identity as the most authentic.

I further trace this thread of performativity in my final chapter to examine how the figure of the rodeo cowboy has continued to circulate in popular music more broadly, both affirming and contesting the rodeo cowboy’s cultural relevance. To accomplish this, I discuss the subgenre I call rodeo country alongside recent manifestations of the Black West, known as the “Yeehaw Agenda,” in popular music (Malandro 2018). I analyze multiple case studies to discuss how the symbols and trappings of cowboy identity are utilized by artists in both country and non-country genres to varying effects. Both types of performance serve to give us insight into how the cowboy figure maintains its relevance in the twenty-first century, and what alternative sets of values might be poised to infiltrate the sacred space of rodeo in the years to come.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

There ain't nothing like a good, solid ride. I don't care where you are or who you are. It's just like music—smooth and perfect if you do it right.

— Alonzo Pettie, a famous bronc and bull rider, in a 2003 interview with The Associated Press

When I was young, Joe Johnston's 2004 epic Western biopic *Hidalgo* was one of my favorite movies. The film follows an American cowboy named Frank T. Hopkins, played by Viggo Mortensen in his first leading role post-*Lord of the Rings*, and his mustang Hidalgo in a sweeping story of conquest, grit, and Americana that spans multiple continents. The story begins in the 1890s American West, with Hopkins shown working as a performer in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show and as a dispatch rider for the United States government, but eventually Hopkins and Hidalgo travel overseas to compete in an endurance race called the "Ocean of Fire," an annual 3,000-mile trek across the Najd desert in Saudi Arabia. Of course, the race has been restricted to pure-bred Arabian horses and Bedouin riders, but Hopkins won't take no for an answer and competes anyway, attempting to prove the superiority of the American wild horses that Hidalgo represents (and, by extension, the superiority of the American cowboy). Throughout the course of the film, he is set against numerous foes and antagonists, Middle Eastern caricatures of "bad Arabs" that were experiencing great popularity in the media in the period after the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003, who hate him because of his nationality and his lack of personal, generational wealth and status (Shaheen 2003). Ultimately Hopkins is victorious, though the race pushes both him and Hidalgo to their limits, and he wins the respect and admiration of the Bedouin riders over whom he triumphs.



As a young person, I loved the film simply because I found it thrilling to imagine riding off into every corner of the world on grand adventures with a four-legged best friend. Looking back on it now, it's clear how it and other films like it from the same era worked to induct me and other young people into a particular way of thinking about and imagining the American West, the wild mustangs that run through it, and the cowboys who attempt to tame it. *Hidalgo* clearly highlights the way that the figure of the American cowboy has been mythologized in popular media both locally and abroad; Mortensen's Hopkins is quietly determined, proving repeatedly through his quick thinking and resourceful problem-solving that with a bit of grit and work ethic, he is capable of a great conquest that brings glory and honor to his nation and to himself. The film, produced by Disney, was marketed as a "true story," but many of the biographical facts and story beats emphasized in the film have since been debunked, including Hopkins' alleged half-Lakota blood, his time with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, and his status as a legendary endurance rider.<sup>1</sup> And yet, much like Paul Bunyan—who may have existed but likely did not own a big blue ox—Hopkins has entered the American cultural mythology as a kind of legendary figure in his own right because of what he represents. *Hidalgo* lifts up these exaggerated facts about Hopkins as truth, telling the story of an American cowboy whose grit, determination, and innate courage make him victorious over an entire culture of non-white individuals whose lives are spent preparing for and competing in this race. *Hidalgo* and other films like it have found great commercial success because they capitalize on national myths about the American frontier, and they

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<sup>1</sup> The Lakota tribe does not have any record of Hopkins' ancestry or any connection to his family, and have not publicly claimed him as a member. Additionally, the Buffalo Bill Historical Center has disputed Hopkins' claims to have performed with the troupe as his name does not appear in any of their comprehensive records, though they have found some evidence that he worked briefly for the Ringling Brothers Circus as a horse handler. Finally, he claimed to have won a Texas-to-Vermont endurance race, but there is no documented evidence that such a race was ever held, nor is there evidence that he really won the 400 endurance races he boasted of (Harrigan 2003, The Long Riders' Guild 2022).

inform the way consumers like me imagine the Old West and its people. Popular culture shapes our collective understanding of history, often in subtle ways, and in turn contributes other peoples' perspectives to our cultural imagination of the past. Through such varied media as film, music, and fashion, the Old West continues to be relevant to our present day in the United States, and there is no site where it feels more immediately real than at the rodeo.

In this dissertation, I combine archival and historical sources, ethnographic research, and analysis of digital media to piece together the long history of music at the rodeo. Beginning with rodeo's early roots in Wild West shows and tracing trends and figures up to the present day, I lay out a complex web of actors, contexts, and ideas that have circulated around of the realms of sport, country music, and military engagement across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Throughout this project, I argue that the core of rodeo's continued relevance and importance to individuals in the United States comes from its connection to a nostalgic and whitewashed view of the Old West, particularly for white folks who perceive their way of life as threatened, vanishing, or becoming obsolete at various points in U.S. American history. This nostalgia is embodied most clearly for competitors, producers, and audience members in the figure of the cowboy, which has changed very little over the last century. I suggest that the rodeo cowboy operates as a twenty-first century stand-in for the range-roaming cowboys of the Old West, representing a (white-bodied) place where American values of patriotism, individualism, and willingness to take action to defend individual or national freedoms are brought forward into the present. This complex nostalgia is paired with a deep sense of patriotism that emerges from rodeo's long history of engagement with the military, a relationship that has never been written about in academic

scholarship and that continues to inform displays of pro-America sentiment in rodeos across the United States and the globe in the twenty-first century.

I also argue for the importance of music as a vehicle for the circulation of these values, both within and branching out from rodeo. Country music is most closely associated with rodeo in recent years, but rodeo has always been musical, and this dissertation traces the differing relationships the sport has had with various genres across its history, ranging from brass bands to rock and metal, and from folk tunes to hip-hop. Within the rodeo, music has provided the sonic backdrop for individuals and institutions to purvey particular interpretations of cowboy and American identity, both during the contests themselves and during opening ceremonies or affiliated concerts. The musical and programmatic choices that producers make, as I discuss in later chapters, heavily influence the type of narrative each event carries, and thus the kind of individuals each event holds up as ideal. However, the cowboy figure is not isolated to rodeo, and I also examine the ways that markers of rodeo identity—including cowboy boots, hats, rodeo belt buckles, and branded denim—have circulated outside of rodeo through their presence in other genres of music. It is my hope that this project, which brings together sport and musical history with ethnographic study and the consideration of media circulation, can contribute to our understanding of how American identity and its often invisible whiteness continues to be constructed in the twenty-first century, particularly at a time when identity politics and the policing of history are such contentious topics.

In this vein, throughout this dissertation I will use the term “American” or “U.S. American” to refer to positions, peoples, ideas, and tropes that exist within the United States of America that fall within a constructed majority. I acknowledge that the Americas are

extremely broad continents containing a vast range of peoples, languages, cultures, and histories, and that the United States has coopted the term “American,” and I use it here simply to mirror the language my interlocutors and sources use. By exploring ways that a particular interpretation of the cowboy figure has become categorized as a United-States-specific “American” icon, I will also open up space for an analysis of the failures of this category for individuals, musics, and rodeos that span the American continents and beyond. I also refer to the professional rodeo circuit throughout this dissertation either as “professional” or “mainstream” rodeo, meaning a rodeo context primarily populated and patronized by a constructed majority of individuals that most often fall within the identity categories of white, straight, masculine, and U.S. American. There are other rodeo circuits specifically devoted to individuals who do not fit these categories—including Black, LGBTQ+, all-women, and Indigenous rodeo circuits. Those circuits have been written about beautifully by other authors, and though I discuss them in the literature review later in this chapter, and they are beyond the scope of this project.

### **Notes on Identity**

Throughout the process of writing this dissertation, I have repeatedly been called back to my many childhood memories of wanting to grow up and be a cowgirl. By the grace of my parents, I started learning to ride quite young, and being a “horse girl” who spent her weekends hauling hay, shoveling manure, and cleaning tack in central Wisconsin was a major part of my identity all the way up until college, when my lack of time, money, and transportation made it impossible to continue. For over ten years, I spent every waking moment dreaming about what it would be like to just hop on a horse, don my pink sparkly

cowgirl hat, and ride off into the sunset. I attended countless local 4-H shows, county fairs, and rodeos, and even competed on leased horses. I have hours and hours of memories of sitting in the barns of the Winnebago County Fairgrounds while 2000s-era Tim McGraw and Toby Keith played over the grainy loudspeakers, clashing with the twangy strains of Merle Haggard drifting over the rows of stalls from someone else's barn boombox.

It never struck me as anything but normal that my equestrian experiences would be accompanied by country music; my mom, who'd grown up in rural Minnesota and had horses for much of her childhood, would always put on her country playlist when we would drive to the barn together on the weekends. I have such strong memories of looking out the window, watching green and gold fields of corn roll past my window while the twangy sounds of Kenny Chesney washed over me and the rich, musty scent of dirty boots, worn leather, and horse manure lingered in my nostrils. My grandfather, who passed in the fall of 2018, often alternated between singing mid-century country-western classics and flipping on the TV in search of old Western films when we visited, always trying to get me and my mom to sing or watch with him to bond over our shared love of horses and the proverbial frontier. Every barn I ever visited had their radios set to the local country station, and it was the soundtrack to the exercise rides and lessons of almost everyone I knew.

I never really learned to rodeo, and most of my equine education was the product of the local teacher's proclivity for Morgan horses and English riding, and yet my experience of the horse world was still deeply informed by country and cowboy codes. Even though I didn't grow up anywhere near the old Western frontier or on the rodeo circuit, I still learned to associate the sounds of country and the aesthetics of the cowboy with a sense of freedom, hard work, and the feeling of strength and self-sufficiency that working on a farm instilled in

me. This stuck with me even when I no longer had access to the rural farmland on which I spent much of my childhood, and when I came to graduate school and began thinking seriously about research projects I was drawn to explore this phenomenon with an academic eye. Coming from a music department, the overlap between country, rodeo, and an American identity built on patriotism was too enticing to overlook—and the preteen version of myself, made fun of for being a horse girl by people whose music tastes encompassed “anything but country,” couldn’t resist the opportunity, either. In this dissertation, while the project may not have turned out to be what I had originally envisioned, I argue for the importance of analyzing rodeo and country music together as contexts where identity markers are invented, claimed, negotiated, and circulated among a wide range of audiences across centuries.

I open this introduction with this brief reflection on my identity because of how it has influenced not only my choice of topic, but also how I have approached it. This is done in the spirit of reflexive ethnography, wherein being attentive to the researcher’s position in the field illuminates how “our shadows join with others, past and present, in a web of histories: personal histories, the histories of our academic field, and the histories of those we study” (Cooley and Barz 2008: 5). While my “field” was perhaps a bit less conventional and my interactions with interlocutors less intimate than for many ethnographers, I think it is still important to note how and why I chose to engage in this research. As described above, I come to this topic as an insider, doing research “at home” because of my own whiteness, my status as a listener of country music, and my equestrian background. I grew up around horses, cows, and arena dirt, and learned to sing by belting along with the Chicks and Carrie Underwood while I mucked out stalls and hauled hay bales. Being a horse person has always

been part of who I am, and when the opportunity to pursue that interest academically came to me, I had no hesitation about galloping off into the sunset with this project. Had I been able to carry out my research as originally intended, spending much more time in the in-person field, this part of my identity would likely have been of service in opening some doors on the professional rodeo circuit. However, COVID-19's not-so-gentle nudge in a different direction instead allowed me to do a great deal more reflecting on the wider structural and historical ways that white patriotism has been baked into the concepts of the American frontier and cowboy identity.

While in many ways my own whiteness and enculturation in these spheres allowed me to occupy this insider position, it also made some things harder for me to see clearly. I have tried throughout this dissertation to be attentive to my own bias while also making it clear that not all country or rodeo fans are white supremacists, and any mistakes found within these pages are solely my own. The last five years have been host to great personal and national divisions within the United States, and while it has occasionally been uncomfortable to confront my own complicity with these structures of whiteness throughout this project, I have found it to be extremely rewarding and important work. I have felt a keen sense of responsibility as a white person to use my insider status in this arena to reveal what bits I can of whiteness's nearly invisible structuring presence in rodeo and country alike. In doing so I hope to have created space to engage in a deeper and more nuanced discussion on how we collectively and individually define American identity.

## **Research Methods and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Like many graduate students in the year 2020, I faced serious challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In March of 2020, I was in the middle of preparing for my comprehensive exams. I had just finished my dissertation proposal, learned that my partner and I would be relocating to Illinois in the fall for his graduate program, and begun to plan for an exciting year of rodeo attendance and travel from the transportation hub of Chicago. The quick spread of COVID-19 across the globe almost seemed to laugh at my proactive planning, and for a while everything seemed to hang in limbo. My exams were taken remotely and defended over Zoom. I taught asynchronous and virtual classes and said goodbye to my incredible students in an email at the end of the year. I lost family, friends, and students to the pandemic in more ways than one. And in the background of all of this loomed the question of whether I would even be able to complete my dissertation research as proposed. Prior to the pandemic, I had attended several local rodeos and made the trip to the 2018 National Finals in Las Vegas, but the year of following the PRCA circuit that I had planned was increasingly looking like it would be out of reach as rodeos either shut their doors for the season or proceeded to largely ignore COVID-19 precautions. I decided to take the summer to focus on our upcoming cross-country move and allow my brain some space to think about other possibilities, and when fall came I was no longer able to ignore the obvious: I needed to reformat my entire project.

This was not a decision I made lightly, and ultimately issues of funding, time, health, and my own lack of patience were the deciding factors in this change. I could have waited for the pandemic to end and then carried on with my research as planned, but I wasn't willing to put my life and career on hold for an undetermined period, nor was it a financially



viable option for me to do so. Instead, I took inspiration from the amazing musicologists on my committee and in my graduate cohort and began to think more broadly about history. Doing this allowed me to identify with greater specificity the distinct lack of a documented musical history of rodeo, and inspired me to design this interdisciplinary project as a way to still utilize the in-person fieldwork I had already done and the virtual fieldwork I could do during the pandemic while making a real contribution to the field of rodeo history by putting as much of its music in one place as possible and identifying the historical trends and values revealed by that ordering. This is not the ethnography-forward project I intended to do, and in fact even conducting virtual interviews proved to be incredibly difficult as many of my potential interlocutors struggled with bad internet, a lack of technological fluency, or simple distrust of me as a person they'd never seen before and didn't know. Instead, my patchwork of methodologies—some interviews and fieldwork, yes, but also archival research, data organization, and analysis of media, charts, and marketing—provides a multi-faceted look at the way American rodeo and the figure of the cowboy have retained their enduring but malleable popularity and status in popular culture over the last hundred years despite the frontier all but disappearing. I return in the conclusion of this dissertation to the many avenues of future research that this dissertation provides a starting point for, including more detailed and geographically specific historical and ethnographic research.

When I began re-orienting my dissertation after coming to the realization that I would not be able to accomplish conventional in-person ethnographic fieldwork, I initially struggled to comprehend how I would be able to produce an acceptable work of ethnomusicology during a pandemic. Discussions of on-the-ground fieldwork as an all-consuming “rite of passage” (Johnson 1984), the only way to really know anything, had

spooked me away from considering a fully virtual project before COVID-19 and only made the thought of that transition harder once it became apparent that this was my only option. However, digital and virtual ethnography is increasingly becoming commonplace in ethnomusicology and other social science disciplines; in their 2012 volume *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, Boellstorff et. al describe ethnography as “a flexible, responsive methodology, sensitive to emergency phenomena and emergent research methods” where “the choice of fieldsite and method should be based on the questions motivating inquiry” (Boellstorff et. al 2012: 6). Similarly, Timothy Cooley, Katherine Meizel, and Nasir Syed write about virtuality in fieldwork as a method that “lends itself to new ways of engaging well-worn ethnomusicological questions” about the value and purpose of fieldwork, the ways that humans relate to each other, and the role of communication in cultural practices (Cooley et. al 2008: 92). In my case, not only were considerations of my own and others’ health and safety vital in making the decision to complete a mostly virtual project, but it is also true that if I were to take Cooley et. al’s insistence that “fieldwork should happen where music happens” to heart, then my project required a virtual approach that could properly account for the digital circulation of media, symbols, and ideas (Ibid.: 106).

Further, while my reliance on archives and historical sources might also initially seem somewhat outside the purview of traditional ethnomusicology, engaging with archival research and the production of archival materials has always been an important facet of ethnomusicological work. Recently, arguments have been made for the importance of developing more sustainable and ethical ways of engaging with archival research, recording, and preservation (Landau and Topp Fargion 2012, Topp Fargion 2009). Indeed, folk and country musics—cowboy music in particular—have often been embroiled in issues of

archives and ethical archival practices, first through the work of the Lomax family in the early twentieth century and continuing with anthologies, preservationist ethnomusicology, and other recording projects into the present day (Fenster 1989, Filene 1991 and 2000, Slowik 2012). Pursuing archival research that looks at the history of music at the rodeo importantly situates these musical objects and practices not just within a broader historical context of American culture, but also within discourses on archiving, preservation, and ethnomusicology as a discipline. This project does not make preservation ethics or archival practice its central question, but through weaving historical sources into ethnographic and intertextual ones to trace patterns over time and geographic distance, I hope to have contributed to the growing body of literature in historical ethnomusicology that seeks creative and multivalent approaches to bringing history and ethnography together.

### **Literature Review: Rodeo, Ritual, and Identity**

This dissertation connects two distinct bodies of literature: works on rodeo and other sporting events, and works on country music. The first and most famous anthropological study of rodeo, Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence's 1982 *Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame*, set the tone for much of the work on rodeo that would follow in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In her monograph, Lawrence is broadly concerned with "the ways in which rodeo is used by ranching society—and by the population which shares that ethos—as a ritual event which serves to express, reaffirm, and perpetuate its values, attitudes, and way of life" (Lawrence 1982: 5). She relies on the work of anthropologists Edward Leach, Clifford Geertz, and Victor Turner, particularly their interpretive approaches to ritual as a symbolic realm; the sport of rodeo in this study

represents the repeated playing out of frontier and expansionist rituals of domination and conquest, both over nature and over non-human animals. Just as the Balinese cockfights described by Geertz carry deep social meaning, so too does rodeo “[render] ordinary, everyday experiences comprehensible by presenting [them] in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced (or, if you prefer, raised) to the level of sheer appearances, where their meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived” (Geertz 1974: 23). Rodeo orders particular themes “into an encompassing structure, presents them in such a way as to throw into relief a particular view of their essential nature. It puts a construction on them, makes them, to those historically positioned to appreciate their construction, meaningful—visible, tangible, graspable—‘real,’ in an ideational sense” (Ibid.). Any meaning found in these rituals is not simply present inherently in the performance, but rather comes into being through the presence of the right audience; in other words, the success of the ritual is entirely dependent on the identities and historical positioning of the spectators. Lawrence, like Geertz, reads rodeo as a sort of collective text where particular facets of rodeo’s ethos can be read and interpreted by audiences, but in lieu of focusing on who exactly those audiences are, she instead focuses on what they “read” from the event itself. In her study, she pays close attention to the way symbols play out in performance, eventually arguing that rodeo, at its deepest and most symbolic level, “[gives] assurance that there are still wild elements to tame while at the same time expressing ambivalence concerning the nature-to-culture transformation which is symbolized in the various events [of rodeo]” (Lawrence 1982: 11).

Most importantly for this dissertation, Lawrence’s monograph explicitly ties the figure of the cowboy to the struggle with identity that is symbolized by rodeo’s events. She

argues that the cowboy “came to find his self-identity through being constantly at war with that portion of his universe which can be conceptualized as ‘the wild’... Not only was there the willingness, which could be conceived of as arising out of necessity, to destroy any part of the wild that did not fit his [cultural] scheme, but beyond this, there came to be an active desire, as a force in itself, to do so” (Ibid.: 65). For Lawrence, the history of the American frontier cowboy, born of cattle ranching and dime novels alike, was intimately connected to a struggle for dominance and an impulse to destroy opposition. She also connects this to the idea of individualism and personal freedoms, where cowboys “rebelled against the work pattern of the civilized, industrial world they left behind,” turning instead to the relative freedom that the frontier offered as a substitute where a man could live by his own rules and codes of honor (Ibid.: 66). All of these issues—freedom, individualism, violence—have maintained their relevance in rodeo’s rituals well into the twenty-first century. While Lawrence’s writing focuses on competitors over audiences, I pick up where her monograph leaves off to suggest that considering the shared markers of identity centered by rodeo and country music allows us to get a better understanding of that historical and cultural positioning that makes both audiences so susceptible to the ritual of rodeo and country performance.

While Lawrence’s monograph is foundational to any academic study of rodeo, her text focuses primarily on ritual at the level of man versus beast, relying heavily on an interpretation of the nature-culture binary drawn from Sherry Ortner’s, where culture is masculinized and valued over feminized nature, to analyze how rodeo plays out human domination in terms of wild versus tame (Ortner 1974). As a result, the identity centered by Lawrence’s text is an invisibly white, masculine one, and while she discusses how the

cowboy image came to be constructed through engagement with Wild West shows and cattle ranching, she is not attentive to the ways that race, gender, or nationality inflect either the cowboy or rodeo. In contrast to this, several recent publications have moved to explicitly center non-white and non-masculine perspectives on rodeo and cowboy identity (Barraclough 2019, Ford 2020, Scofield 2019, Wolman and Smith 2019). Both Elyssa Ford's 2020 monograph *Rodeo as Refuge, Rodeo as Rebellion* and Rebecca Scofield's 2019 *Outriders* move through a series of non-mainstream rodeo contexts to examine the ways that non-white, non-straight, even non-American individuals and groups utilize rodeo as a performance space where identity can be negotiated.

Scofield's book, which features chapters on cowgirls, prison rodeo, Black rodeo, and gay rodeo, argues that individuals in all of these settings not only resist a narrow definition of the cowboy but also use it to "strategically [deploy] complex notions like authenticity and heritage as a way to demand inclusion, but also, at times, exclude others" (Scofield 2019: 4). She takes a performance-oriented approach to considering identity in rodeo, building on a long line of scholars who take popular performance as a realm for shaping regional and national identity (Deloria 1998 and 2004, Imada 2012, Jones 2015). For Scofield, rodeo performances represent a way for people who are marginalized in mainstream rodeo to "claim authenticity and demand greater inclusion in national mythologies, while also at times reiterating the inherently exclusionary aspects of these myths" (Ibid.: 5). As I discuss in Chapter Two of this dissertation, "us" versus "them" language has been historically key to how white rodeo maintains its boundaries and regulates the use of the cowboy figure within its performances; Scofield's work demonstrates how this linguistic strategy is also utilized in Black, gay, imprisoned, and feminine rodeo performance to police identity. Further, Scofield

posits that rodeo performance can be analyzed as an “epistemology of the West: a specific way of knowing, or making others know, that one is western” (Ibid.). In other words, rodeo performances can tell us exactly what kind of ways of being count as Western for contestants, producers, and audiences alike. For this dissertation, I push Scofield’s point further to argue that music is a foundational component of that epistemology and performance, both in how it imports cultural values and identities into rodeo through music as well as how the popular music that calls on rodeo codes and tropes exports Western ideology into popular culture at large.

Much like Scofield’s monograph, Elyssa Ford’s book is separated into chapters based on different rodeo contexts: Mexican *charreada*, Hawaiian rodeo, Indigenous rodeo, Black rodeo, and the gay rodeo circuit. Ford argues that all of these groups of people participate in rodeo “not just as sport but as a way to proclaim their right to the American past and to their American identity today” (Ford 2020: 1). Like Scofield, she considers rodeo to be a “site of cultural history,” a place where the past is “performed, reproduced, and invented” (Ibid.: 3). In Ford’s book, participating in rodeo is not necessarily about policing identity as it is in Scofield’s text, but rather about finding space in a historical, national narrative through redefinition. For example, some participants feel comfortable with the gender roles inscribed so strictly onto rodeo, while others chafe at them and push back. Her chapter on *charreada* dialogues with Laura Barraclough’s 2019 *Charros*, which chronicles contemporary *charreada* and how its competitors are utilizing the figure of the *charro* to engage with and challenge the American cowboy while negotiating masculinity, nationality, and Western authenticity. Similarly, Ford’s chapter on Hawaiian rodeo and ranching culture reflects the discussion in David Wolman and Julian Smith’s *Aloha Rodeo* of how paniolo’s

entry into rodeo completely upends popular conceptions of “cowboys and Indians” while complicating the way we conceive of identity, imperialism, and race (Wolman and Smith 2019: 3).

The unifying thread across all these rodeo contexts is a desire on behalf of participants to see their non-white, non-straight, or non-masculine identity reflected in history, and to then build a shared present through cementing and performing ties to historical authenticity. I suggest that this is possible in large part because of how deeply and thoroughly contemporary mainstream rodeo has constructed these connections in its own history. Both Scofield and Ford have noted that much of rodeo scholarship centers white folks, and this is true, but very few of those monographs have actively investigated how rodeo has come to be constructed as white beyond basic lip service to segregation in the era of rodeo’s professionalization. In contrast, the collection of literature discussed in the above paragraphs is important in how it highlights the highly variable nature of contemporary and historical rodeo cowboy identity. Many of these texts have also hinted towards ways that rodeo performances by marginalized competitors have both changed and upheld the broader “epistemology of the West” that rodeo represents (Scofield 2019: 5). In this dissertation, however, I work toward understanding the way that music is utilized and wielded by rodeo competitors and administrators who are not on the margins, but rather at rodeo’s self-constructed center. Doing so allows us to see the mechanisms by which the conventional cowboy icon is continually upheld and reinforced as authentic through entertainment and spectacle in professional rodeo, even as that icon may be sonically or performatively challenged in other spheres of popular culture by musicians, artists, and videographers. Because music circulates so widely, and through its sonic codes and lyrical content is so



well suited for carrying moral and meaning, it provides a uniquely effective means for producers to add layers of complex narrative to any moment of the rodeo that line up with the kind of cowboy identity they are trying to convey.

I argue in this dissertation that at the 2020 National Finals Rodeo an idealized version of authentic cowboy identity is conveyed to audiences by highlighting connections between competitors and old-timey Americana through visuals and sounds rooted in nostalgic twentieth-century aesthetics and values. Many of today's rodeo cowboys have never ridden a range, but this fact seems to matter less now than adherence to Western social codes that are tied to nostalgia for a time when the range still existed. In professional rodeo, the historical and systematic violence that undergirds the idea of the Old West is sanitized by avoiding any explicit references to unjust or colonial violence against others. Instead, it is glamorized by highlighting the ritualized conflict between man and beast that so fundamentally characterizes rodeo events and by glorifying that struggle for victory through connecting it to similar struggles experienced by soldiers and law enforcement officers. Associating the cowboy figure with violence goes beyond simply acknowledging the frontier past he represents, however. In many ways, being a cowboy is about having the capacity for violence and struggle, but also for restraint.

Perhaps the most important theme that contributes to the reinforcement of these tropes in rodeo is the concept of cowboys being authentically Western because of their commitment to the idea of freedom. This manifests in many ways, but the most conventional connection comes in the popularly-cultivated image of the cowboy riding the open range, free to go where he wants and do what he wants with his trusty horse by his side. In the twenty-first century, however, that image is no longer accurate as barbed wire fences,

railroad tracks, and federal range laws have thoroughly parceled out and privatized the West (Hornbeck 2010). Academic work on the increasingly prominent collegiate rodeo circuit also points out that the development of pre-professional rodeo indicates a changing demographic when it comes to rodeo cowboys of the twenty-first century; while some do come from rural backgrounds, now many professionals competing at the national level are university-educated and occupy different social positions than the cowboys of the nineteenth and twentieth century (Mahoney 2004, Theodori 2006 and 2007). Fewer and fewer cowboys actually work on the proverbial “range,” and some rodeo competitors have never actually even worked with livestock on a ranch before entering the circuit for the first time (Branch 2018).

This reality is one that the NFR’s opening ceremonies work to veil, choosing instead to maintain a grip on authenticity by highlighting connections between competitors and old-timey Americana through visuals and sounds rooted in nostalgic twentieth-century aesthetics and values. Sociologist Beverly Stoeltje, building on the work of scholar Américo Paredes, suggests that the “longing for a past when men were engaged in a struggle for something they considered noble and worthy”—i.e. the freedom that the American West represented—was key to how the figure of the cowboy became a fabricated folk hero (Stoeltje 2012: 54). Paredes tied this nostalgia to the concept of *machismo*, noting that in the United States an “artificial and grotesque” manliness emerged and continued to grow throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century because of a burgeoning sense of nationalism (Paredes [1967] 1993: 223-234). He suggests that in the United States, “machismo betrays a certain element of nostalgia; it is cultivated by those who feel they have been born too late. The North American *macho* acts as if the Wild West had never

come to an end” (Ibid.: 234). Stoeltje connects this idea to a heritage-focused idea of nationalism, where in looking back at the past, individuals construct a sanitized perspective that “glamorizes it, removing the danger, disease, and death, and creating unity in the present” (Stoeltje 2012: 52).

The Wild West was dangerous in many ways, though it is difficult to definitively quantify the violence of the period due to both sources prone to exaggeration and the over-representation of criminals in Western movies, tv-shows, and dime novels.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the proliferation of inter-personal violence in the 1800s, death and disease were rampant as medicine continued to develop, and the colonial violence of expansion was (and still is) widespread and deeply traumatic for Indigenous people (Sánchez and Pita 2021). Further, rodeo’s roots in Wild West shows reveal that the concept of a “Wild West” in the first place is a partially constructed one; indeed, folks like Buffalo Bill and other early Western entertainers “helped ‘tame’ the American West, metaphorically revealing a ‘wild’ West in need of control” (Masterson 1990: 13). Through creating and populating a vast, wild land ripe with the possibility of violence, the cowboy has always been positioned to occupy the role of the reluctant hero by defending that imagined landscape.

Associating the cowboy figure with violence goes beyond simply acknowledging the frontier past he represents, however. In many ways, being a cowboy is about having the capacity for violence and struggle, but also for restraint. The idea of engaging in a struggle only for “something they considered noble and worthy” suggests that any violence that

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, many scholars have suggested that the Wild West was *not* very violent, but rather that a mixture of things contribute to our perceptions of it as such, including (a) an overreliance on fictionalized accounts of the West, (b) the sensationalized nature of much news media from that time period, and (c) an overreaction by New Western historians devoted to overturning the erasing impetus of the Frederick Turner’s frontier thesis and highlighting instead the historical violence done to marginalized groups (Benson 1998, DiLorenzo 2010, Dykstra 2009).

might ensue in such a struggle is reluctant; they might prefer a quiet life of solitude and freedom, but when something needs fixing, the cowboy is compelled to act (Stoeltje 2012: 54). As Stoeltje and Paredes suggest, this idea of necessary violence, rooted in the impulse to protect and expand, has its basis in cultures of masculinity from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Americas. Specifically, scholars have discussed the many ways that physical violence was a key part of building a concept of masculinity built on a “culture of honor” where honor “equates with the strength and power of a man to enforce his will on others... In this culture, a man has to be ready to strike back at all times” (Moore 2014: 31). It is not necessarily a natural proclivity for violence that spurs action, but the necessity of protecting one’s honor. Indeed, as the figure of the cowboy developed throughout the twentieth century, honor and the capacity to do what’s right became central to the values attributed to that cultural icon.

The existing literature on rodeo makes it clear that rodeo’s history, rituals, and continued place in U.S. American society are tied up in complex discourse around what makes someone an authentic cowboy. Recently, in an interview with Nevada Colwell and Steve Goedert for the NFR Extra podcast, professional bareback rider Kaycee Feild discusses the widespread performance of “cowboy manners” in rodeo as being tied to an appreciation for the history of the sport and those who have competed before them:

I think part of it [(“the cowboy way”)] is young guys really respect our elders, and the champions that have come and gone, and I also think that our culture, the Western culture which is probably the most patriotic culture there is... [is the] backbone [of that]... they know right from wrong, and they know it in their heart, and just because there’s a lotta wrong going on right now doesn’t mean it’s okay. I think cowboys are just... y’know, I don’t know if that’s hard-headed or what it is, but they respect who they are and what life is really about, and I think the mannerism is kind of all in that. (Feild 2021: 20:57).

In just a few sentences, Feild has made explicit the link for him—and other rodeo competitors—between patriotism, Western identity, and an appreciation for the past. Cowboy authenticity, for these athletes, does not rely on riding the range in the twenty-first century. Instead, a commitment to upholding historic Old West values is foregrounded, perhaps because it is attainable for most twenty-first century cowboys in a way that roaming the range is not. We have shifted from a concept of freedom that indexes the territorial vastness of the Western frontier to one that emphasizes a perspective centering national and even Constitutional freedoms. Feild’s quote above illustrates, too, that the ability to distinguish “right” from “wrong” is important, and implies that a real cowboy will stand up for what’s right because they “know it in their heart.” In this dissertation, I argue that this idea of Western authenticity—and patriotism—is a central premise of the rodeo in the twenty-first century.

### **Literature Review: Sports, Music, and the Self**

This project also contributes to recent literature on music and sports. Considering music and sport together opens up a realm of representation that has attracted several scholars in recent years, many of whom have examined how sport produces and regulates particular kinds of bodies and identities (Armstrong and Young 1999, Bateman 2014, Hammond 2011, Jack 2013, Kytö 2011). Beyond the obvious similarities between music and sports in terms of how both regulate the movements and actions of participants, in the context of nationalism the synergy between music and sport as governing practices can construct, contest, reinforce, and negotiate individual and group identity. Sports scholar Ken McLeod argues that “sports and popular music are most firmly linked in their common

appeal to the body and its pleasures by means of both participation and spectatorship,” and indeed the unifying locus of the body is where identity is most clearly expressed in sports (McLeod 2011: 1). Anthropologists Noel Dyck and Eduardo Archetti take this idea further, positing that sport and dance both represent “techniques of the body” (Mauss 1973) that allow space for the production, reproduction, and contestation of identities but also function as “penetrating analytical vantage points from which to apprehend the taken-for-granted arrangements and assumptions of social life” (Dyck and Archetti 2003: 2).

For rodeo, national identity is the umbrella beneath which other identity categories fall, and a U.S. American identity that reifies a nostalgic shared past is central to the patriotic project of rodeo. Many sports scholars have argued that competitive sports represent opportunities for spectators and athletes alike to identify with their nation socially, ideologically, and in their bodies (Buchanan 2002, Hammond 2011, Schoonderwoerd 2011). In her work on Bulgarian soccer culture and nationalism, ethnomusicologist Donna Buchanan has argued that both music and sport are “powerful forms of cultural performance that possess the ability to generate national sentiment, and even to transform that sentiment into prescriptions for nationalist action” (Buchanan 2002: 24). Rodeo operates in a very similar way, utilizing music to infuse the sporting event with a nationalist ethos predicated on nostalgia. It is not an altogether different attitude from the one that drove Donald Trump’s 2016 “Make America Great Again” campaign, and indeed the messages of both rodeo and Trump’s campaign rely on the same nostalgia for an American past that was somehow more authentic, more free, than the America we live in now. Further, they both posit that only through direct action can that imagined past be recovered, reclaimed, and remade in the present.

In this dissertation, I argue that professional rodeo makes use of music and media to narrow its lens onto a single interpretation of the way these identities intersect, often obfuscating all other perspectives. Rodeo competitors and audiences alike are offered the chance to experience what it means to be a true, patriotic American, but only if they believe in the authenticity of the image being embodied in the arena before them. The figure of the cowboy, so fundamentally different now from what it was in the nineteenth century, retains a historical authenticity that is entirely dependent on the participants' willingness to let their nostalgia for an imagined past color the way they interpret rodeo events and performances. The cowboys and cowgirls in the arena likewise represent a history that can still be accessed by contemporary audiences and competitors through engagement with rodeo, allowing them to "[bear] the nation in their bodies" just as capoeira dancers or Bulgarian soccer players do (Buchanan 2002: 24). Music and sport work together in rodeo's past and into its future to provide audiences with a narrative that feels continuous, both incredibly real and yet also always calling back to an era where times were simpler. Musicologist Beth Levy has argued that the Wild West and its associated figures were historically a "natural and strategic choice for projects both romantic and modern, individual and communal, nostalgic and progressive" (Levy 2012: 2), and I further argue that this tension between past and present is an important part of contemporary rodeo's continued success.

## **Chapter Summaries**

In order to understand the contemporary constellation of music, media, identity, and sport that defines rodeo in the twenty-first century, first the history of that entanglement must be made explicit. Chapter Two of this dissertation lays out a brief musical history of

rodeo, beginning with Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows and journeying all the way up to the present day. This dissertation marks the first time this full historical narrative has been collected into one place in print, and for this reason I elected to focus in this chapter on some of the biggest names and trends found at each period in rodeo's history. First, I discuss the foundational relationship between rodeo and popular music—at the turn of the twentieth century, this meant brass band music, vaudeville, and ragtime—that began with Wild West shows, noting how these shows laid the foundational for professional, competitive rodeo in later years through their mythologization of the Old West and their musical Othering of non-white performers. This trend continued throughout the twentieth century in a variety of ways, from heavy reliance on famous white country-western performers like Merle Haggard and Gene Autry to the gradual incorporation of more diverse genres in the last thirty years, though only as themed one-offs and never the main, unmarked event.

This discussion of musical inclusion and exclusion lays the groundwork for later chapters, where I discuss how contemporary rodeos work to perform specific manifestations of cowboy and American identity. It also reveals the prevalence of military and hyper-patriotic influence in rodeo's inception as a sport. I argue in this chapter that the rodeo cowboy, increasingly the only "real" cowboy left in the United States as the proverbial frontier continued to disappear in the twentieth century, came to represent this nexus of influences and sentiments, both in the rodeo contest and in the music accompanying it. The cowboy identity put forth by rodeo throughout this time period remained remarkably consistent despite changing times and political contexts, and its assumed whiteness, rurality, and pro-military attitude have all become baked into the contemporary iterations of the cowboy that the rest of this dissertation analyzes. I also argue that country music, the genre



most consistently associated with rodeo through its history, plays a particularly important part in how that identity has been constructed and maintained across the twentieth century.

Chapter Three builds on this history to compare the ways that historically-informed ideas of nostalgia, authenticity, and patriotism have come together in both rodeo and country music to influence the way that individuals in both spheres have engaged with the process of identity-making in the twenty-first century. I first examine rodeo's recent history of involvement with the U.S. military, discussing the international military rodeo circuit for the first time in academic scholarship as well as examining the American military rodeo circuit and the professional rodeo's dedication to supporting United States troops with fundraisers, international tours, and dedicated opening ceremonies and events. Many rodeo competitors both past and present have been involved in the military, as far back as the ex-military individuals working in Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows, and I will discuss in my fourth chapter how deeply themes of pro-military propaganda and patriotism have been embedded in the most recent professional rodeos via their opening ceremonies. I also explore the way that country music has become a bastion of pro-military sentiment in the twenty-first century; historically, country singers have often engaged with the struggle and trauma of war, with country songs even being used as military recruitment tools in the 1950s, but after the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, country took on a much more overtly jingoistic tone in its portrayal of patriotism. This sharpening of topical focus, as well as country's already established tendency to lift up narratives of white, working-class, conservative Americans, led to it fitting naturally with rodeo's emphasis on nostalgia for the Old West.

Chapter Three also deals with some recent controversies in the country and rodeo spheres that share the same root tensions because of how they highlight shared values and

interpretations of identity. I discuss public backlash to the National Finals Rodeo's 2020 many production decisions related to the COVID-19 pandemic—most rodeo-goers who were active on social media protested any concessions made to the pandemic—alongside some other recent controversies around the acceptability of blackface performances at events and diversity on rodeo committees. In a similar vein, I also unpack some of country's more recent scandals, including the blacklisting of The Chicks for their anti-war comments in 2003, their subsequent re-entry into the genre with Beyoncé at the 2016 Country Music Association Awards, singer Morgan Wallen's highly-publicized use of the n-word, country singers' flouting of COVID-19 protocols while on tour, and Lady Antebellum's appropriation of Black blues singer Lady A's name and the resulting legal fights that continue at the time of this writing. I discuss these controversies not to shine a negative light on rodeo or on country music, but rather to demonstrate how these highly contentious events in recent years highlight the similarities in audiences, values, and methods of communication in both arenas.

My fourth chapter contains the bulk of my ethnographic work, and relies on the connection between rodeo, country music, patriotism, and cowboy identity established in the previous two chapters to undertake a close analysis of the 2020 National Finals Rodeo. I examine a selection of the opening ceremonies, which begin each night of rodeo for ten consecutive days, with an eye for how they work together to create a gradually deepening narrative for audiences. Each opening ceremony on its own contains a carefully-curated mix of music, video, performance, and ritual that holds meaning for audiences, producers, and competitors in the arena. I argue that these rodeo rituals work to define a specific iteration of cowboy—and, by extension, American—identity that is rooted in patriotism and a

willingness to act to protect (or use) individual or national freedoms. This is accomplished through visually collapsing the distinction between cowboy and soldier, as in the ceremonies where new Marines are sworn in on the arena dirt or in videos where Texas Rangers and rodeo competitors complement each other, and through the deft deployment of differing styles of music to incorporate audiences' emotions and bodies into the spectacle of the rodeo. The overlapping values and audiences between rodeo and country make this ritual legible for participants, and both spheres' histories of patriotism and invisible, nostalgic whiteness link them together in a shared performance of the Old West that stakes a claim to a particular iteration of cowboy identity as the most authentic.

My fifth and final chapter picks up this thread of performativity, turning away from the sport of rodeo to instead examine how the figure of the rodeo cowboy has continued to circulate in popular music outside of the sporting context. To accomplish this, I discuss two different musical contexts with an eye for how rodeo cowboy values are attached to fashion and other visual markers of identity in popular music, which can then either be reaffirmed or subverted through performance. First, I examine a subgenre I call rodeo country, made up of country singers who are personally connected to the sport of rodeo, usually as (ex-)competitors or rodeo queens. These singers explicitly engage with fashion items that, for them and for fans of rodeo and country alike, represent particular personality traits or values, including Stetsons or cowboy hats, boots, belt buckles, and Wrangler jeans. They use these visual markers of rodeo identity to comment on their own determination, grit, and work ethic, and conversely re-ascribe those values explicitly back to those fashion items.

In contrast to this reaffirming subgenre, where the singers' authenticity and validity in the country sphere is not a question, I also discuss recent manifestations of the Black

West, known as the “Yeehaw Agenda,” in popular music (Malandro 2018). The American West was always a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural place, but that history has been whitewashed so thoroughly that when non-white folks claim cowboy identity in the twenty-first century they are often met with racist backlash and controversy. In Chapter Five, I analyze two different cases of Black cowboy identity appearing in popular music to discuss how the symbols and trappings of cowboy identity are utilized by artists in other genres. Rapper Megan Thee Stallion has made extensive use of Western aesthetics in her music videos and performances, and her recent collaboration with Los Angeles crew the Compton Cowboys for her Apple Music Awards performance represents a sharp contrast to the conservative, nostalgic atmosphere where cowboy aesthetics normally appear, even as the underlying message of work ethic and grit remain the same. As her performance took place fully under the rap genre’s umbrella, no one protested her use of cowboy aesthetics. In contrast, Lil Nas X’s country-trap hit “Old Town Road” was met with intense controversy because of his Blackness and his initial Billboard chart categorization as a country artist. Both Lil Nas X and Megan Thee Stallion represent equally authentic embodiments of the contemporary Black West, and they utilize the same visual markers of cowboy identity that rodeo country musicians do, but the identity politics of popular music genres caused those performances to be received very differently, revealing unspoken assumptions about whiteness in both country and rodeo. Both types of performance also serve to give us insight into how the cowboy figure maintains its relevance in the twenty-first century, and what alternative sets of values might be poised to infiltrate the sacred space of rodeo in the years to come.

## **Chapter 2: Rodeo's Musical History<sup>3</sup>**

*cw: racist terminology, descriptions of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism*

[The Wild West] is the best and most valuable object lesson in the history of our common country ever conceived or carried into magnificent, colossal and effective execution by the genius of man. It pictures faithfully, because the actors in this great drama of civilization are not mimic artists, but are the veritable heroes of the real conflict waged to proclaim civilization and freedom from Ocean to Ocean, and from Gulf to Gulf. Truth is stamped upon its every act and illuminates its every illustration.

— 1895 program for *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*

Rodeo has been musical since its earliest days as a sport. From its beginnings in the Wild West shows that proliferated at the end of the nineteenth century to singing cowboy Gene Autry's heavy hand in the early commercialization of rodeo, music and sound have been integral to the way that the sport has formed and developed over the twentieth century. Despite this, music has often fallen to the background in academic considerations of rodeo's structure, impact, and relevance throughout history. A few publications have touched briefly on music's historic presence in rodeo, though it seldom receives more than a mention (Allen 1998, Keillor 2002, Levy 2012, Turnbull 2016). However, attending any sort of rodeo today will clearly illustrate how profoundly music has permeated every aspect of the show and how it conditions spectators' responses, from pre-rodeo entertainment to music that occurs during events to affiliated concerts that take place once the rodeo is over. In order to understand these contemporary events, however, it is necessary to provide an overview of the key historical contexts that created them. In this chapter, I lay out the musical foundations of rodeo in the last century, paying particular attention to what each set of

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<sup>3</sup> To listen along with the musical examples in this chapter, follow this link to the YouTube playlist: <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLVZ1WtQdnGkiJnsf4NSFdd1YZKPhZtbzw>

genres and historical contexts show us about the kinds of values that are brought to rodeo through music. Wild West shows, cowboy bands, singing cowboys, and popular music all come together in this chapter to give us a clearer look at what constitutes the musically imagined West for rodeo audiences and producers alike throughout the twentieth century.

Throughout this chapter, I specifically argue that rodeo and the military have been entwined since the beginning of rodeo's history because of the way both soundscapes evoke connections to a particular brand of U.S. American patriotism, where defending (and exercising) personal and national freedoms are of the utmost importance. I also suggest that examining rodeo's musical history gives insight into the ways in which "restorative nostalgia"—Svetlana Boym's term for a nostalgia that attempts to reconstruct some elusive distant home or shared past under the banner of authentic "truth and tradition"—operates as a critical feature of the American rodeo throughout its long history (Boym 2001: xviii). Even in its earliest days, newly forged from the remnants of Wild West shows in the early twentieth century, rodeo's appeal largely lies in the way it invites its spectators, competitors, and administrators to participate in a collective act of imagining an Old West where freedom could be found in every river bend and open plain. Music, as an active agent in the process of making knowledge, plays an important role in defining this collective history and giving form to the identities produced by rodeo's symbolic performances.

In the ritualized and embodied performances of cowboy identity that underpin rodeo, a particular romanticized narrative of the American West is made real for its participants. That narrative is brought to active life in the figure of the cowboy in myriad ways through rodeo performances, and music's complex nexus of nostalgia and authenticity in the rodeo context helps to define and mythologize a white-washed and larger-than-life cowboy figure.

When this figure is taken up and circulated in performances at the rodeo and beyond, it becomes a fluid place where issues of inclusion and exclusion are negotiated throughout history. This chapter also emphasizes the role played by cowboys in rodeo administration and production to note that the very individuals for whom rodeo's imagery really matters are often the ones driving the development of that imagery. Boym writes that "fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future" (Ibid.: xvi). In the case of rodeo, this is reflected in how music informs present portrayals of cowboy identity, built on imagined figures from the past, while also contributing to the ways those performances are embodied and carried into the future by participants and spectators, shaping rodeos to come. The cowboys who run rodeos have always been both personally and professionally invested in rodeo's narrative, and they make use of the way that rodeo speaks to markers of identity both on a national and a deeply intimate level to reinforce their own worldviews while also adapting them to a changing cultural climate throughout history.

### **Beginnings: Wild West Shows, Cowboy Bands, and Early Rodeo's Musical Entertainment**

As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, rodeo as a sport was partially inspired by the Wild West shows that were so popular throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While there were several shows touring the United States and elsewhere at any given time in this era, the most famous of these is *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*,

a show led by Buffalo Bill Cody in various forms from 1883 to 1913.<sup>4</sup> *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* toured around the United States as well as abroad, spreading a carefully curated image of the American West as it did so. Much academic literature has been devoted to Wild West shows in general, and to Buffalo Bill's career in particular, and these works have shown that frontier entertainment had wide-reaching implications for the way that American and international audiences conceived of the proverbial Wild West and the mythologized individuals who populated it (Deahl 1975, Kasson 2000, Laegrid 2014, Levy 2012, Reddin 1999, Rydell and Kroes 2005, Warren 2005). In this section, I will explore the musical components of these shows that have set the stage for contemporary rodeo's musical context.

Despite the scholarly attention paid to the show as a whole, comparatively little work has been done on what *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* would have sounded like. In his dissertation, American Studies scholar Michael L. Masterson argues that music played a vital role in the Wild West's operation as a vehicle for expressing the American expansionist ethos, while also teaching specific historical perspectives and values (Masterson 1990: 55). Archived show programs, newspaper clippings, and letters show that although multiple kinds of musical performance took place before, during, and after each show, the so-called Cowboy Band was the most prominent. Made up of brass and wind instruments, standard for the popular bands of this time period, they were directed by band leader William Sweeney and dressed in traditional cowboy attire. They played a variety of songs from popular

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<sup>4</sup> While *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* only ran during these years, Buffalo Bill Cody found formal employment in popular Wild West entertainment beginning with an 1872 show called *The Scouts of the Prairie*, produced by Ned Buntline in Chicago. In 1874 he worked on a new play called *Scouts of the Plains*, before founding the *Buffalo Bill Combination* in 1874, a performing troupe that toured for ten years before the founding of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*. After the show went bankrupt in 1913, Cody cycled through a few other employment opportunities before dying in poverty in 1917 (Fees).



entertainment catalogues of the day, including instrumental versions of opera arias, ragtime hits, waltzes, and more, and indeed programs for these shows often contained advertisements from music publishers whose catalogues were being tapped (Masterson 1995). In 1995, Masterson drew on his extensive research into the show's musical history and produced an album entitled *Wild West Music of Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band*, performed by the Americus Brass Band and directed by Dr. Masterson. The track listing for this album can be found in Appendix A, and it illustrates the Cowboy Band's versatility with respect to genre, ranging from Handel to military marches to European and American folk tunes.

Several important trends become apparent in examining the music of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*: first, patriotism and military sounds have been incorporated into the spectacle of the Wild West from its beginning; second, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* show provided a fertile ground for turning the American West into an imaginary place both at home and abroad; and third, issues of identity (particularly race, gender, and class) have seldom been as stable as they appear on the rodeo or Wild West show stage. The first of these trends is manifest in the opening sounds spectators would have heard when attending *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*: the Cowboy Band gathering together to play "The Star-Spangled Banner."<sup>5</sup> This practice was not established within American sports more broadly until well into the twentieth century, though there are records of the song being played at some baseball and basketball games in the late nineteenth century; some suggest that Buffalo Bill's show spreading the practice across the United States and abroad contributed to the song's installation as the national anthem in 1931 (Ferris 2014, Masterson 1995). The playing of the future national anthem functioned to frame the show in a patriotic light just as it welcomed and enfolded

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<sup>5</sup> See "The Star Spangled Banner" in the YouTube playlist for an example of what this would have sounded like.

spectators into a shared mythology of Americana. The song’s wartime history and connotations—poet Francis Scott Key wrote the lyrics in 1812 after witnessing the British attack on Fort McHenry in Baltimore—also inspire feelings of national pride in conquest and protective violence that will be reinforced in the spectacle that follows it. Masterson argues that hearing “The Star-Spangled Banner” in this fashion caused audiences to “mentally suspend real time” to become actors in the pageantry of the American West, allowing themselves to identify with the heroes of the arena (Masterson 1990: 56-57). As the fourth chapter in this dissertation argues, this framing device continues to function in this exact way in twenty-first century rodeo, where opening ceremonies and patriotic pageantry incorporate audiences actively into the contest playing out in the arena before them.

Patriotism also colored the sounds of *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* through the prolific military soundscapes that undergirded many of the recreated battles and historic vignettes that made up the show. Not only do battle marches and military airs occupy a significant space on the Cowboy Band’s program (see Appendix A), but so do the loud, raucous sounds of cheering and shouting interrupted by musket and cannon fire.<sup>6</sup> Music and warfare have been intertwined for millennia, and that history is far too extensive to cover in this dissertation, but particularly within the United States band music has a long history of being utilized during war to heighten morale, regulate movement and strategy, and serve ceremonial functions.<sup>7</sup> As military bands began to see less actual combat moving into the twentieth century and their ceremonial functions increased, bands’ repertoire also adjusted to include a wider range of popular songs of the day while retaining a body of martial music.

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<sup>6</sup> See “The Passing of Red Man” and “Offenbachiana” in the YouTube playlist for an example of the kind of music the Cowboy Band would have been performing at this time.

<sup>7</sup> Interested parties might begin with Newsome 1998, Riley and Brucher 2013, and Sullivan 2017.

The Cowboy Band leader, cornet player William Sweeney, knew these genres and sounds well; he was hired by Buffalo Bill in 1883 after spending 10 years serving in the United States Army on the Western frontier, and the music he programmed for the *Wild West* correlates with these trends (Conrad 2016). Alongside the sounds and smells of gunfire and explosive cannons, the music of this show brought to the fore the military history of expansion and violence that goes hand in hand with the making of American legends and icons.

When it came to creating the iconic cowboy, specifically, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* utilized more than military and patriotic sounds to craft this figure. Musically, the Cowboy Band also participated in acts of sonic whitewashing and racial stereotyping, appropriating non-white popular music genres and pairing them with exploitative casting and representations of non-white actors. Various iterations of Buffalo Bill's entertainment complex included white and Black cowboys, Mexican vaqueros, Argentinian gauchos, Indigenous horsemen, Russian and Ukrainian Cossacks, and even Berber-speaking riders from the Middle East (Rogers and Seefeldt 2010). In 1893, Buffalo Bill changed the title of his show to *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World* to reflect this varied makeup, but also to index a particular kind of masculinity; riders from around the world were included to bind them together in a "brotherhood of manly international riders" but also to highlight the superiority of the (white) American cowboy, who "stood as the finest image of manliness" (Ibid.). While the performances included actors of many ethnicities, the white cowboys were centered in displays of victory and domination. In other words, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* was in some ways radically inclusive for the time, but only to serve a larger purpose of reinstating rough-and-tumble whiteness at the top of the

masculine hierarchy it presented to audiences. Beyond the visual components of colonizing narratives, where white actors repeatedly achieved victory over non-white actors, this was partially accomplished through curated use of non-white musical genres. This spoke to the way popular culture at the time whitewashed and appropriated the products of non-white artists more generally in a process of “mining the musical resources of minority populations” intended to help “[solidify] a national identity based on frontiers of cultural exchange,” which resulted in the nostalgic softening of the violent process of empire (Levy 2012: 19).

Two striking manifestations of this practice are in the coon songs and indigenous melodies arranged and deployed by the Cowboy Band during *Wild West* shows. Coon songs, so titled for the slur (“coon”) meaning “Black person,” represented a genre that presented racist stereotypes of Black people and Black music that were extremely popular among white audiences throughout the nineteenth century, especially on the minstrel show stage.<sup>8</sup> These stereotypes often portrayed Blackness as wild, sexual, and primitive in nature, especially in the context of jazz and ragtime, and these caricatures found purchase both at home and abroad (Latham 2002, Thompson 2018). Programs from the *Wild West*’s active years tell us that Buffalo Bill’s Cowboy Band regularly performed coon songs, ragtime songs, early jazz pieces, and other pieces of music that were taken from contemporary Black musical traditions in their pre-show concerts, but almost never during the main show. Isolating the music of Black people to pre-show entertainment and diversion separated it from the more conventionally white music that played during the reenactments themselves.

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<sup>8</sup> Readers interested in learning more about the history of minstrelsy in the United States might begin with Eric Lott’s *Love And Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993) and William J. Mahar’s *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (1999).

Much like the inclusion of non-white riders and reenactors in *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, sonic inclusion in these shows was exploitative, and the end result was to reify whiteness as the most ideal social category while reinforcing the message that America would always emerge victorious in its various exploits of conquest and imperialism.

Indigenous songs too had a place in *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, though at first glance a very different one than Black musics. Indigenous horsemen and actors played a big role in many of the acts in the Wild West show, and indeed one of the central themes of each show was “cowboys versus Indians,” as historic battles between various white and Indigenous groups of people were reenacted as one of the main events. Also present in most shows were various presentations done by Indigenous people of their horsemanship, marksmanship, or dances. Publicity materials often represent Native performers as fulfilling the “noble savage” or “vanishing Indian” role, but those same photos and illustrations were often accompanied by comments by the performers themselves. These comments, alongside other primary sources, have allowed scholars to argue that Native performers were more than hired actors in these shows, and that in fact they made use of Wild West shows to assert their own opinions, viewpoints, and messages about what mattered to them (Black Elk 1952, McNenly 2014 and 2015). And yet, many accounts of Wild West shows throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggest that indigenous performers were frequently mistreated while the roles they played in the arena continued to spread misinformation and reinforce the popular racist notion that Indigenous people were savage, violent, and in need of taming or domestication (Allen 2015).

Indigenous music, unlike the Black musics arranged by the Cowboy Band that were already integrated into popular culture in the U.S., was also utilized to further caricature

Indigenous actors in *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*. It usually appeared in two forms: first, actual Indigenous songs sung, played, and danced by Indigenous people, though curated by white showrunners; and second, arrangements of “Indian-sounding” songs by the Cowboy Band that functioned as sonic markers of colonialism and conquest (Masterson 1990). Audiences responded with confusion and wonder to the actual indigenous singing and playing, utilizing racist terminology and expressions of Othering to convey their feelings. One Philadelphia reporter, responding to a performance led by a Sioux man named American Horse, described what he heard as “a chorus of unearthly howls” (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1886). Another reporter indicated distaste for a performance of “Nearer My God to Thee” by a group of Sioux singers, who performed the song in their own language: the timbre used was one “that would make a buzz saw shudder” (*The Morning Journal*, 1886). This language compares Sioux vocality to the sounds of either animals or tools, and contributes to the dehumanizing effect of such performance contexts.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, band leader Karl L. King, who took over the Cowboy Band in 1914, followed a popular trend in classical music of the late nineteenth century and tried to fit indigenous tunes into Euro-American band contexts. As Jamake Highwater puts it, “sometimes it seems possible that composers have done a better job of ripping off the Indian than the military. Everyone from Dvořák to John Alden Carpenter has attempted to capture the redman in a musical cage, compounded of notes and bars forged in western Europe” (Highwater 1982: 3). By containing Indigenous musical themes within the bounds of a Euro-

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<sup>9</sup> Using this type of language to refer to Indigenous musicking has been part of North American colonization since the 1400s, when missionaries and colonists used dehumanizing words to justify their brutal colonialism to themselves and audiences at home, to displace contemporaneous fears and beliefs about witchcraft onto indigenous people, and to reinforce colonial racial hierarchies that placed white colonizers on top (Bloechl 2004, Porterfield 1992, Ochoa-Gautier 2014, Tomlinson 2013, White 2015).

American band, band music's superiority is asserted smoothly over Indigenous musicking, and its contrast with the "coarse" sounds of Indigenous singing maintains both parts of the "noble savage" stereotype (*The Morning Journal* 1886).

It is clear that, throughout *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, these borrowed musics did not appear as they did in their original contexts. The Cowboy Band, in arranging things for brass band and for the particular setting of the Wild West, whitewashed these sounds by smoothing out their "rougher edges," forcing them to fit into white Euro-American tuning systems, genre conventions, and concert settings. Just like in rodeo of the twentieth century and beyond, the dichotomy of wild versus tame or civilized is at play here (Lawrence 1982). Whether referring to the wilderness of the U.S.'s Indigenous people, perceived to be slowly vanishing from a modernizing West, or to the hyper-sexualized primitivism of Black folks and jazz, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* sets up non-white individuals as both temporally distant, locked in a nostalgic past to which we can never return, and also yet very present as foils against which the white U.S.-American cowboy can be held up as ideal.<sup>10</sup> Much attention has been devoted to the predominant feeling at the turn of the century among white men (a feeling that has continued to gain traction into the twenty-first century) of fragility and precarity related to the feminization of the workforce, particularly paired with the industrialization and privatization of the West that relegated working men to smaller and smaller parcels of land.<sup>11</sup> Protecting and glorifying a white masculinity tied to freedom and conquest, then, became one of the *Wild West's* more important ideological goals. In Cody's

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<sup>10</sup> The lack of Mexican songs or influences in *Buffalo Bill's Wild West's* musical repertoire is a striking omission, especially considering the degree to which the show itself was indebted to *charreada*. This may have been an attempt to distance the show from the still popular (and older) *charreada*, ignoring Mexican charros' claims to being the "original cowboys" (Barraclough 2019) by simply excluding them from the musical narrative.

<sup>11</sup> Bederman 1995, Higham 1970, Warren 2003

version of the Wild West, the white cowboys always came out on top, and the black, Mexican, Indigenous, and foreign rough riders were wild but containable—present, but only to be looked at as relics of the past.

None of these trends were isolated to *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, nor did they disappear when it concluded. As the show toured internationally, it spread its curated perspectives on America's frontier as well as stereotypes about the people who occupied it (Kasson 2000, Laegrid 2014, Reddin 1999, Rydell and Kroes 2005, Warren 2005). While Wild West shows were experiencing the height of their popularity at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, early rodeos were already taking place throughout the Western United States as a way for ranch hands and rural cowboys to cling to a way of life that was quickly disappearing (Fredriksson 1985, Westermeier 2005). Where Wild West shows emphasized reenactment, rodeos instead used the language of authenticity; Wild West performers were actors, where rodeo competitors were cowboys. Even though big-name rodeos today like Cheyenne Frontier Days, held in Wyoming, and the Pendleton Round-Up in Oregon were already developing into larger entertainment events, their framing as sporting events where real cowboys competed for real glory cemented their eventual superiority over their more overtly theatrical counterparts. And yet, early rodeo shared many commonalities with Wild West Shows. The programs for the first years of Cheyenne Frontier Days reveal significant organizational similarities; the souvenir program for its first celebration in 1897 lists events that include horse races, Pony Express reenactments, a "sham battle" featuring U.S. troops, bucking horses, and staged scenes from a mythic journey to the West that involved a hold-up and vigilantes (*Cheyenne Frontier Days* 1897). The program also details the presence of several military bands from Cheyenne, Wyoming and Greeley, Colorado, that provided



music during some of the larger events during Frontier Days, as well as some Sioux performers who “gave a fine war dance in the old-time Indian fashion” (Ibid.). Just like *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*, the frontier soundscapes presented here included the sounding of the bugle at the start of battle reenactments, “the discharge of numbers of guns fired as if at an enemy” (Ibid.), and vaudeville acts to provide additional popular entertainment (*Cheyenne Frontier Days* 1901).

Once the pinnacle of entertainment, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West’s* nostalgic recreation of scenes from the Old West was losing its popularity by 1911 in favor of the more authentic rodeo contests. Indeed, Buffalo Bill Cody found himself at odds with Cheyenne Frontier Days in 1911. Newspaper editorials detail Cody’s plans to put on several shows in towns around Cheyenne during Frontier Week, despite being asked to change his schedule so that folks would not have to choose between attending the Wild West show or the rodeo (*Cheyenne State Leader* 1911a). The organizers of Frontier Days were worried about attendance, and chose to emphasize the perceived differences between Cody’s show and theirs to hopefully boost attendance at their event. The Cheyenne State Leader newspaper reported, “The visit of Colonel Cody’s show to this section at the Frontier celebration period will have the effect of enabling the public to observe the difference between the real thing and the showman’s weakly imitation” (*Cheyenne State Leader* 1911b). Cody eventually agreed to take his show elsewhere during Frontier Days, but his deference to them makes the message clear: by 1911, Wild West shows had lost their monopoly on authenticity, and rodeo’s emphasis on work and “real” cowboys was partially responsible for that.

Frontier Days, like other burgeoning rodeos of the time, incorporated the reenactments, entertainment events, and sonic and visual whitewashing of shows like

*Buffalo Bill's Wild West* as they began to shift in emphasis from play to sport. As Wild West shows began to gradually go out of business in the 1910s, rodeos were poised to pick up where folks like Buffalo Bill Cody left off, and they began to expand quickly throughout the United States both in size and popularity. Some events that later became rodeo staples had their roots in shows like Buffalo Bill's. For example, bulldogging—a timed event where cowboys launch themselves off a galloping horse and wrestle a running bull to the ground by its horns—was developed by Black cowboy Bill Pickett, a former Wild West performer, in the early 1900s and is still one of the foundational events of rodeo in 2021. Further, some scholars credit Buffalo Bill's Wild West show as a key factor in bringing rodeo to the United States in the first place through its highlighting of good horsemanship and showcasing the roping skills of the *vaquero* tradition and *charreada*, a type of Mexican rodeo (Gustafson 1988, Rangel 2013). However, by the time rodeo was professionalized in the 1930s the athletes who competed at its top levels were almost entirely white.<sup>12</sup> Just as Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band sonically bounded and whitewashed the Wild West cowboy, so too did early rodeo quickly erase its multi-ethnic origins in favor of highlighting the white cowboy figure due to influences from popular culture and its purveyors, including Gene Autry.

### **Gene Autry: Commercializing Rodeo, Performing Patriotism**

Before World War I, rodeo in the United States largely ran parallel to the Wild West shows that toured at the same time. There was overlap in both events and contestants, and

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<sup>12</sup> Very little information about the ins and outs of the rodeo circuit in the 1910s and 20s is currently accessible, and a deeper dive into this period of rodeo history would require extensive archival research beyond the scope of this dissertation. We know that the term “rodeo” was slowly gaining traction throughout this period, and that a firm concept of the sport did not coalesce until its professionalization in the 1930s.

many cowboys and cowgirls were able to cobble together a decent living by competing and performing on both circuits. As Wild West shows faded into oblivion in the early 1910s, rodeo competitors turned to popular culture's representation of the cowboy for inspiration in how they styled themselves, and ultimately clarity about who was included under the moniker of rodeo cowboy. Previous to this transformation, the cowboy image was largely crafted through late-nineteenth century, silent films, dime novels, and Wild West shows. But as the twentieth century progressed, the singing cowboy of Western films and television rose to prominence, embodied most of all in the actor, singer, and rodeo producer and performer Gene Autry beginning in the 1930s. Gene Autry's influence on rodeo is particularly significant because of how he encouraged theatricality and spectacle, incorporated specific kinds of music into his and other rodeos, and emphasized patriotic display the rodeo event. As later chapters will show, the tone he set for rodeo has developed into a more extreme version of this early pageantry, and has since become industry standard.

Singing cowboys as a filmic archetype first developed in the 1920s, with the earliest perhaps being the country performer Carl T. Sprague, who gained notoriety through performing the cowboy songs he grew up on in Texas.<sup>13</sup> Like many other singing cowboys who would soon populate the silver screen, Sprague grew up on a farm and knew his way around a ranch. The songs he was raised with fit well into the earliest days of the emerging country-western genre, which was commercializing and becoming popular with the advent of widespread recording technology in the 1920s, and relied largely on both Southern and Western folk and regional songs (Malone 1968).<sup>14</sup> As the 1930s arrived, Western films

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<sup>13</sup> See "When the Work's All Done This Fall" in the YouTube playlist to hear Carl Sprague sing.

<sup>14</sup> Country music's long and many-named history will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter. The Lomaxes, who are largely responsible for the enduring popularity of cowboy songs in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, will be discussed in Chapter Five of this dissertation.

coming out of Hollywood got hold of cowboy songs and brought them into the limelight, highlighting them as a valuable genre in and of themselves. This sudden increase in popularity moved the cowboy song away from folk culture, instead aligning it more closely with popular music tastes of the time that included crooning and swing. The topics of the songs remained the same, however, focusing on the life and trials of men working in the rural West. Scholars of Western films and cowboy songs have often argued that generically, Westerns take as their central task “defining the nation by circulating generative myths about the formation of the nation and its national character,” or in other words: “who or what is an American” (Kalinak 2007: 25). I argue in Chapter Four of this dissertation that rodeo takes as its central goal the same exact mission, though while Westerns explore this question through a variety of characters and perspectives the rodeo almost exclusively centers the cowboy icon as the last remaining vestige of the Old West.

This connection between the cowboy figure and national identity in rodeo exists in large part because of Gene Autry’s position as public representative of the singing cowboy figure alongside his extensive involvement with and love for rodeo. Autry, an accomplished country singer and crooner, made his career in film and television portraying (according to Johnny Cash’s song “Who’s Gene Autry?”) “a handsome man on a big fine stallion goin’ about, doin’ good,” who was “an image of justice and goodness and purity” (Cash 1978).<sup>15</sup> Autry’s many roles helped to curate a very specific view of the singing cowboy as a hard-working man with grit and determination, but one who was clean-shaven, respectful, and used music in a calculated way to perform acceptable shows of emotion (Kalinak 2007). Musicologist Stephanie Vander Wel has further argued that Autry worked within the

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<sup>15</sup> For full lyrics, see Appendix B. Also see “Daddy, Who’s Gene Autry?” in the YouTube playlist to listen along with the song.

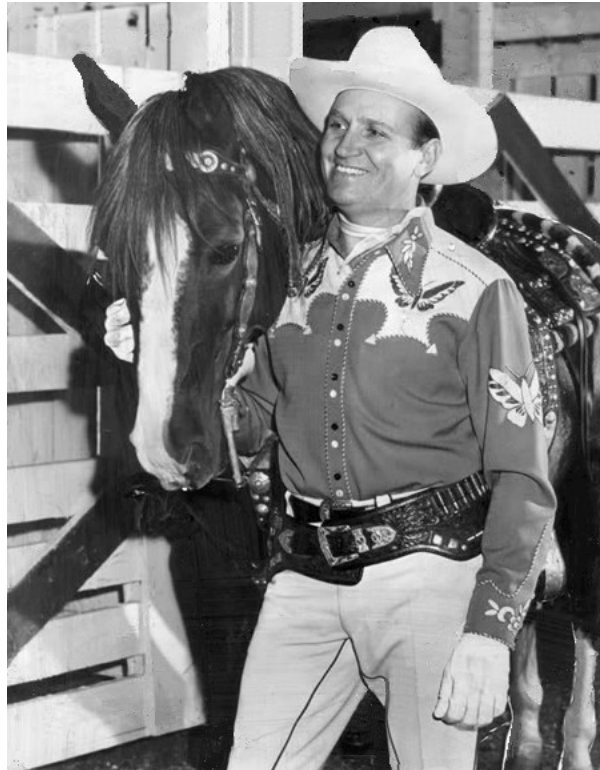
confines of Depression-era gender trouble to “[infuse] the heroic stance of the cowboy with effusive expressions” (Vander Wel 2012: 209), both upholding and subtly questioning dominant gender roles of the day. Musically, Autry and others—notably singing cowgirl Patsy Montana—combined the rhetoric of authenticity granted by cowboy songs’ folk roots with the new popular and mass-mediated idioms of Tin Pan Alley and swing music, crafting a glamorous and Hollywood-tinged version of the Old West that still had limited room for negotiation (Ibid.). In an era where both white masculinity and rurality were fragile and contested, Autry’s sensitive glorification of the white cowboy struck a chord with listeners across the Depression-era United States that continues to ring true in many ways today.<sup>16</sup>

When Autry turned to rodeo in earnest in the 1940s, he brought the swirling nexus of the singing cowboy’s public image with him. Autry’s first big rodeo performance was at the 1933 World Championship Rodeo at the Chicago World’s Fair, and after that he began to tour on the rodeo circuit with increasing frequency. Rodeos all over the country would book Autry to perform as their show’s entertainment headliner, a point of continuity with the earlier Wild West shows that featured musical acts before, during, and after shows. He brought glitz and glamor to the rough-and-tumble rodeo, and brought a degree of both popularity and authenticity through his well-established role as the preeminent singing cowboy of Hollywood. Autry, however, was also inspired by rodeo competitors; reportedly after attending the Colonel W.T. Johnson Rodeo in Dallas in 1936, Autry was so taken with the brightly-colored shirts worn by the bronc riders there that he incorporated this aesthetic into his own attire (George-Warren 2007: 158). The embroidered, piped, pearl-snap shirts so strongly associated with the singing cowboy and the Old West today was born of this

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<sup>16</sup> See “Gene Autry – Back in the Saddle Again” in the YouTube playlist to listen to one of Gene Autry’s most famous songs.

inspiration, and Autry wore shirts like these for most of his career to symbolize his authentic connection to the cowboy identity he performed (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Gene Autry, sporting a typical Western shirt, alongside his horse Champion. © 1950 by CBS

As Autry’s touring career picked up speed, he became the first country-western performer and entertainer to perform at the prestigious Madison Square Garden Rodeo in 1935, and at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo in 1942. Houston in particular considers itself deeply indebted to Autry for the current success and historical trajectory of their rodeo. In fact, Autry headlined the Houston rodeo from 1942-1945, from 1947-1948, and again in 1955.<sup>17</sup> His popularity drove attendance higher each year, and he also reportedly worked behind the scenes in its early years to help ensure the rodeo’s success (RodeoHouston 2021). More importantly for the professionalization of rodeo, all of this

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<sup>17</sup> See “Gene Autry at Fort Madison Rodeo 1940’s” in the YouTube playlist for an example of the type of show Gene Autry put on at smaller rodeos.

sparked a desire in Autry to put together his own rodeo program in 1941, which he named Flying A Ranch Rodeo.

That year, Autry acquired property in Oklahoma where he set up his rodeo company, and he purchased a string of rodeo stock with the intent of making a name for himself as a stock contractor and rodeo producer (George-Warren 2007). However, by the end of 1941 the United States found itself embroiled in the second World War, and Autry enlisted almost immediately. His deployment was delayed due to his filming schedule, alongside complications with his requested commission to serve as a pilot, and the Flying A Ranch Rodeo was able to make its premiere at the Houston Rodeo the same year he headlined as their entertainment act for the first time, on February 6, 1942. His act reportedly included “a spectacular homage to the Wild West show, with actors... masquerading as such heroic American horseman as Buffalo Bill, Teddy Roosevelt, Davy Crockett, and Kit Carson” (Ibid.: 203). The show was a huge success and very popular with audiences, though casting working Hollywood actors to play rodeos proved an unsustainable practice in future years. Aside from the inclusion of musical entertainment, Autry’s Flying A Ranch Rodeo made its mark on rodeo at a pivotal point in its history several other ways: by excluding female competitors, and by inviting militant patriotism into rodeo’s heart.

Before Autry became involved with rodeo, women’s roles were already heavily restricted in most mainstream shows after the 1929 death of cowgirl Bonnie McCarroll, who was crushed beneath a bronc at the Pendleton Roundup. That same year, the Rodeo Association of America (RAA) was formed, an all-male, all-cowboy organization who found in McCarroll’s death the excuse they needed to curtail women’s participation in the more dangerous rodeo events. The RAA also developed the existing points-based

championship system that still persists today, where cowboys' monetary winnings are converted into points that count towards a year-end total, which then determines champion titles. Of course, not every rodeo ascribed to these standards in the RAA's early days, but most did. The Madison Square Garden Rodeo featured a cowgirl bronc riding contest up until 1941, but when Gene Autry's influence was flexed over the rodeo sphere, taking charge of Madison Square Garden and programming at many other large rodeos, that event came to a swift and decisive end (George-Warren 2007: 203). Women had nowhere left to compete in rodeo except as invited barrel racers at male-only rodeos, and this is a trend that largely continues in professional rodeo today.<sup>18</sup> In this way, Autry effectively finalized women's excision from rodeo and relegated them to glamorous (and safe) contests of horsemanship as rodeo queens and ranch girls. While Autry may have invited questioning of gender roles in his films and musical performances, he certainly did not in the way he organized his rodeos.

Autry's persistent focus on patriotism after enlisting in the Air Force represented another significant shift in rodeo's culture. While the singing cowboy icon already had associations with Americana and the Old West through its aesthetics and musical lineage, Autry utilized his position as a public figure to close the distance between nostalgic reenactment and love of country. This tone first became associated with Autry when in 1940 he began producing a weekly radio show called *Melody Ranch*, a variety show that was

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<sup>18</sup> In an attempt to combat this exclusion, the Girls Rodeo Association (GRA) was eventually founded in 1948 after a calf-roping rules dispute at a local, non-sanctioned rodeo. The GRA organized to help find women a place in rodeo after their near-complete exclusion at the hands of producers like Gene Autry. They persisted for decades, eventually becoming the still-operating Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA) in 1981. The WPRA has continued to work with the PRCA to ensure that women's barrel racing is a standard event at PRCA rodeos even if it is not an official PRCA event itself. The WPRA also hosts its own rodeos, with such events as bronc riding, bull riding, team roping, and calf roping open to female competitors, but most WPRA members choose to avoid WPRA rodeos because the purses are so much smaller than those available at PRCA-sanctioned rodeos.



based on the entertainment act Autry performed when he toured rodeos. Each 30-minute episode would include adventure stories, interspersed with musical interludes and the occasional guest star. However, after Autry took his oath of enlistment in July of 1942, *Melody Ranch* began to change its tune. The show's name was changed to *Sergeant Gene Autry*, and the musical material veered away from Western tunes and popular music to instead focus heavily on military songs, Air Force tunes in particular, and the dramas turned from the Western frontier to the war front (George-Warren 2007). Autry's show leaned into this war-time patriotism so heavily that not only did the show actively encourage listeners to join the service and buy war bonds, some episodes went so far as to issue warnings to "any enemies who might be listening" (Ibid.: 204) that the United States was going to win the war, no matter the cost.

Extending Autry's reach overseas and further cementing his role as a patriotic and iconic American figure, deployed servicemen were provided with transcripts of the show, and after Autry was honorably discharged from the Air Force in June of 1945, he and his USO troupe went on an eighty-five-show tour of the bases in the South Pacific where they performed for nearly a million GIs (Ibid.: 220). Autry and his troupe were on Tinian when the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, on Saipan when the second was dropped on Nagasaki three days later, and on Iwo Jima on August 14<sup>th</sup> when Truman announced Japan's surrender (Ibid.). His proximity to such important historic events helped tie his image so thoroughly to patriotic, pro-military sentiment that even though he did not actively pursue military involvement later in life the associations stuck. Autry's rodeos also always included a Cavalcade of Great Americans at the conclusion of each show, a patriotic parade which "highlighted the western nature of the nation's pantheon of heroes" including

George Washington, Theodore Roosevelt, Davy Crockett, and myriad others (Childers 2010: 356). This cavalcade formed a bookend with the opening national anthem that framed the rodeo spectacle, reminding audience members that Sergeant Gene Autry was a patriot, and they should be too.

The 1930s and 1940s were formative years for professional rodeo because of the governing systems and regulations put in place by entities like the Rodeo Association of America. However, Gene Autry's hand also weighed heavily on the way rodeo events were structured as entertainment events. When we consider how rodeo has turned into a massive, commercialized industry that supports thousands of professionals each year and generates millions of dollars in revenue, Autry's part in turning rodeo from competitive sport into big business cannot be overstated. He brought Hollywood style and spectacle to rodeo, providing the necessary bridge from reenactment-focused Wild West shows to rodeo's contemporary entertainment complex. Other singing cowboy individuals tried to follow in Autry's footsteps by headlining major rodeos, including stars like Roy Rogers and Rex Allen, but by the late 1950s popular culture in the United States had begun to move on. For rodeo, this meant a slow shift in entertainment from singing cowboys to general country-western music, and then to popular music more generally. The next section of this chapter will explore this expansion of popular music at the rodeo. Even as popular music evolved, however, rodeo organizers and officials still utilized musical programming to make statements about authenticity, Western values, and the whiteness of the cowboy.

## **Popular Music at the Rodeo**

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, entertainment at rodeo's biggest events followed popular music trends at large while still maintaining a degree of continuity with rodeo's Western and working roots. Contemporary and mainstream rock, pop, and even occasionally funk or soul stars and bands played increasingly large stages as rodeos expanded and venues stretched to include stadiums and sports complexes. Local artists and reenactment groups playing at bars and in tents represented ties to older, more traditional performances that maintained the grittier rodeo and Western aesthetic. Over time, as the genres of rock and pop and country expanded and became even more distinct from each other on the popular music market, the mixture of styles and genres present at professional rodeos also began to become increasingly diverse. Country music still formed the core of rodeo's musical entertainment, as it does today, but an examination of the organizational programming at key rodeos over the years—including Cheyenne Frontier Days, the Houston Stock Show and Rodeo, and the National Finals Rodeo—shows how rodeo responded actively to changing musical contexts after its professionalization in the 1930s. Despite these changes, and the desire on behalf of rodeo officials to appeal to wider audiences, I will argue that the stalwart presence of country music, the retention of cowboy bands into the twenty first century, and the ways that non-country artists have been presented and marketed at rodeos all illustrate how rodeo continues to work hard to uphold its particular view of what it means to be American, to be authentically Western, and to embody the cowboy figure.

*The 1950s: The Sons of the Pioneers and Conservatism*

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, programs for mainstream rodeos show that entertainment did not stray terribly far from the blueprint set by Gene Autry. Singing cowboys like Roy Rogers and Rex Allen performed alongside country-western singers like Jimmy Dean, Eddie Peabody, and Eddy Arnold. Swing and jazz musicians and crooners also began to appear at rodeos fairly frequently, as did actors and actresses from popular Western films of the day, through the 1940s and into the 1950s.<sup>19</sup> As rodeo continued to expand in the 1950s, culminating with the establishment of the first National Finals Rodeo in 1959, rodeo began to move from regional sport to big business. Purse sizes grew alongside attendance numbers, and rodeo committees found themselves suddenly handling much larger events than the small, regional rodeos that were most popular in the first half of the twentieth century. Still, rodeo retained its local connections and military roots through engagement with the pop culture figure of the cowboy. Cowboy bands like the Sons of the Pioneers, formed in the 1930s, performed often at rodeos throughout the 1940s and 1950s, musically reaffirming the link between rodeo and Wild West shows that was so influential to rodeo's early years. Travis Stimeling argues that the Sons of the Pioneers, who were particularly famous in the early 1950s because of their politically-colored radio broadcast *The Lucky "U" Ranch*, were also a good representation of the ways that the cowboy figure was being updated in the early years of the Cold War. Not only did they look the part of clean-cut cowboys, they also embodied the patriotic ideal that Gene Autry and his contemporaries worked so hard to popularize during World War II.

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<sup>19</sup> I combined and collated this data from archival sources (programs, online lists of performers, and pre-collected spreadsheets of performances by year) held by Cheyenne Frontier Days, the National Finals Rodeo, and the Houston Stock Show and Rodeo.



**Figure 2:** The Sons of the Pioneers, reproduced with permission from the Country Music Hall of Fame.

Stimeling identifies *The Lucky “U” Ranch* as a site where popular cowboy musicians were still able to hold sway over cultural attitudes in an era where spies and military men were pop culture’s favorite icons.<sup>20</sup> He argues that the show “called upon the audience to act responsibly within their own communities, challenging them to make sacrifices for their neighbors” through how the Sons of the Pioneers interacted with audiences each week (Stimeling 2010: 82-83). This manifest in recurring bits on the broadcast where the group would offer prizes and rewards to listeners who engaged with their communities in ways that were appropriately charitable and patriotic, and I argue that this also sets the tone for later iterations of the cowboy particularly in how the idea of service is linked to the military and conservatism. *The Lucky “U” Ranch*, and therefore the Sons of the Pioneers, focused much of its programming on the toll of the Cold War on military officials and families after 1952, when they began to broadcast internationally to deployed military and naval officials through the Armed Forces Radio Service. Stimeling

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<sup>20</sup> See “The Sons of the Pioneers – Froggy Went-A-Courtin’ (Lucky-U Ranch Live)” in the YouTube playlist for an example of the show.

notes how the broadcast's regular interviews with family of deployed service members functioned not only to boost the morale of deployed audiences, but also to reinforce the "painful necessity of sacrifice" expected from all good Americans to keep their communities safe—and free of communism (Ibid.: 86). This is a concept I return to in later chapters of this dissertation as one of the core mandates of 21<sup>st</sup> century rodeo entertainment.

By combining the home-grown authenticity of the singing cowboy figure with an updated emphasis on sacrifice and service at home rather than abroad, the Sons of the Pioneers took the model Gene Autry and his contemporaries defined and brought it forward into the Cold War era. There is also an element of nostalgia here in how they link themselves to the "simpler times" before the Cold War—even before the Great Depression—accomplished through their blend of old-timey country-western songs from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and their focus on conservative values. Stimeling suggests that some of the group's songs even go so far as to articulate what would later become foundational values for the Southern California conservative movement, "which fused fundamentalist Christian religious views, anticommunist sentiments, and pragmatic approaches to domestic and foreign policies to create a 'common-sense' approach to thoroughly modern problems" (Ibid.: 91). In appearing at prominent rodeos—often alongside older singing cowboys like Roy Rogers or Gene Autry—throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, the Sons of the Pioneers brought this collection of conservatism, patriotism, and nostalgia to rodeo audiences in the appealing, familiar package of the clean-cut cowboy figure.

*The 1970s and 1980s: Nostalgia and White-Collar Cowboys*

Prior to the 1970s, popular music was featured with some frequency in rodeo performances, but for the most part entertainment acts were connected to rodeo to some degree through connections to country-western music. In 1970, however, rodeo's increasing popularity among folks who did not grow up around the sport or on the range led to the need for entertainment that would speak to a rapidly diversifying audience. That year, the Houston Stock Show and Rodeo's entertainment committee made history by programming both their first Black performer, country music star Charley Pride, and their first rock-and-roll performer, Elvis Presley. This is a trend mirrored in the 1970s by other mainstream rodeos across the United States, which featured artists including the Jackson 5, Sonny and Cher, Conway Twitty, and Olivia Newton-John. Of course, country musicians still made up the vast majority of entertainment programming, but even those performers sounded more and more like popular musicians of this time as the genre of "country pop" gained prominence over earlier genres like rockabilly and country-western swing in the late 60s and early 70s.<sup>21</sup> Popular music's sounds were beginning to become entwined with rodeo on a commercial level, and as rodeos began to accommodate their growing audiences through diversified musical programming, they needed more space. In 1966, the Houston Stock Show and Rodeo had moved from the Sam Houston Coliseum, which sat 9,200 people, to the Astrodome, which seated 48,000 when it was first opened in 1965.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Country pop grew out of a trend in the 1950s called the Nashville Sound, which refers to country's attempt to regain some mainstream notoriety by incorporating some rock-and-roll influences and other popular sounds. This history will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

<sup>22</sup> The Astrodome currently has a seating capacity of 67,925, though the Houston Rodeo moved to the neighboring Reliant Stadium (now NRG Stadium), which seats over 72,000, in 2003.

Nostalgia for simpler times is also an important part of this era in rodeo—and popular culture—history; in the wake of 1960s counter-cultural movements and associated conflicts, the United States’s white working class scrambled to imagine the impact such movements as second-wave feminism, anti-war protest, and civil rights might have on their way of life. In the early 1970s, many white people turned to the 1950s seeking a nostalgic, sanitized representation of the way things used to be. This period was often portrayed in popular media as “a comforting but evanescent fantasy world, one that masked the urgent need for social change” (Marcus 2004: 15). For many working-class folks, rodeo functioned as that crucible of memory, history, and authenticity that gave them something stable to latch onto in a rapidly changing world. Just as music in 1950s rodeo reminded audiences of pre-Depression freedom and self-sufficiency amidst rapid social change, the sounds of 1970s rodeo both accommodated growing audiences and reinforced feelings of self-importance for white, rural audiences. Merle Haggard performed on the same stages as the Jackson 5, and while the Jackson 5 might have brought in more varied audience members, Merle Haggard’s music spoke more deeply to rodeo attendees who considered themselves to be “real” working-class cowboys.

Haggard, a country singer whose past included plenty of rabble-rousing and rurality, represented the kind of background rodeo audiences and competitors could relate to. He was a white man who spoke his mind, and his contrariness made him a bulwark of the emerging subgenre of “outlaw country” that came out of a desire to move away from the increasingly-mainstream “Nashville sound” that was so popular at the time. Haggard’s music showed substantial pride in its redneck, blue-collar, white-trash roots, and his audiences responded to that. Country music scholars Adam Hollowell and Alexandria Miller have interpreted



outlaw country as a genre that illustrates the many “adaptive strategies for maintenance of traditional white masculine cultural and commercial power” (Hollowell and Miller 2019: 121). White country singers maneuver to place themselves on the fringe of mainstream culture, yet also center themselves through nostalgic remembrance of how things used to be. For country fans and singers like Merle Haggard, the past was a simpler time when white men and women were an unspoken dominant majority, unquestioned and untroubled by changing cultural power dynamics and interracial conflict. That environment can still exist in country songs and at rodeos if everyone present fully invests in the authenticity of that past, rendering it present again through their shared belief in its truth. This overlaps with the idea of restorative nostalgia, wherein nostalgia requires participants to buy into this imagined past being embodied in those who believe in its authenticity.

Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm argue that a large portion of American popular music in the 1970s—particularly country and rock—explores experiences of identity fragmentation among the industrial working class, who felt de-centered in American culture and silenced in popular media. Left only with “the imagined community of nationhood,” the white working class retreated back into a staunchly patriarchal and racist idea of what it meant to be a blue-collar American (Cowie and Boehm 2006: 356). Merle Haggard, as a country singer whose songs most often aligned with conservative political values, brought these values onto rodeo stages over and over again to great acclaim. He later acknowledged the jingoistic songs he performed in the 1970s as being extremely one-sided, but in the early stages of his career he found enormous popularity among country audiences with his pro-working-class lyrics. Songs like “Okie from Muskogee,” which describes Middle America as a place where people don’t smoke marijuana, don’t take LSD, and don’t

challenge authority by burning draft cards, originally represented a reactive, conservative self-righteousness.<sup>23</sup> Haggard often spoke of it as response to what he initially perceived as the idiocy of anti-war activists in the late 1960s; in an interview for an *American Masters* documentary, he said,

That's how I got into it with the hippies... I thought they were unqualified to judge America, and I thought they were lookin' down their noses at something I cherished very much, and it pissed me off. And I thought, "You sons of bitches, you've never been restricted away from this great, wonderful country, and yet here you are in the streets bitchin' about things, protesting about a war they didn't know any more about than I did. They weren't over there fightin' that war any more than I was (Haggard 2010).

Haggard and his contemporaries in country music were frequent, popular performers at large rodeos throughout the 1970s and beyond, and despite Haggard's later re-framing of his anti-liberal views, for many audience members he represented an emerging framework of conservative rurality embodied in country music, cowboys, and the militant patriotism of the white working class. The prominence of performers like Haggard at rodeos throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s speaks to the fact that even though professional rodeo audiences were expanding and diversifying, its core supporters and competitors remained fairly homogenous. In fact, the 1970s and early 1980s saw the official establishment of such race-based rodeo events as the Indian National Finals Rodeo in 1976 and the Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo in 1984, a rodeo created for Black competitors. Rodeo might have been musically diversifying, but the desire for spaces free of white competitors suggests that a significant number of non-white competitors did not feel welcome in an environment of white patriotism and conservatism. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation,

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<sup>23</sup> See "Merle Haggard – Okie From Muskogee (Live)" in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song.

this has not changed in the twenty-first century despite the marked increase in entertainment programming of diverse genres and artists.

*The 2000s: Phasing Out the Cowboy Bands, Phasing In Sound Producers*

In many regional rodeos across the country, the old tradition of cowboy bands performing at rodeos persisted long after star-studded programs and big arenas began to be the norm in the 1970s and 1980s. In some ways, their function mirrored the functions of the cowboy bands that accompanied Wild West shows back in the early twentieth century; local musicians would put on their cowboy hats and boots, grab their instruments, and head off to provide old-timey accompaniment for regional rodeos, reaffirming the link many audience members and competitors feel between rodeo and a bucolic frontier past. The sounds of a brass band playing military marches and Western folk songs is synonymous for many with local rodeo. For example, stock contractor and Pro Rodeo Hall-of-Famer Harry Vold talked often about missing the brass bands at big rodeos in the early 2000s. When he produced rodeos, he would often bring his own brass band to ensure that his rodeos were “what I thought was a better show” than the cookie-cutter professionalized entertainment most rodeos put on (Feist 2017). Despite the general love for cowboy bands among rodeo aficionados, in most professional rodeo today they remain in memory and sonic traces only.<sup>24</sup>

This is not true everywhere, however; in Belle Fourche, Colorado, the Belle Fourche Cowboy Band has been playing local rodeos since the 1931 Black Hills Round-up. The Deadwood Pioneer-Times newspaper introduces the “assortment of 25 snappily attired

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<sup>24</sup> The fourth chapter of this dissertation explores the lingering traces of brass bands and Wild West shows on the 2020 National Finals Rodeo, alongside country music, military soundscapes, and folksong.

cowboys and cowgirls, dressed in ten gallon hats, gaudy neckerchiefs, loud shirts, snappy white breeches and real cowboy boots” as a “genuine cowboy musical organization” (*Deadwood-Pioneer Times* 1931). The article takes great care to note that many of the band members were “born and bred in the west and have fairly lived the life of typical westerners,” establishing the kind of authenticity linked with the idea of place and lifestyle that characterizes much of the cowboy and frontier ideology in the 1930s. The music they will play, “the kind of music western folks like,” includes cowboy tunes, Western ballads, and “spine tickling marches” of the military variety, all of which make up their repertoire today (Ibid.). The Belle Fourche Cowboy Band still plays the Black Hills Round-up each year, and they often travel to other regional rodeos to perform as well.<sup>25</sup> They aren’t the only local cowboy band still in operation, though more and more have been dissolving in recent years as funding is increasingly hard to come by. Additionally, while many cowboy bands occupied the position of interstitial or event music, playing during or between events in the rodeo show itself, in the last twenty or thirty years sound producers have stepped into the role of rodeo DJ.

Jill Franzen, sound curator and owner of Jill’s Sound, remembers what it was like when she got her start twenty-one years ago:

At first, people didn’t take us very serious, and I think people had a hard time when we went from the bands and the live music to what we were doing. It was kinda old school and the change was hard. But now people really see the enhancement and the entertainment value of it. ‘Cause now we play cuts [of songs], we play jokes with the announcers and the clowns. I’ll play a cut of a song making fun of ‘em and they’ll play off me, so we’re really a big part of the entertainment now (personal communication, March 10, 2021).

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<sup>25</sup> See “Belle Fourche Cowboy Band 7/3/15” in the YouTube playlist to hear them play.

Jill also remembered where she got the idea of going into rodeo sound in the first place: watching rodeo announcers' wives step in when a band canceled, sitting up on the announcer's podium with their husbands beside them and a tape recorder in their hands. They would lean over during pauses in the announcing, and hold the recorders up to the microphone so that twice-distorted music would play over crackly speakers. She was inspired by these women, and noted how, when she was first working as a sound curator, not only was she often the only girl on the rodeo production committee (which came with its own challenges), but audiences were often flippant about the stress and difficulty of her job. The shift from live music to pre-recorded sound was a difficult change for the traditionalist, conservative rodeo audiences she grew up with, and it also meant that people assumed what she did was something "anyone could do" (Ibid.). But listening to her speak of the complexities of her job, from the long hours spent perfecting cuts of songs on her computer at home to the daily meetings with rodeo production crews to the stress of improvising during a live rodeo, it's clear that rodeo sound workers are no amateurs. In many ways, they have taken up the mantle of cowboy bands reaching all the way back to Wild West shows. They are intimately involved in the way that rodeo brings in spectators, curating narrative and emotion to set the tone for the pageant of the arena. And, just like cowboy band members were often frontier figures themselves, many of today's sound curators have been involved in rodeo since their birth.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See "Gem State Classic Pro Rodeo" in the YouTube playlist for an example of the type of rodeos that smaller sound curators work for; the Gem State Classic Pro Rodeo's sound curator is Jill Franzen, cited above.

*The 2010s and Beyond: “Us” versus “Them” in Politics and Genre*

In the last twenty years, professional rodeo has continued to diversify its musical programming while retaining country music, and rock to some degree, as its core genre. As discussed above, this is due in large part to the way that authenticity and restorative nostalgia function in tandem to produce an audience deeply invested in the perceived truths represented by the narratives of country and rock music. This relationship has strengthened and deepened in the last ten years as conservative parts of the United States have come under harsh criticism from urban and liberal groups, and conservative rodeo and country fans have banded together to fight a rising sense of loss, a feeling that the white America they grew up with is disappearing. Svetlana Boym discusses the way that groups bound by shared nostalgia form their sense of coherent identity by focusing on conspiracy: “Conspiracy is used pejoratively, to designate a subversive kinship of others, an imagined community based on exclusion more than affection, a union of those who are not with us, but against it... Paranoiac reconstruction of home is predicated on the fantasy of persecution” (Boym 2001: 43). For conservative rodeo and country fans, those “others” united against them, threatening their way of life, are often the liberals and city-dwellers, or even PETA and other animal rights organizations.<sup>27</sup> In recent years, this has manifested in some tense moments for rodeo, and this final segment of this chapter explores how rodeo entertainment producers have dealt with (or ignored) that tension in their programming.

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<sup>27</sup> I will note here again that, while this dissertation deals with professional PRCA-sanctioned rodeo—of which the audience is largely white and conservative though diversifying—the incredible Black, Indigenous, or gay rodeo circuits are beyond the scope of this project. Elyssa Ford’s *Rodeo as Refuge, Rodeo as Rebellion: Gender, Race, and Identity in the American Rodeo* (2020) and Rebecca Scofield’s *Outriders: Rodeo at the Fringes of the American West* (2019) both deal with the ways non-white and non-conservative individuals have made space for themselves in both rodeo and the mythology of the American West, and provide good starting points for readers interested in how non-majority individuals and groups navigate rodeo spaces.

In August of 2018, my partner and I decided to attend the Fiesta Stock Show & Rodeo in Santa Barbara, California, put on each year as part of the Old Spanish Days festival. I'd been to many rodeos before this one, but this was my partner's first, and as we approached the entrance to the Earl Warren Showgrounds, he pointed to a large group of people gathered near the gate with signs and pamphlets who were chanting and shouting and asked me if that was normal. As the line of cars trawled closer, I was able to make out who the group of protesters were: PETA representatives gathered anti-rodeo community members to protest what they perceived as rodeo's flagrant animal cruelty.<sup>28</sup> When one of the cars ahead of us stopped to pay their entrance fee, we were right in front of the group of protesters. One of them, a young woman with her blonde hair in braids, approached our vehicle with a pamphlet in an outstretched hand. I rolled down my window and took it from her, thanking her with a smile as signs that read "RODEO IS MURDER" and "CRUELTY FOR A BUCK" waved in the background. She smiled back at me with surprise, and said, "You're the first one who hasn't been rude to us," before backing away and moving on to the next car. When we drove through the gate ourselves, the ticket-taker grimaced at us and said, "Sorry 'bout them, they're always makin' a racket about stuff they don't understand." This moment was small, the ticket-taker's comment nonconfrontational, but it demonstrates the way that rodeo workers and protesters alike utilize exclusionary "us" versus "them" language to protect their own perspectives.

PETA's longstanding anti-rodeo activism isn't the only controversy that has clouded the professional rodeo sphere in recent years. In 2013, a rodeo clown named Tuffy Gessling

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<sup>28</sup> It is also beyond the scope of this dissertation to delve too deeply into animal cruelty at the rodeo. This is a complex issue with many sides, and I would suggest Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence's 1982 *Rodeo* to interested readers.

performed a skit mocking then-President Barack Obama at the Missouri State Fair. The skit involved another person pretending to be an Obama-masked stuffed dummy in the middle of the arena while rodeo bulls bucked and ran around the ring. When a bull approached them, the person ran away and escaped, surprising audiences who thought the person wasn't real. While this happened, Gessling was on the mic cracking jokes and attempting to energize the audience by criticizing Obama.<sup>29</sup> In one video, he says "I know I'm a clown. He [(Obama)] just runs around like one, doesn't know he is one" (Helling 2013). Gessling was banned from future performances at the Missouri State Fair after intense backlash, with Representative Emanuel Cleaver of Missouri's 5<sup>th</sup> district calling the display "sickening" and "offensive" (Ibid.). Rodeo fans and conservatives showed up for Gessling by the thousands, and a Facebook page called "Support Tuffy Gessling, Professional Rodeo Entertainer" had garnered over 20,000 likes a mere few days after the event. Some rodeo attendees posting on the page even suggested rodeo clowns and other attendees wear Obama masks at future events as a form of protest, and rodeo trainer Lyle Sankey stated that he thought "it's a crock... Do you see as much publicity when they make fun of any conservatives? That doesn't make the news" (Ibid.).

The racist—arguably 21<sup>st</sup>-century blackface—mask of Obama's face was used to represent someone perceived as an outsider to the kind of shared rodeo identity attendees came to enjoy; he was described as a "clown" and a "dummy," and spectators got a good laugh out of watching him narrowly and clumsily avoid being attacked by the bulls in the arena. The Obama clown stood in for liberals, for urban centers, for all the things perceived to be attacking conservative fans' way of life. Rodeo fans' overwhelmingly defensive

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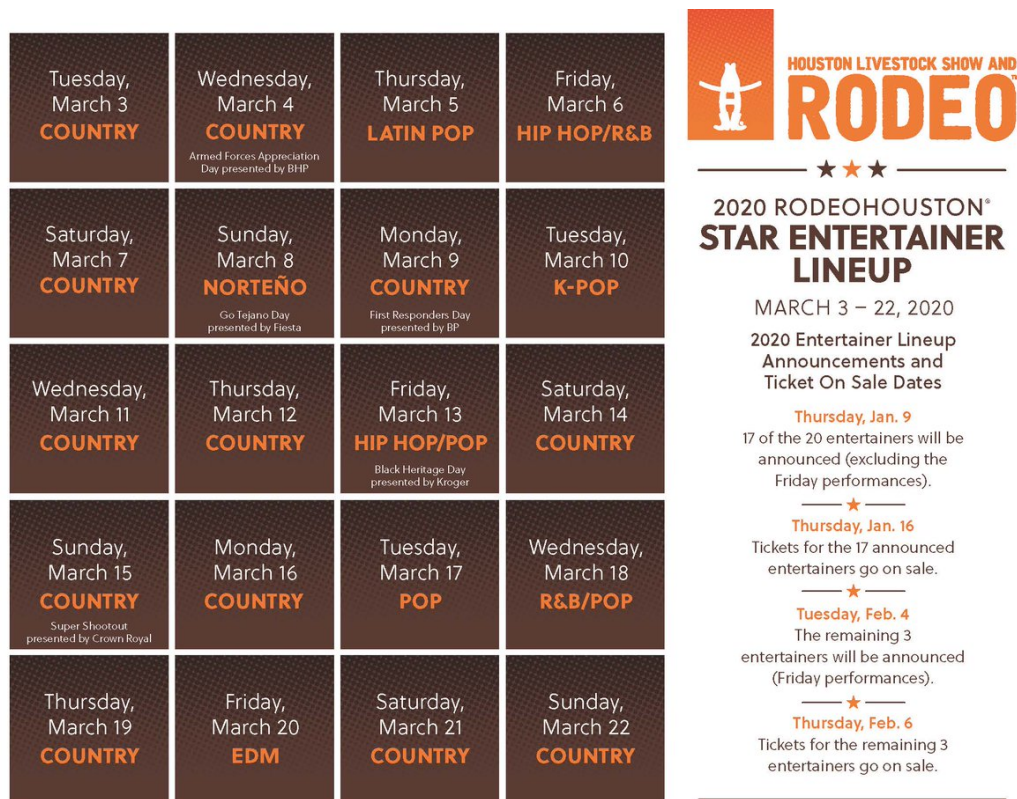
<sup>29</sup> See "Obama rodeo clown act inspires political fight" in the YouTube playlist for news coverage around this controversy.



reaction to the criticism of the skit indicates how the sentiment that Obama was a clown was shared and understood by most State Fair rodeo attendees. And yet, when questioned about it, Gessling reported that he was just doing what comedians all over the country do every day, using political figures to poke fun at current events; he said, “I never tried to be a racist or anything like that. I love all people no matter their background. I live to make people laugh” (Ibid.). The success of his skit, however, was predicated on the knowledge that mocking the United States’ first Black president was something that would make his audience laugh. This incident illustrates how even when the “us” versus “them” language of rodeo, just as with Wild West shows, is couched in a blanket of surface-level inclusion, it still pervades rodeo entertainment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The assumed whiteness of rodeo, made invisible in its programming, codes non-white, non-conservative, non-rural individuals as outsiders

Musically, the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo’s (HLSR) programming and publicity for its entertainment events offers another model of this process. Since the 1990s, the HLSR has offered twenty straight nights of rodeo. Each night concludes with a concert by musicians of varying genres. Every evening after the rodeo, the chutes are wheeled out of the arena and a rotating stage is brought in, and fans who purchased tickets to the rodeo—including some who bought the tickets but come only for the concerts—are treated to a full-length concert experience. Most of the concerts are given by country artists, or in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a mix of traditional country artists and country-pop singers like Carrie Underwood or Kacey Musgraves, but recent years have included such genres as K-pop, hip hop, R&B, EDM, norteño, rock, and pop. Notably, the HLSR has utilized a genre-based approach to marketing these concerts each year. They begin by releasing a calendar of concerts, labeled

only by the genre of the performer who will be appearing on each night (see Figure 3 below for the 2020 HSLR genre release). A few weeks after the initial genre categories are revealed, all but the Friday evening concerts are announced by name and tickets go on sale a week after that. Almost a month later, the Friday concerts are announced by name, and another week later those tickets are released to the public. This strategy functions to build up excitement and suspense for what have historically been big-name performers and lucrative concerts for the HSLR.



**Figure 3:** The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo’s 2020 genre release, © RodeoHouston 2020.

A few things about this strategy stick out as noteworthy; first, the way that historically racialized genres are associated with race-based evening themes. The only norteño band is programmed for March 8<sup>th</sup>, which is the HSLR’s Go Tejano Day, while a hip-hop performer is programmed on March 13<sup>th</sup>, Black Heritage Day. The other themed

days—March 4<sup>th</sup>'s Armed Forces Appreciation Day, March 9<sup>th</sup>'s First Responders Day, and March 15<sup>th</sup>'s “Super Shootout”—are paired with country music performers, all of whom it will later be revealed are white. This programming choice also reveals how the themed days related to the United States’ gun-toting and military identities are associated not just with country music, but also with an assumed whiteness. In fact, every artist or band programmed on those patriotism-themed days for at least the past 10 years has been white. It is clear from the way musical offerings are repeatedly paired with themed events that not only is whiteness assumed for country acts, non-white performers are also marked as marginal to the central narrative of country authenticity. Despite this, the Friday night concerts—the HLSR’s biggest sellers and the last-released performers—are all non-country performers. In 2020, those artists were Chance The Rapper (March 6), Lizzo (March 13), and Marshmello (March 20).<sup>30</sup> Houston walks a fine line here, relying on the revenue generated from big-name artists who do not fall under the country category and yet using language and genre to ensure that they do not fully take center stage in the rodeo context.

This negotiation is a reflection of the cowboys who have historically made up the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo’s administration. The organization has made an effort to diversify their hires in recent years, but in 2009 there was some controversy over the utter lack of women and people of color on the executive committee, made up of 19 white men. State senator Mario Gallegos filed a bill requiring the rodeo’s organizing committee to comply with the state’s open records rules, and encouraged the rodeo to work with more local minority-owned businesses and to diversify their upper-level staff. The show’s

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<sup>30</sup> Only Chance The Rapper was able to perform, as community spread of COVID-19 among rodeo attendees prompted a swift shutdown of the HLSR on March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020. See “Houston Rodeo – Chance the Rapper” in the YouTube playlist for a short video of his performance.

president, Leroy Shafer, objected, arguing that as a non-profit they should not be held to the same standard as public government entities, but community members responded by organizing protests and boycotts, and releasing documentation of the way that the HLSR functioned as a money-making machine for white rodeo executives. Several of the concerns raised by community members involved the musical programming specifically; Go Tejano Day, one of the HLSR's themed performances, has historically had one of the highest numbers of attendees in the rodeo's history, but musical performers on that day are allegedly paid substantially less than white performers (Connelly 2009). The rodeo responded with its own information, arguing that it never releases entertainers' salaries but confirming that not all performers are paid the same amount because "The Show negotiates all of its entertainer contracts based on market value (understanding that it pays a premium over market because of the one-off nature and the size of the venue)" (Ibid.). And further, it contended that appointment to the executive board was based on time spent volunteering at the rodeo, with the average at the time being 37.5 years (Murphy 2009). In an industry where women and people of color have been systematically pushed to the sidelines by professional organizations like the PRCA, that barrier of time would remain insurmountable for many, though in 2021 it appears that some of those staffing exclusions have since been addressed.

The case of the HLSR illustrates how twenty-first century rodeo continues to center whiteness in its musical programming, even though it may also appear to be more diverse. The same rhetoric of nostalgia for unproblematic whiteness that underpinned The Sons of the Pioneers conservatism or Merle Haggard's outlaw rebellion is present here in the continued linguistic and programmatic othering of non-white rodeo entertainers, audiences, competitors, and administrators. The lineage of exclusion from *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*

through to the present day is clearly visible, as is the rodeo's continued entanglement with pro-military patriotism and national identity. Country music remains the star of the show, central to this identity-making project, and other musical stylings are included only on the margins. The cowboys who work on programming committees are following larger popular music trends by including non-white and non-country performers, but there is also an aspect of self-preservation at work. In protecting the importance of the white country identity, and by placing everyone who does not fall within it on the outside, committees effectively reinforce the systems that keep rural whiteness as the norm for rodeo while veiling it from view as a category at all. The twenty-first century cowboy remains white in rodeo, even as the continued presence of country and cowboy aesthetics in other genres of music pushes back at that definition.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has argued that across rodeo's history, music has been a fundamental part of how rodeo executives, committees, competitors, and audiences—all pulled from the same cowboy stock—have moved as a group to protect a shared identity perceived as being under threat. From turn-of-the-century worry about an industrializing United States and a vanishing frontier to Depression-era paranoia about rural survival, and from 1960s turmoil over war and the Civil Rights movement to twenty-first century concerns over the loss of white superiority, rodeo people have always fought to represent and protect their own. I have argued here that the musical programming of rodeo across these historical contexts not only reflects the values at stake for rodeo folk in these concerns and struggles, but also influences the way that audiences and administrators alike respond to culture shifts. People

find something to identify with in the various performers and cowboys who have shaped rodeo's entertainment. When Gene Autry encouraged listeners to enlist, they did. When the Sons of the Pioneers encouraged fans to do good in their own communities, they did. When Merle Haggard made fun of liberals, so did his audiences. And when a rodeo clown tells his audience to laugh at Obama as the *real* clown, they do. As we look to contemporary rodeo in later chapters of this dissertation, there is a clear precedent for the music of rodeo events having substantial impact on the way listeners perceive that event and their own role in it.

Before I turn to an extended consideration of the 2020 National Finals Rodeo as a case study for how these factors play out in professional rodeo today (see Chapter Four), I will first examine one genre of music in particular. Throughout rodeo's history, country music has been more closely tied to the sport than any other, and exploring the political identities and contexts associated with country music and rodeo will allow us to better understand the ways that nationalism, patriotism, whiteness, and the U.S. American duality of expansion and protection have been so continually tied together over the last hundred and fifty years.

### **Chapter 3: Nationalism, Patriotism, and Political Identity in Rodeo & Country Music**<sup>31</sup>

*cw: racism, police brutality, and military violence; racist terminology*

Music is interesting. I grew up listening to classic rock, and I'll tell you kinda an odd story. My music taste changed on 9/11... I intellectually find this very curious, but on 9/11 I didn't like how rock music responded. And country music collectively, the way they responded, it resonated with me. And I have to say, it just is a gut level. I had an emotional reaction that says 'these are my people.' And so ever since 2001 I listen to country music, but I'm a non-country music fan because I didn't listen to it prior to 2001.

— Ted Cruz in a March 24, 2015 interview with *CBS This Morning*

In the previous chapter of this dissertation, I traced the development of the cowboy figure through rodeo's history, arguing that rodeo was a site for the musical formation and nuancing of that figure as the people it represented tried to maintain their cultural relevancy and protect their point of view in a rapidly-changing country. Unpacking this musical history revealed that many genres have some history and association with rodeo, but country music has been the most important and most enduring for rodeo fans. It is arguably the most closely associated with rodeo because of the perceived overlap in audiences: self-described rural, redneck, white, gun-loving freedom fighters. Of course, this particular set of intersecting identities is reductive and historically inaccurate, but in the American popular imagination it has managed to hold fast for many years. Country radio stations and governing bodies have worked in recent years to popularize songs and artists who uphold these identity markers (see: Gretchen Wilson's "Redneck Woman" as an example), and an extensive body of literature exists that unpacks the nuances of those identities and how they have been popularly constructed in recent years (i.e. Fox 2001, Mann 2008, VanderWel 2017 and

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<sup>31</sup> To listen along with the musical examples in this chapter, follow this link to the YouTube playlist: [https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLVZ1WtQdnGkfyFNHCkOX0x7\\_QzLOEP7VB](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLVZ1WtQdnGkfyFNHCkOX0x7_QzLOEP7VB)

2020). This chapter builds on this work in conjunction with existing work on rodeo and identity to explore how both rodeo's and country music's engagement with identity and patriotism overlap in the twenty-first century, often in problematic and controversial ways.

The connections untangled here suggest that country holds such a prominent place in rodeo because both contexts make use of nostalgia and authenticity as intertwined concepts that posit a similar central identity—white, rural, Southern, American. Both contexts also utilize these concepts to defend their space in frontier history from the perceived threat of difference. I further argue that both rodeo and country music are key sites of exploration because they critically reveal the process of defining the nation through defining its inhabitants in terms of ethnicity, shared values, and shared history. In doing so, rodeo and country music are continuing the lineage of frontier-themed media stretching as far back as the mid-1800s that employed iconic figures from the Old West to negotiate competing ideas of what it means to be American. In the twenty-first century, particularly post-9/11, these national identity markers are hotly contested, politicized, and the source of ongoing conflict. I argue that mainstream rodeo and country are so compatible because they have both staked a claim to a particular subset of those identities, and that their coexistence in contemporary rodeo performance serves to highlight those areas of overlap. While my previous chapter explored how rodeo became patriotic through its involvement with musical performance throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this chapter explores how that patriotism manifests in the present through emphasizing military engagement, the ideal of freedom, and the connection between the soldier and the cowboy in contemporary rodeo.



## **Rodeo, the Military, and Patriotism**

In the second chapter of this dissertation, I teased apart the ways in which pride in one's country came to be musically and thematically entwined with the sport of rodeo throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From Buffalo Bill Cody's centering of "The Star-Spangled Banner" to Gene Autry's Cowboy Ten Commandments (Commandment #10 is "The Cowboy is a Patriot") to the Sons of the Pioneers' radio calls to action, patriotism is deeply embedded in rodeo's past. As previously discussed, this has been largely accomplished through the selective inclusion of particular musical figures, styles, and messages in rodeo's entertainment complex. The musical choices made by rodeo performers, producers, and competitors are also colored by rodeo's continual association with the U.S. military. On the professional circuit, rodeo and the military are brought together in a performance of American identity that updates the expansionist and protective impulses of the Wild West's colonizers for the twenty-first century. The military rodeo circuit has not received any attention in recent academic literature on rodeo, but it is well known by professional rodeo competitors, and is a large part of how contemporary rodeo marks itself as patriotic and nationalistic. This section discusses both the military rodeo circuit and professional rodeo's involvement with the military through the Wrangler National Patriot program. Both contexts highlight similar claims to a tough, hardworking, self-sacrificing persona through the combination of soldier and cowboy, and I contend that this is because this mix of figures offers a solid place from which rodeo aficionados can stake a claim to American identity.

In the United States, several organizations have been formed over the last fifty years under the umbrella of military rodeo. Military rodeos have been held throughout the United

States since the 1940s—and deployed servicemen have been responsible for starting rodeos in other countries in years prior, using whatever livestock were native to the area—but many of them were undocumented due to a lack of organizational leadership and professionalization.<sup>32</sup> In 1980, the first Military World Championship rodeo was held in Yuma, Arizona, and it continued to be held there for several years despite the lack of a formal organization to oversee any kind of regulated military rodeo. The competition was open to all military members, active or retired (Military Rodeo Cowboy Hall of Fame 2021). In 1984, the Military Rodeo Association (MRA) was formed by cowboys and veterans Ron Arrington and Roy Madden. Unlike regular rodeo, the military rodeo was beset with deployments and retirements, meaning that the MRA’s administration often rotated and changed in the middle of the season, and in 1989 many military folks saw themselves recalled in preparation for the Gulf War, leaving the MRA with ample downtime to restructure until its rebirth in 1990 as the Military Rodeo Cowboys Association (MRCA). While the 1990s were fairly prolific for this organization, ongoing military operations led to a continued decrease in participants, leading the MRCA to shut down between 1999 and 2018. Since being rebooted, the MRCA has expanded rapidly, holding its first World Finals in over twenty years in 2020 despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. However, it’s not the only military rodeo association currently in operation.

The Professional Armed Forces Rodeo Association (PAFRA) was founded in 2000 by three Air Force Master Sergeants and a retired Army Sergeant Major with the goal of

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<sup>32</sup> From the early 1970s to 2002, the European Rodeo Cowboy Association (ERCA) allowed military members to continue rodeoing while deployed in the European theater. Rodeos were held all over Europe, and much like when Buffalo Bill took his show abroad, this served to continue further spreading imagery of the American West across the globe. For an interesting discussion of non-military rodeo in Italy, see Renee Laegrid’s 2014 “Finding the American West in Twenty-First-Century Italy.”

organizing a rodeo association that would “closely adhere to the same professional qualities [the organizers] had grown accustomed to in the United States Military,” while allowing competitors to compete in prestigious events co-sanctioned by other established rodeo groups like the PRCA (PAFRA 2021). Their mission statement is as follows: “The mission of PAFRA is to provide a Veterans based, Values oriented Rodeo Association that empowers its members to Serve their Communities through Servant Leadership and Rodeo” (Ibid.). Each year, they hold their own World Finals rodeo during the weekend of Veterans’ Day, with winners being awarded their own championship belt buckles “forged in military tradition, the love of rodeo, and the love of country” (Ibid.). Unlike the MRCA, PAFRA has remained fairly consistent in their twenty-year tenure, hosting rodeos each year without fail, except for 2001 when many of PAFRA’s participants were responding to 9/11. Notably, they also have been partially responsible for the recent global spread of rodeo; they refer to themselves as the “premier global military rodeo association,” with many members continuing to ride and compete while deployed on the European circuit just as the MRCA’s participants had until 2002.

The draw of rodeo for military personnel may not be immediately apparent, but for folks like Lance Corporal Kirk Holden it’s “the natural high” of pitting a single man against a massive horse or bull that makes it so appealing; “It’s like, hey, I rode something eight times my size and ten times my strength, and I beat him. In football, a running back may beat a linebacker, but it’s just man against man. Here, it’s man against nature” (Perry 1987). That same ritual of domination, man triumphing over beast, that Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence identified as core to the way rodeo speaks to its rural audience is prevalent here in military rodeo as well. The impulse of imperial expansion, domination, and protection from foreign

influence that the military represents plays out on a different scale in rodeo, too. Sergeant Sonny Borrelli makes the connection between rodeo and military apparent through the overlap in character between the soldier and the cowboy; he notes that cowboys often make the best Marines, because “it’s a question of heart. A good Marine has got heart, he thrives on being tough and hard-charging. So does a good cowboy. That’s what sets us apart” (Ibid.). For military personnel, participating in rodeo is a chance to exercise that heart and toughness outside the theater of war. Rodeo is an extremely dangerous sport, but it is not a war zone, and for many soldiers the rodeo represents a chance to cut loose a little while reaffirming their love of country in a different way (Ibid.).

Military rodeo circuits are only one of several ways contemporary rodeo interfaces with the U.S. Armed Forces. In 2009, American denim brand Wrangler—a long-time favorite of cowboys, rodeo and ranching alike—founded the Wrangler National Patriot program, a fundraising operation intended to help raise money to support military veterans and their families, and to “serve as inspiration for all Americans to rally around each other in patriotism” (Wrangler 2021). While Wrangler is generally recognized as an iconic brand of Western wear, this program is also specifically tied to rodeo because it was funded first by famous rodeo cowboy Jim Shoulders, with his seed check presented to Wrangler at the 2009 National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas. The operation combines rodeo performances and the sale of Wrangler National Patriot shirts, available at partnering rodeos across the country, but the annual international tour is arguably the biggest and most important component of this project. Each year, Wrangler sends a touring group comprised of country musicians, rodeo athletes, and Wrangler personnel overseas to visit active U.S. Armed Forces bases.<sup>33</sup> Jeff

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<sup>33</sup> See “Wrangler National Patriot Tour” in the YouTube playlist for a promotional video of the tour.

Chadwick, Wrangler's director of special events, told NFR Extra Podcast hosts that the tour's goal is to give deployed troops both a "thank you" on behalf of the Western industry, and to boost morale by providing some American entertainment: "You can't bring everybody, you can't bring America, so you bring a little piece of it [to the troops]" (Chadwick 2019: 58:50). The touring group performs music for the troops, sometimes even inviting the musically-inclined among them up to the stage to sing, and they bring lassos to teach soldiers some rope tricks. Importantly for Wrangler, the PRCA contestants they bring along with them are always dressed in cowboy boots, a cowboy hat, and denim. Chadwick says this is because it's important that they represent America visually, not just through their actions; after all, "What's more American than cowboys and cowgirls?" (Ibid.: 63:45).

Kaycee Feild, a four-time World Champion in bareback bronc riding, went on tour with the Wrangler Patriot Project in 2010. In an interview for the NFR Extra Podcast, he discussed his time on that tour; "We went all over Iraq, Afghanistan, Qatar, Oman, we went to these little tiny bases just to say thank you, and when those guys would see cowboy boots and a cowboy hat, you'd instantly see their face light up with life" (Feild 2021: 22:50). To the soldiers they were visiting, seeing someone embody the cowboy figure so fully was clearly a mark of home, of what they were fighting for. And for Feild, that experience has changed the way he rodeos. He said that he's more relaxed about competition now because of what he saw while overseas: "Y'know, [the troops] are going to battle and they could lose their lives or watch a friend die, and all I've gotta do is prepare and go to do something I really love to do. And so the more that I can dream it and the more that I can do it at home, when I get to Vegas, all I have to do is try as hard as I possibly can and the rest takes care of itself" (Ibid.: 10:45). The host in the interview responded to this comment with a quip about

how rodeo cowboys aren't "getting shot at, but there's definitely an aspect of danger involved in bareback riding, too," quickly moving to remind listeners that while the rodeo is not the war front, there's a different kind of battle taking place in the arena that carries great importance (Ibid.: 11:53).

Beyond explicitly military-organized rodeo events and tours, mainstream rodeo also engages frequently with the military by dedicating specific performances to veterans, active duty military personnel, or military families. As the previous chapter mentioned, each year the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo features an Armed Forces Appreciation Day, while the National Finals Rodeo includes an annual National Patriot Night alongside a mix of memorials, tributes, and salutes to veterans and soldiers killed in action that vary in theme each year. Clearly, supporting the troops matters deeply to rodeo people. I argue that this is because the idea of freedom is the central value that drives rodeo performances, whether it's the nostalgic longing for days past of perceived greater freedom and privilege or a sense of Western identity rooted in the drive to fight for personal and national freedoms. The demonstrations of patriotism and love of country that accompany military themes in rodeo allow rodeo audiences to manifest their connection to an expansionist American ethos in a different way than rodeo on its own does, but through similar articulations of violence, freedom, and calls to action.

In sum, professional rodeo as a sport and ritual performance represents a complex set of interlocking perspectives and identity markers that include whiteness, Americanness, masculinity, and patriotism. Many of these are apparent in the structuring of the rodeo event itself, where Man symbolically dominates Nature in perpetuity. These highlighted identity markers also point to those individuals *not* visibly associated with professional, PRCA-

sanctioned rodeo. The fact that Black, Indigenous, and Mexican cowboys and cowgirls, all of whom would have been present on the range in the nineteenth century, continue to rodeo on their own separate circuits speaks to the way that whiteness and masculinity are built into the very framework of rodeo. Finally, in prioritizing military associations and demonstrations of patriotism, rodeo production committees, sponsors, and Western brands like Wrangler make it clear that those who take action to protect and uphold national and personal freedoms are worthy of the highest degree of respect and, often, imitation. Inclusion of military themes and individuals in rodeo is only half of the patriotic formula for contemporary rodeo's performance of American identity, however. These ideals of freedom, self-sufficiency, and toughness are also sonically and thematically articulated through the inclusion of carefully selected songs and musical backdrops, most of which fall under the genre umbrella of country music. To better understand the context in which rodeo's performances are situated, I now turn to the genre of country to lay out how issues of identity, nation, and politics are demonstrated in alignment with rodeo's spectacle.

### **Country Music and Identity**

Country music's history as a genre in the United States shares a similar trajectory to rodeo, though country's origins in Southern hillbilly culture offers a different starting point than rodeo's range-roving roots, and the two have come to be deeply entwined in popular culture through the mythologized narrative of the cowboy. Akin to rodeo's professional whitewashing of the cowboy, country music has developed over the years into a genre that is labeled almost exclusively as white, even though historic and contemporary audiences and producers alike prove that this is a popular construction and not fact. This has enabled the

most traditional subsets of the genre, which maintain ties to country's segregated origins, to function as a location to voice white nostalgia for an America that no longer exists. In these subgenres, an endless litany of white men (and sometimes women) lament the loss of traditional America and the way things used to be, their authenticity as country singers defined by their whiteness and their commitment to the idea of working-class tradition. This white country identity is not inherent in the genre, but is manufactured by performers, industry professionals, and audiences through the performance of specific identity markers. One of the most foundational recent texts, Aaron Fox's *Real Country* (2004), argues that this constellation of identities is produced through distinct forms of sociality and relating that are embodied in rituals of country performance which importantly tie country to the working-class (Fox 2004: 29). While these identities are not stable, and shift to accommodate changing historical contexts, they always harken back to early country's specifically whitened presentation of authenticity and Depression-era conceptions of race, class, gender, and more.

The idea of authenticity in country music is central to considering how performer and audience identities are manifest in the genre; several scholars have suggested that both nostalgia and authenticity are tied up deeply in country music's connection to the cowboy figure (Peterson 1997, Turnbull 2016). These studies examine the ways that nostalgia and expectations of authenticity in performance have allowed cowboy musicians to "[create] a picture of the mythic West" but also to "[remind] listeners that it should still exist, thereby shaping our knowledge and experience of the region through song" (Turnbull 2016: 59). Gillian Turnbull argues that this is possible because the cowboy figure represents a somehow authentic, lived experience of the West that most listeners have never had themselves.



Cowboy singers and country musicians therefore, through their accessibility to individuals at all class levels, provide secondhand access for listeners to the “lost West” (Ibid.). This commonality is made clear through how the cowboy figure embodies the tension between traditional values and a desire or necessity to adapt to modern times. The pervasiveness of the cowboy icon as a marker of American identity throughout nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century history is a testament to its enduring ability to adapt.

In this context, the cowboy is not simply a figure of the past but is an actively constructed persona that belongs simultaneously to the realms of tradition and folklore and to the commercial marketplace, existing as both a lived marker of the working class and an escapist fantasy of the wealthy and urban. Nearly every audience member can relate to this figure in some way, for better or for worse. Nostalgia and longing are intertwined in how audiences perceive the cowboy figure, but questions of authenticity are also raised when considering performer identity; is the performer speaking from the vantage point of the working class, or is the performer embodying the country cowboy persona from a different perspective? Different musicians may choose to hide or highlight individual facets of their own identities based on how they interact with the country genre’s prevailing notions of what makes an authentic performer; rurality, a working-class upbringing, whiteness, Christianity, patriotism, and ties to the South are all things that can conventionally mark someone as authentically country. That list is not all-encompassing, nor does it fully reflect country’s actual demographics, which I will return to at the end of this section. It also does not account for the pressures of the commercial music industry, where performers are judged by how well they fit—or break—prevailing conventions within their genre, but on the whole finding

success in the country genre largely means finding a way to fit in with the existing standards for authenticity.<sup>34</sup>

Fox suggests that much of this negotiation of identity happens specifically through the ways his interlocutors use and inflect their voices, noting the pervasive presence of speech, patter, talk, and other forms of heightened speech in musical performances that function to frame them as country (Fox 2004: 276). Political economist Geoff Mann, singles out one particular vocal technique as key to the genre: what he calls country “twang.” This country twang that has come to symbolize the sound of an entire genre indexes a geographic origin—the South—through its evocation of both the sound of a plucked string and a southern drawl. Mann identifies this as a process of “diphthongization,” where vowel sounds are drawn out into two audibly distinct segments (Mann 2008: 79). The pairing of these sonic markers that twang represents, he argues, is a self-referential sign of a country artist’s authenticity because of how it makes the music sound white (Ibid.: 80). Twang also has implications for thinking about the performance of gender and sexuality in country music, as musicologist Stephanie Vander Wel has discussed. When writing of mid-twentieth-century performances by female country singers, Vander Wel posits that the strategic use—and occasionally absence of—twang as a vocal technique could inflect song lyrics with greater nuance when it came to addressing the “desires and fears of a 1950s audience who found the era’s promises of socioeconomic mobility out of their reach” (Vander Wel 2020: 12).

Additionally, working-class women manipulated their voices in and out of twangy

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<sup>34</sup> This is true for mainstream country, but a subgenre referred to as “outlaw country” also exists on the fringes of the genre. For outlaw country performers, like Sturgill Simpson, authenticity is bestowed upon them by audiences because they do *not* fit the mainstream mold. Usually, this means that at first glance they have avoided the pressure to commercialize themselves and bend to the genre’s rules, and this speaks to an underlying current of individualism and refusal to conform that becomes very relevant when considering how country audiences have participated in political discourse around identity politics and freedom in recent years.

production to perform varying versions of country identity, sometimes “def[y]ing] common notions of gender, especially those that involve bodily refinement and containment,” other times encouraging those same stereotypes (Ibid.: 13). Timbre and tone, like any other part of performance, have been and continue to be tools for performers and audiences alike to use to shape genre and style conventions to their own individual identities.

Mann and Vander Wel both suggest that twang indexes whiteness because it has been constructed to do so through a vocal materiality tied to the (also constructed) racial and geographic associations with the accent and timbre of twang. Mann argues that contemporary country music “calls” white people by circularly producing and re-producing a particular white subjectivity that relies on a nostalgia for a time when whiteness was not perceived as being under threat (Mann 2008: 80). For country listeners and performers, historical layers of exclusion, gate-keeping, and identity politics have built up over time to “make country music seem not only as something that only white people make, but also something that only white people ‘hear,’ something that recruits white people to their ‘whiteness’” (Ibid.: 83). Country music’s lyrics, associations, and vocality collectively perform a “historical [white] victimhood,” offering white listeners a safe place where the external world’s challenging of “traditional identities, roles, and expectations” cannot touch them (Ibid.: 85). Country music “offers whiteness as an antidote to that world, while at the same time asserting that the antidote will nonetheless never really work,” resulting in the persistent anxiety that forms the “backbeat of nostalgia” of a post-Civil Rights American whiteness (Ibid.: 86). Much like in rodeo, where nostalgia for the freedom and self-made honor of the frontier haunts each buck and jump, country music’s continued popularity can partially be attributed to how it voices feelings of loss for the white security much of its audiences used to enjoy. Yet considering

country to be a white genre of music does not give a full picture of its actual historical makeup.

Before the music recording industry began to formalize a racialized division between “hillbilly” (white) music and “race” (Black) records in the 1920s, Karl Hagstrom Miller suggests that music developed a color line in the southern United States born out of 1880s segregation legislation, the 1888 foundation of the American Folklore Society, and the combined revolutions of mass-produced sheet music and the invention of the talking machine (Miller 2010: 2-3). Together, these three changes in the southern cultural and musical landscape resulted in the urge to define, categorize, and market the music of the southern United States as a distinctly, authentically “American” music. What had previously been an interracial, blurry mess of styles and instruments and voices was, by the 1920s, divided into two neat categories that mapped directly onto southern definitions of race. While race records developed into genres like the southern blues, hillbilly records transformed into country music, and their division was seemingly set in stone along racialized lines from that point forward (Lewis 2001, Miller 2010, Stoeber 2016).

Recent scholarship suggests that there was no clear moment of breakage between country and the blues despite the industry’s attempts to define one. Charles Hughes points out that even as late as the 1960s and 1970s, when most audiences automatically perceived country as a music associated with white conservatism and the political right, and soul had come to stand in for civil rights and the Black Power movement, the two genres shared musical codes and musicians, like Arthur Alexander and Red Foley (Hughes 2015). Referencing what he terms the “country-soul triangle,” Hughes argues that these musicians—some Black and some white—utilized the racial divide between country and soul studios to

create additional work opportunities for themselves on both sides of the sonic color line, while also recognizing that the division of labor between white and Black musicians attempting to find work in studios was not an equal one (Ibid.: 6-7). Hughes' work illustrates the constant negotiation between industry, genre, and individual musicians in the construction of country's commercial identity. Country has never been as white as it seems, and although commercial "top-40" country music today is overwhelmingly dominated by white artists, in the same way that rodeo is, non-white musicians and audience members have been a part of country's construction and consumption since before its inception as a commercial genre, complicating the way we see country's intersectional idea of authenticity.

Of course, Black musicians aren't the only non-white folks playing, singing, and listening to country music, though the Black/white binary dominates current scholarship on country music. A small body of recent literature centers Mexican and Creole country music fans, as well as considering country's influence from genres like Tejano and habanera music (Hubbs, Malone and Stricklin 2003, Wever 2013). Scholarship on Native American country music is the only place where the topics of country, the cowboy, and the rodeo appear together in academic literature (Marshall 2016). For example, Elaine Keillor's article on Indigenous music and rodeo traces the connections between Northern Plains horse and riding songs, Indigenous people's participation in North American rodeos, and contemporary music by popular artists like Buffy Sainte-Marie (Keillor 2002). Kristina Jacobsen's longer ethnographic study of music and language on the Navajo Nation discusses country music's pervasive presence on reservations, manifest in local radio stations, rez bands, and Indigenous rodeo (Jacobsen 2017). She suggests that "country music and cowboy culture, rather than being allochronically out of place [on the reservation], are a highly visible and

deeply emplaced part of contemporary indigenous experience.” The way that local bands insert Navajo place-names and words into country standards serves as a method for re-making country music in their own image (Jacobsen 2009: 452).

Country music shares with rodeo a multi-racial history within the United States that often hides historical Blackness in favor of highlighting whiteness as the constructed norm within the genre. Also akin to rodeo, country’s present is just as multi-racial as its past; non-white musicians and audiences can choose to navigate an outwardly white industry to get what they need from a community that may not welcome them, or they can opt to listen to and play country music in their own isolated spaces because it gives them the opportunity to see their own identities reflected and centered. No matter the players and no matter the audiences, country music relies on the entangled notions of nostalgia and authenticity to maintain its relevance throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, though these notions may be differently inflected in non-white contexts. Music reflects the identities of its audiences, but it also produces them through the way it causes performers, producers, and receivers alike to relate to each other, to history, and to themselves. In this way, both rodeo and country music bring to their combined events complex sets of identity markers, histories, and relationships that are reinforced, embodied, and also negotiated in the rodeo arena.

While the country genre’s commercial industry drives country music performers to articulate and engage with a wide variety of historical authenticities and identities, rodeo makes use of a very particular subset of country music and largely avoids the messiness of defining genre. Through relying on country music that engages with particular identity markers, mainstream rodeo’s producers situate the sport’s foundation firmly atop a scaffold

of patriotism, working-class identity, and whiteness that allows performers, producers, and audience members to participate in a nostalgic reenactment of an American past that gives voice to their anxieties, hopes, and dreams. Country music, and the values, ideas, and identities it carries with it, clearly matters in the making of rodeo. The next section of this chapter now turns to the relationship between country music and patriotism, the final piece of how rodeo and country have maintained such a close relationship into the twenty-first century.

### **Country Music, the Military, and Patriotism**

While country music has long been intertwined with issues of national identity and patriotism, it first became intimately involved with the military in the 1950s when the Army and Air Force Recruiting Service began to use the genre to intentionally increase voluntary enlistment numbers among young white Southerners (Thompson 2020). This happened partially by accident; in 1953, a country singer named Faron Young was drafted into the Army, and while he completed basic training his song “Goin’ Steady” climbed the charts and became a hit.<sup>35</sup> The Army was quick to take advantage of this moment in the spotlight, choosing to make Young a figurehead for the Army throughout his enlistment. He appeared on such famous stages as the Grand Ole Opry, a country music mecca in the 1950s, and had a special spot on the ABC talent show “Talent Patrol,” a program that highlighted enlisted personnel’s varied entertainment skills. According to scholar Joseph Thompson, this allowed the Army to “plug enlistment” from a variety of stages while also “brand[ing] military service with the down-home appeal of country music” (Ibid.).

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<sup>35</sup> See “Faron Young ~ Goin’ Steady” in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song.

This proved to be a successful strategy for military recruiters, and soon after they partnered with Nashville producer Owen Bradley to create a whole host of country music recruitment tools. Most influential was the 1957 television program “Country Style, U.S.A.,” each 15-minute episode featured famous country singers like Johnny Cash, who would sing a few country tunes with recruiting messages played in-between to remind listeners how they could contribute to their country if they felt so moved.<sup>36</sup> Thompson also notes how quickly other service branches moved to reproduce their own version of the Army’s show; the Air Force created a radio show called “Country Music Time,” while the Navy’s was called “Hootenavy,” a play on “hootenanny” (Ibid.). Audiences were drawn to these radio and TV programs because of the stars performing on them, just as with Gene Autry’s show in the 1940s. The messages of patriotism and recruitment slipped in between performances were not subtle, and they were effective.

Thompson contends that this strategy also contained some darker threads; because of country’s already-solidified ties to whiteness in the 1950s, the use of the genre as a tool of recruitment resulted in white Southerners seeking out the military in the hope of finding a “steppingstone to social respectability and economic stability—a way to avoid the manual labor and low-wage service sector jobs that dominated the post-war economy of the South” (Thompson 2020). Despite the 1950 announcement of the removal of a 10% cap on Black soldiers entering the Army, the military was hesitant to desegregate its forces, and it’s possible that this focus on white Southern recruits was an unofficial effort to keep a white

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<sup>36</sup> See “Country Style USA (1950’s)” in the YouTube playlist for a sample episode.



majority in the Army.<sup>37</sup> Utilizing this music as a tool throughout the most intense years of the Civil Rights movement in the United States also arguably further distanced non-white individuals from the military and from the kind of hands-on patriotism it engendered among recruits and supporters. Economic stability and social prestige sounded pretty good to rural white Southerners who felt their comfortable, invisible superiority being jeopardized, and enlistment offered the chance to rectify that precarity through direct, patriotic action (MacGregor 1979). Because it was such an effective recruitment strategy, the military continued to host these programs and used country music in its promotional materials until the late 1980s, when rising enrollment of people of color caused a change in strategy (Thompson 2020). But by that point, the long and popular entanglement of country and military had helped “brand the genre as the sound of white devotion to the nation-state” (Ibid.).

This was true even before the monumental events of September 11, 2001, but that moment in history changed the country music industry as irrevocably as it changed the American cultural landscape. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, many people were at a loss for how to respond, but country music stepped up immediately. Songs like Alan Jackson’s melancholic and extremely popular “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)” were released in large numbers over the next several years, all decrying the loss of life on American soil, illustrating unyielding support for the troops and the American military, and encouraging American civilians to do their part in helping the United States recover.<sup>38</sup> For

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<sup>37</sup> Some senior leaders in the Army were hesitant about changing official policies to match what was actually happening in the field of the Korean War; Army Lt. General Edward M. Almond stated at the time that he “[did] not agree that integration improves military efficiency; I believe it weakens it... This is not racism—it is common sense and understanding” (MacGregor 1979: 441).

<sup>38</sup> See “Alan Jackson – Where Were You” in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song.

many, this shift in emphasis meant renewed interest in country music; 2016 presidential hopeful and Texas senator Ted Cruz told *CBS This Morning* that “country music collectively, the way they responded [on 9/11], it resonated with me... I had an emotional reaction that says ‘these are my people.’ And so ever since 2001 I listen to country music” (Cruz 2015). Country’s focus had turned away from the domestic “us versus them” language that pitted rural, conservative ideology against coastal and liberal elites and which had characterized the genre for decades, instead highlighting a (mostly) united American people who were righteously enraged by this act of terrorism (Boulton 2008).

In practice, however, that domestic exclusionary tension still existed as many Americans were not pro-war even in the wake of 9/11, and when Bush authorized the invasion of Iraq in 2003 not all country artists were on board. The Chicks controversy that same year demonstrates this discrepancy; lead singer Natalie Maines told a crowd of London fans during a concert that “we do not want this war, this violence, and we’re ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas.”<sup>39</sup> Despite the fact that their current hit, a cover of Bruce Robison’s “Travelin’ Soldier,” was a patriotic song about a soldier’s romance with his high school sweetheart during the Vietnam War, their off-the-cuff comment was met with extraordinary and immediate backlash.<sup>40</sup> Records were burned, crushed, and otherwise destroyed en masse by angry fans, radio stations boycotted them, and they were forced to largely withdraw from the public eye for several years. A number of scholars have written of this controversy as an illustration of country’s turn away from a history of patriotism as dissent—the rebellious voices of Waylon Jennings and Merle Haggard suddenly forgotten—

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<sup>39</sup> At the time, the Chicks were known as the Dixie Chicks, but out of respect for their desire to support the Black Lives Matter movement in removing the word “Dixie” from their name, I refer to them as the Chicks throughout this dissertation regardless of the period I’m discussing.

<sup>40</sup> See “The Chicks – Travelin’ Soldier” in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song.

toward an interpretation of patriotism as unquestioned, undying support for the military (Boulton 2008, Watson and Burns 2010). This turn is reflected in a lot of the other country music released around this time, much of it angry, aggressive, and intense; one good example is Toby Keith's 2002 "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)."<sup>41</sup> Lyrics include such phrases as "we'll put a boot in your ass / it's the American way" and "justice will be served and the battle will rage / this big dog will fight when you rattle his cage / you'll be sorry that you messed with the U.S. of A." while rock-inflected instrumentals and pealing bells ring out in the background.

Songs like Keith's and Jackson's rocketed to the top of the country charts in the years after the War on Terror began, and they were not alone. A 2019 study on country music after 9/11 revealed that in the decade following the attack at least twenty-eight tracks were released that explicitly explored themes of patriotism and war, including Toby Keith's 2003 "American Soldier," an enduringly popular song that gives voice to what it's like to be a soldier in the twenty-first century (Decker 2019).<sup>42</sup> In highlighting this military narrative, the song and others that follow its precedent also reaffirm country values that already existed in the genre, namely masculinity, work ethic, Christianity, and a willingness to "do what's right" no matter the cost. The lyrics of Keith's song discuss how the protagonist is "just trying to be a father / raise a daughter and a son" while lamenting how "providing for our future's my responsibility" because he's "everything to everyone." This soldier "can't call in sick on Mondays," unlike the liberals and elites who work cushy 9-5 jobs, and if he's called to die for his country he'll "bear that cross with honor / 'cause freedom don't come free."

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<sup>41</sup> See "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue" in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song and see the music video.

<sup>42</sup> See "Toby Keith – American Soldier" in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song and see the music video.

These themes were already present in much country music before 9/11; while they briefly vanished during the onset of the War on Terror in an attempt to engender a more united American front, in the decade following they became inseparable from the genre as audiences propelled such songs to popularity on the charts. Even today, people still turn often to this music for emotional release, catharsis, and a reaffirmation of values—as of May 11, 2021, Keith’s “American Soldier” has over 53,000,000 views on YouTube, with almost 30,000 comments, some posted as recently as a few minutes ago. Other popular songs from this period include Carrie Underwood’s 2008 “Just a Dream,” which chronicles an 18-year-old woman attending the funeral of her soldier fiancée in her wedding dress (currently over 85,000,000 views), and Kenny Chesney’s 2005 “Who You’d Be Today,” a ballad that wonders about the lost futures of loved ones who died in war (over 14,000,000 views).<sup>43</sup>

This repeated emphasis on war, and the heroes who perished fighting in it, also led to a cultural renewal after 9/11 of the “heroic, male, blue-collar American worker, the man of few words and strong deeds” who had previously become an “almost entirely historical and nostalgic legacy of what Harrison and Bluestone (1988) call ‘the post-war class compromise’ ... a residual, sepia-toned ghost on the margins of the postmodern ‘global political economy’” (Fox 2005: 172).<sup>44</sup> The white, working-class American man who had felt so marginalized and left behind by popular culture and politics emerged from 9/11 as a hero, “[looming] up from the rubble of the World Trade Center as a fireman, a cop, a construction worker, and a soldier” (Ibid.). As this group, who had for many years perceived themselves as threatened by globalization, industrialism, and the diversification of the working world,

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<sup>43</sup> See “Carrie Underwood – Just A Dream” and “Kenny Chesney – Who You’d Be Today” in the YouTube playlist to listen to and watch the music videos for both songs.

<sup>44</sup> The “post-war class compromise” is a phrase from Harrison and Bluestone’s work, which Fox is citing and re-defining in his 2005 writing, cited here.

reclaimed center-stage in American popular culture, the constellation of identity markers they represented (re)gained a sense of mainstream authenticity and self-importance. The working-class hero who was lauded in the wake of 9/11 was the same hero that country music had been venerating for decades, only now pushed to hegemonic extremes by its expedient rise to mainstream popularity. In the 2010s this led to the emergence of such hyper-masculine subgenres as “bro country,” but it also cemented country’s status as a stand-in genre more generally for working-class, white, pro-military, conservative, patriotic identity in the United States.<sup>45</sup>

Country music as a genre has been shaped by its audiences’, performers’, and organizations’ engagement with the United States Armed Forces throughout its long history. This has manifest in recent years via country singers—and audiences—performatively embodying military-related personas, whether it be singing songs from the perspective of a deployed soldier, a wounded veteran, or a family member who lost a loved one to the war front. Thematically, the way that country music’s history is inflected by U.S. American ideas of frontier nostalgia and rough-and-tumble working-class authenticity results in particular conflicts arising within the country genre in the twenty-first century, all centering on what it means to be an American. In the final section of this chapter, I will turn to the state of country music and rodeo in the 2020s, pointing out the places where their shared values, troubles, and conceptions of identity continue to overlap.

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<sup>45</sup> Notably, country music is the most often-used genre by conservative candidates on campaign trails throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Interested parties can explore the website *Trax on the Trails* for more information (<https://www.traxonthetrail.com/>).

## The 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Shared Issues of American Identity in Country and Rodeo

When the COVID-19 outbreak suspended public activity in 2020, different groups of people responded in different ways. Many folks chose to hunker down, hoard toilet paper, or immediately begin hand-sewing masks for essential workers. Others loudly touted the pandemic as “fake news,” government conspiracy, or no worse than the flu. Most of rodeo’s fans fall in the latter camp, as illustrated by the impassioned commentary on the National Finals Rodeo’s social media channels in response to a variety of posts announcing the cancellation of Las Vegas’s hosting, the movement of the NFR to an alternate location, and the requirement that attendees wear masks. The first inkling that the NFR would be in jeopardy due to the COVID-19 pandemic came from the NFR’s Instagram page on August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020 when they posted a photo of their logo with the caption:

Statement from the @prca\_prorodeo on the #WranglerNFR  
The Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) remains  
committed to hosting the 2020 Wrangler National Finals Rodeo (NFR).<sup>46</sup>

The comments on this post were mixed in terms of support or suspicion, but many followers immediately took to the platform to voice their discontent with the coronavirus pandemic more generally, noting how it was ruining their NFR plans. One user commented: “Find a place to have it that lives in ‘faith over fear.’ 🇺🇸🇺🇸🇺🇸🇺🇸,” the pointed use of the American flag emoji driving home the common theme in the comment thread that to cancel the NFR would be, frankly, un-American.<sup>47</sup> This user’s comment also suggests the strong religious perspective prevalent among anti-cancellation followers, many of whom also espouse anti-science positions in this and other comment threads while maintaining that making any concessions to the pandemic is weak, fearful, or stupid.

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<sup>46</sup> Las Vegas NFR (@lasvegasnfr), August 19<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>47</sup> User @mrsuelayman

Two days later in another post, the NFR officially announced that Las Vegas would not be hosting the 2020 National Finals and asked for fans to fill out a survey to choose between some possible alternative destinations.<sup>48</sup> More angry followers flooded the comments section, pointing the finger for this change in plan at liberals, the Nevada governor, the NFR, and China in equal measure. Many users mixed anti-government perspectives with an emphasis on the financial aspect of Las Vegas’s cancellation, pointing out that “Champions need to be crowned ! they need the chance to compete for that money”<sup>49</sup> or else risk poverty from the lack of work many competitive rodeo athletes faced in 2020 as the result of other rodeo cancellations. One user explicitly connected government conspiracy, the pandemic, and working-class concern over finances in their comment:

This decision is absolutely stupid! There is zero science behind it...only fear. In the future, you will be exposed and embarrassed for this and in no way can you say that you did for safety sake. Way to be there for the cowboys and cowgirls that just had their means of income stripped away from them. None of you should receive a damn paycheck either! But most likely you will, just like the politicians do...rules and laws for the people while exempting themselves from their own rules and laws. [sic]<sup>50</sup>

Responses to this user’s comment devolved into a science-versus-anti-science argument rife with ad hominem attacks and profanity, but most prominent was an adamant sentiment that the government was to blame—and therefore was not to be trusted. The language of many comments is disturbingly reminiscent of the January 6, 2021 storming of the United States Capitol by right-wing extremists; one user said, “Move it fuck the scamdemic have fans open it wide open time to make stand,” calling other NFR fans to take action against a perceived

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<sup>48</sup> “While it is unfortunate that Las Vegas is unable to host the #WranglerNFR with fans in 2020, we would like to get your feedback on the PRCA’s plans for potentially hosting in another destination. Click on our profile link to take the survey” (Las Vegas NFR, August 21 2020).

<sup>49</sup> User @4\_bar\_c\_photos\_, sic

<sup>50</sup> User @brent.conrad

government conspiracy to take away freedoms from average citizens.<sup>51</sup> This sentiment is echoed by many other users on this and other posts as the deepest concern over the NFR's change in plan. Another NFR fan pointedly tied together economics, conspiracy, and calls to action in response to the November 2, 2020 announcement that bags and purses would not be allowed inside the NFR's new venue:

@globelifefield and @lasvegasnfr are doing exactly what they're told so they can make their money. Cool. They also have to make sure that spectators attending the event are totally compliant and unresistant even if the policy is preposterous. They want to see if y'all will follow their RIDICULOUS rules. In fact, the extreme left makes these bullshit rules and regs so that we won't show up and get together—we're weaker separated and isolated. They want people confused about dumb shit like this and arguing already because it turns us into SHEEP. Wake up already damn! [sic]<sup>52</sup>

This trend is not isolated to rodeo fans in the United States; a 2020 study by the Lehigh University College of Business identifies differences in political ideology as the primary factor in how individuals have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic (Nowlan and Zane 2020). While previous research has suggested that in general conservative individuals are more sensitive to outside threats to safety, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that conservatives in the United States tend to believe that the virus does not pose a huge risk and are resultingly more willing to ignore mask mandates, stay-at-home orders, and social distancing (Ibid.). Nowlan and Zane argue that this is because of a difference in perception about the coronavirus's agency; conservatives are inclined to believe in free will, where liberals tend to be more accepting of randomness. Conservatives view free will and self-determination as "primary drivers of outcomes in life," where work ethic and self-control are most important in ensuring an individual's success and perceived restrictions on individual

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<sup>51</sup> User @troydog13, sic

<sup>52</sup> User @kandywalkitout



freedoms are the source of strong negative reactions (Ibid.: 4). Liberals, on the other hand, tend to be more focused on how random or external circumstances beyond an individual's control influence final outcomes. This study then draws a line between these differing perspectives and widespread responses to COVID-19; conservatives are arguably less sensitive to the threat of the virus because any negative consequences that come from it can instead be attributed to the actions of high-agency entities like federal officials, health organizations, media outlets, and local governments (Ibid.: 5).

When the NFR announced on November 27, 2020 that it would be requiring masks at its events, many rodeo fans showed their conservative colors in how they responded, attributing agency for the perceived loss of freedom to everyone but the coronavirus: the NFR, Nevada's governor, the Democrats/liberals/left, or even just a nondescript but ever-watchful "them." Many users also tied this loss of freedom to a core American or cowboy identity that rodeo fans all have in common, arguing that if the NFR's administrators were *real* Americans or *real* cowboys, they wouldn't be bowing down to Big Government; one user simply commented, "Gonna have to boycott this until y'all get some American sense again. This is ridiculous."<sup>53</sup> Others contended that cowboys would never wear masks; "I pretty sure cowboys used to ride the range and after bringin cattle to sale they'd hit whore houses and saloons. I don't think I've ever met a real cowboy who would be ok with these ignorant masks rules. Ain't cowboys supposed to stand up for what's right not bow down to the bullshit?" [sic].<sup>54</sup> American identity—cowboy identity—is deeply tied up in responses to COVID-19 for rodeo fans, and Instagram proved a fertile ground for those fans to pointedly

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<sup>53</sup> User @horsinaroun

<sup>54</sup> User @austin.burrow1. Also see "Wearing a mask is the most un-cowboy thing I can imagine" from user @akheller\_7

voice those identities in a communal space. Commenters repeatedly reminded everyone that rodeo is an American sport for American fans, and only American patriots deserved to enjoy it; one user snarkily commented, “I’m sorry I thought this was America. Wow”<sup>55</sup> while another added, “😞 Watching America’s freedom crumble is heartbreaking. 😞”<sup>56</sup>. Others were more aggressive, calling mask-wearers stupid; “The one disease more contagious than the controlavirus is stupidity and you have it bad.”<sup>57</sup> One of the more memorable comments goes farther, naming the media, an unspecified “people,” and scientists/the government as the real virus: “Yea no mask! It’s America! The FLU kills more than COVID. Mask are a joke and a way to scare people! The MEDIA is the virus. People are the PANDEMIC. COMMON sense is the CURE! To God be the glory!”<sup>58</sup>

This protracted and extreme reaction to the NFR’s change in plans for 2020 illustrates the deep connection rodeo fans feel between their sport and their own identities. Making any concessions to the pandemic proved deeply personal to the Instagram users who flocked to the comments section to protest those changes; their words illustrated the financial, political, and national concerns that rodeo fans carry with them in their engagement with the sport. Though commentary on the military is largely absent from these comment threads, the views espoused by followers represent continuations of the conservative, America-first ideology that undergirds both country music and rodeo in the twenty-first century. Of course, not all rodeo fans are conservatives, and many left-leaning fans took to the comments section to try and combat ardent anti-maskers, but an overwhelming percentage of the comments left on

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<sup>55</sup> User @josey-21

<sup>56</sup> User @joan22nd

<sup>57</sup> User @chukars1live.com

<sup>58</sup> User @double\_o\_cattle\_co.\_

each of the NFR's posts share the same suspicion of the government and fear over losing individual freedoms.

In contrast, for country music the last several years have been marked not by how the genre responds to COVID-19—though there have been some controversies over mask-free concerts—but rather by how it has responded to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and grappled with historic racism in the music industry.<sup>59</sup> Similar themes of white or conservative fear, thinly veiled by claims of nostalgia or authenticity driving exclusionary language and policy, are rife within country's contemporary conversations about race and political correctness. Country's popularity has risen since the pandemic began in March of 2020, with some journalists suggesting that its “feeling of normalcy is alluring” in a time where everything is upside-down for many people, but in the wake of national protests for racial justice and equity it is also clear that the genre has been ignoring (or suppressing) some major issues within its ranks (Kornhaber 2020). As previous sections of this chapter showed, American identity is a central concern for country music performers, producers, and audiences. As the genre's makers and audiences wrestle with twenty-first century identity politics, country's status as a safe space for white nostalgia has been called into question by the media.

One of the more revealing controversies of recent years is that surrounding singer Morgan Wallen. In a video taken on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021, a neighbor captured Wallen returning to his Nashville home with a group of friends after a night out; he can be heard in

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<sup>59</sup> Most notably, country singer Chase Rice gave a mask-free concert at the Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary—a prison-turned-museum and concert venue—in Petros, Tennessee on June 27, 2020. Singers Travis McCready and Chris Janson also both held mask-free concerts in the middle of 2020. Rice's Instagram in March contained the lyrics: “Dear corona, you don't know the heart of a country fan... We're gonna show up, hold our drinks high, sing them songs about trucks and beer” (Kornhaber 2020).

the video yelling at someone to watch over one of his friends, saying “take care of this pussy-ass motherfucker” and “take care of this pussy-ass n\*\*\*\*\*” before disappearing from view.<sup>60</sup> The video was released by TMZ a few days later, on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, and Wallen promptly issued a public statement: “I used an unacceptable and inappropriate racial slur that I wish I could take back. There are no excuses to use this type of language, ever. I want to sincerely apologize for using the word. I promise to do better” (Oliver 2021).<sup>61</sup> The damage, however, had already been done. Several country music radio stations pulled Warren’s music from their rotations, streaming services like Spotify and Apple Music removed him from promoted playlists, the American Country Music (ACM) Awards withdrew him from eligibility for their awards season, and his label (Nashville’s Big Loud) suspended his contract (Ibid.). However, Wallen’s popularity exploded and his songs rapidly climbed iTunes and Billboard sales charts following the release of the first video. My own Facebook feed at that time was full to the brim with shared articles and comment thread debates about the issue, with many people decrying Wallen’s “cancellation” as an attempt to curtail of his freedom of speech and suggesting that everyone go out and stream his music everywhere, buy his new album—released a scant few weeks before this video surfaced—and leave supportive comments on his social media channels.

In a lengthier apology released a few days later, Wallen asked his followers to stop defending his actions, saying “I appreciate those who still see something in me and have defended me, but, for today, please don’t. I was wrong. It’s on me to take ownership for this and I fully accept any penalties I’m facing” (Oliver 2021). Wallen also detailed his meetings with several Black-led organizations, including the Nashville NAACP, in his attempt to show

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<sup>60</sup> I have elected not to put the racial slur Wallen used in print.

<sup>61</sup> See “Morgan Wallen’s Apology” in the YouTube playlist to listen to his apology.

that he was trying to learn. His fans responded with overwhelming support, leaving apologist comments on his video like “You still have tons of support !! People are too damn uptight and there is so much worse to worry about!” or “You don’t need to apologize to anyone. This is still America” (Wallen 2021). Alternatively, many fans left comments that attempted to turn the focus back on the Black community for having popularized the use of the term in question; one fan wrote, “Kid don’t buy into their BS. You used it how rap taught kids to use it. It meant no more than ‘my friend’ the way it was used... just like in the crap rap that degrades women, glorifies drug dealers and promotes violence. SHARE HIS MUSIC” (Ibid.). Wallen himself made (what looks like) a fairly genuine attempt to learn from his mistakes in the public eye—though one that still required the emotional labor of many Black people at the NAACP and elsewhere, and was likely driven by the fear of losing his career—but many of his fans simply took it as a sign that liberal “cancel culture” had set its sights on Wallen and on country music. By attempting to remind other fans (and Wallen) that “this is still America” and that the freedom of speech reigns supreme, and by also reminding other fans that Black people can say the n-word, the comment thread on this video attempts to reframe this controversy as being about the hypocritical left trying to cancel country music.

Aside from the ACM pulling Wallen’s nominations and the Country Music Association (CMA) removing Wallen from all their platforms, few country artists spoke publicly about the controversy. Some, like singer Kelsea Ballerini, suggested that Wallen’s actions were reprehensible because they didn’t reflect Nashville or the country music industry, but singer Maren Morris tweeted to counter, “It actually IS representative of our town because this isn’t his first ‘scuffle’ and he just demolished a huge streaming record last month regardless. We all know it wasn’t his first time using that word. We keep them rich

and protected at all costs with no recourse” (Morris 2021). Mickey Guyton, a Black country singer who just recently had become the first Black female solo artist to receive a Grammy nomination in a country category for her song “Black Like Me,” also tweeted about the incident, saying simply, “The hate runs deep. Smfh” (Guyton 2021).<sup>62</sup>

Wallen’s isn’t the only racially-charged controversy to rock the country world in the last two years. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers, two of country’s most popular groups underwent name changes in an attempt to excise terms with racist connotations from their brands. First to make the change was the Dixie Chicks, now known simply as the Chicks. They removed “dixie” from their name because of the racist baggage attached to the term, and while some fans responded poorly to the change—many sarcastically asked why not remove the term “chicks,” too, since it can be a derogatory term for women—their history of being rebellious, politically active musicians made it an easier transition for the fans they’d managed to retain across the years. They released their newest album *Gaslighter* under this changed name in July of 2020, and their songs cover such topics as abortion rights, gun control, Trump’s relationship with Russia, and anti-Black violence.<sup>63</sup> Alongside their new name, the Chicks used this album to reestablish themselves as liberal country artists who would never just “shut up and sing.”<sup>64</sup>

In contrast to the Chicks, the group formerly known as Lady Antebellum handled their name change differently. The band, which has been popular for years and had a number

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<sup>62</sup> “Smfh” stands for “shaking my fucking head.” Additionally, see “Mickey Guyton – Black Like Me” in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song.

<sup>63</sup> See “The Chicks – March March” in the YouTube playlist to listen to one of the songs from this new album.

<sup>64</sup> This phrase was used by protesting audiences in 2003 after Natalie Maines’s anti-Bush comment caused them to be cancelled by the country music industry, with many (male) audience members telling the Chicks that they should not hold political opinions and should just “shut up and sing.”

one hit single as recently as January of 2020, decided to go by Lady A in response to the anti-police-brutality protests of 2020, removing the term “antebellum” from their name. They said that they originally chose the word because of the “vague southern nostalgia” it evoked, but their statement acknowledged that they “did not take into account the associations that weigh down this word referring to the period of history before the Civil War, which includes slavery” (Kornhaber 2020). However, there was already an established musician using the name Lady A, a Black blues singer from Seattle named Anita White who had been working under that name for over two decades.<sup>65</sup> When this news hit the media, the country group initially claimed ignorance that Lady A existed, but then later announced that they had begun negotiations to allow both the group and the blues singer to keep and use the name. However, the deal quickly went sour, with the band suing White for copyright infringement on July 8, 2020 and stating that she’d asked them for a \$10 million payment to use the name. White told the press that she had indeed asked for a \$5 million payment to her for the rights to the name, which she had held and used to build her brand for twenty years, alongside a \$5 million donation to charities of her choice. She told *Vulture*, “If you want to be an advocate or an ally, you help those who you’re oppressing. And that might require you to give something up because I am not going to be erased” (Kornhaber 2020).

On September 15, 2020, Anita White filed a countersuit asserting her ownership of the Lady A trademark, seeking damages for lost sales and a weakened brand, and seeking royalties from any income the band receives under the name Lady A, which they have continued to use despite the lawsuits. The band has continued to receive widespread support from their fans and from the country music industry; in October of 2020, they won the Group

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<sup>65</sup> See “Lady A’s New Joint” in the YouTube playlist to listen to her music.

Video of the Year award at the CMT Music Awards for their song “Champagne Night.”<sup>66</sup> In 2021, they became the newest members of the Grand Ole Opry—membership is a huge achievement in country music, bringing with it elite performance opportunities that last until the performers die—and they also released a new single called “Like A Lady” that debuted at number 30 on the iTunes country music chart. Nothing has been legally settled yet, but many fans responded negatively to both the name change and the resulting lawsuits. Some fans took to social media to protest the name changes, using similar terminology to that which would be employed in support of Morgan Wallen’s use of the n-word in early 2021. For example, DeAnna Lorraine—a former Congressional candidate running against House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi—wrote, “I was excited to go to your show this year and now you’ve lost a fan for life. Groveling to the BLM mob for a freakin non-offensive word. You guys are sick” (sic).<sup>67</sup>

Again, an attempt is made to focus the blame on liberals—particularly Black liberals—for enacting a cancel culture that targets conservatives and country music fans. Ignoring the fact that perhaps one of the earliest and most enduringly famous examples of cancel culture in country music came in the form of audience’s and industry gatekeepers’ attacks on the Chicks after their 2003 comments about George W. Bush, every recent controversy in the country music world has been met with a vocal set of country fans decrying cancel culture as a targeted impingement of personal freedoms. Of course, I would be remiss to not point out that there is also a large contingency of fans who are happy with the slow political changes country music is making, and who have responded positively to

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<sup>66</sup> See “Lady A – Champaign Night” in the YouTube playlist to listen to their music.

<sup>67</sup> Cited from a now-deleted tweet. It is worth noting here that as of November 3, 2020 DeAnna Lorraine has been permanently suspended from Twitter, after repeatedly voicing support for Kenosha, WI shooter Kyle Rittenhouse and tweeting racist comments about extreme violence and immigrants (Collins 2020).



the name changes, the industry-level responses to overt racism, and the new music Black artists like Mickey Guyton and Jimmie Allen are putting out, some of which deals explicitly with the Black experience in the country genre.<sup>68</sup> It is also true that in the past few years the genre has made some strides towards surface-level acceptance of diversity and liberal politics, but as fan responses to both Lady A and Morgan Wallen's recent faux pas illustrate, fans have a huge impact on how the genre's makers and gatekeepers respond to controversy outside its governing bodies. While the CMT and CMAs moved quickly to remove Wallen from their channels, his fans came out in droves to ensure his continued financial success on the charts and continued play time on local radio stations. And while the band Lady A appeared to be working towards a collaborative solution to their exploitative problem, fans pointed out that "groveling to the BLM mob" was not the kind of action that they would support. Once Lady A sued Anita White, attempting to take her stage name for themselves without financial remuneration, fans settled down again.

These recent case studies show that for both country and rodeo fans identity is deeply tied to the idea of having and using personal freedoms. Whether that freedom is defined as the right to not wear a mask or the right to use offensive language, responses to the recent controversies in country music and in professional rodeo illustrate that these audiences possess a deep-seated fear of losing their freedom to a liberal-driven government and culture that have their targets set squarely on working-class white Americans. Both rodeo and country music offer spaces for those fans to navigate their complex feelings of nostalgia for a white America that has disappeared, as well as to express their feelings about the value of patriotism, hard work, and tradition. When the sanctity of those places are threatened, by the

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<sup>68</sup> See "Jimmie Allen – Make Me Want To" in the YouTube playlist as an example of this sound.

possibility of being “cancelled” by popular culture or by institutions and governing bodies enacting rules and regulations that are perceived as threatening personal freedoms, fans lash out.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter, I have examined the performance and construction of identity as it relates to professional rodeo and the country music industry, arguing that in both contexts identity is deeply tied to the idea of what it means to be an (authentic) American individual. For rodeo fans, competitors, and producers, the ritual act of performing the Wild West’s expansion and domination over the natural world is a way of locating themselves in that history and (re)claiming it as their own. Authenticity is tied to one’s ability to participate in this ritual, either as a spectator or as a competitor, and to understand that those performed actions have meaning in how they index a specific perspective on American history. I suggest that the figure of the cowboy represents the idealized constellation of identities in this context, and it functions as a marker of toughness, willingness to get one’s hands dirty, and the kind of patriotism that encourages an individual to take direct action to maintain freedom. That there is such a widespread and popular military rodeo circuit, alongside the professional rodeo’s devotion to explosive pro-military performances, also clearly illustrates how deeply patriotic identity is connected to the freedom-loving ethos of the rodeo and its fans.

In the same way, country music has historically served as an arena for white, working-class Americans to explicitly center their identities and carve out a space for poor, rural folks in America’s national white mythology. The genre has always been tinged with a

certain degree of vague nostalgia for an America that no longer exists, and while the genre has never actually been exclusively white, it has positioned itself as a safe haven for white Americans over the last several decades through artists' repeated use of "us" versus "them" language that sets white/rural/working-class/heteronormative/Christian/conservative individuals against their opposites on both a local and global scale. The military's usage of country music as a recruitment tool and country artists' flamboyantly pro-military response to 9/11 have further cemented the relationship between the country genre and a specific brand of patriotism that trades on direct, measurable action, including buying war bonds, donating to veterans' organizations, or enlisting in the Armed Forces. Country musicians have also repeatedly embodied and empathized with various war-related figures, from the sacrificing soldier to the widowed wife, and utilized those figures to stir up pro-military emotion in audiences. These connections between genre and military have set up country music as the ideal location for the transmittal, negotiation, and intake of American identity markers.

By discussing several recent case studies in both rodeo and country music, and exploring how those controversies reveal underlying tensions and motivations on behalf of audiences, industry entities, and performers, I have argued that rodeo and country have such ideological synergy because their audiences share similar sets of concerns about freedom, patriotism, nostalgia, and authenticity. When the National Finals Rodeo instituted a mask mandate for their 2020 events, fans perceived this rule as a sign that the organization was full of obedient sheep who bowed to a liberal government and fake science. In the same way, when several country music stars moved to change their names as a response to the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, fans decried cancel culture and targeted those artists as weak-

minded money-grabbers who were bowing to “the mob.” Both of these responses spring from personal concerns over the perceived loss of individual freedoms in the twenty-first century, and indicate that rodeo and country audiences are primed to respond to the same threats in similar ways. In addition, rodeo and country both also represent sites where individuals—particularly white, working-class adjacent individuals—see their own identities reflected and refracted, and when the heroes of those sites are called into question or called out for errors, fans take those things personally.

In my next chapter, I turn to the 2020 National Finals Rodeo as an extended case study of how country music (and other related genres) and rodeo are combined into one major event, where concerns over patriotism, freedoms, nostalgia, and authenticity are funneled into a single ten-night stretch and the ideology that both industries have in common is made highly visible through elaborately musical opening ceremonies. The figures of the cowboy and the soldier are central to understanding the musical and visual play of these ceremonies, and this chapter has illustrated how closely the two are tied together in the way they index freedom, direct action, and love of country.

## **Chapter 4: Sound and Spectacle at the 2020 National Finals Rodeo**<sup>69</sup>

*cw: descriptions of violence and injury*

[The Wild West] is something of which intelligence, morality, and patriotism approve, because it is history not vaudeville; not cheap and ephemeral theatrical mimicry confined within the limits of four walls, but the perpetuation and magnificent material re-introduction of a crowning epoch, of transcendent, electrifying Reality, whose natural stage dwarfs that of Caesar's Coliseum and is illumined by the lamps of heaven.

—Nate Salsbury, intro to the 1899 *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* program

On a blustery Friday evening in early December, I sat down in my living room with my computer at the ready, slippers on, and hot cocoa in hand. I was preparing to watch the first night of the 2020 National Finals Rodeo (NFR), livestreamed this year from Arlington, Texas on the Cowboy Channel Plus's website from December 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup>. In what would be a striking departure from my experience attending the live events in Las Vegas during the 2018 season, ten nights of video coverage took me and thousands of other viewers up close to what was happening in the chutes, the locker room, and the arena. Hours of pre-show footage were aired live alongside opening ceremonies and the rodeo itself, providing unique perspectives that highlighted the NFR's media elements in lieu of the non-reproducible and in-person physical, sensory experiences. Where my experience attending the 2018 National Finals in Las Vegas was one of sensory overload, the sounds, scents, and images of the Old West and rural America loudly overlaying the neon lights and city grunginess of the Las Vegas strip in a war of attention, 2020's NFR was both more removed and more intimate. Sitting on my couch, I was not overwhelmed by blasting metal music through stadium loudspeakers or caught in the crush of bodies hustling to find their seats before the next event

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<sup>69</sup> To listen along with the musical examples in this chapter, follow this link to the YouTube playlist: <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLVZ1WtQdnGkjS4uskUorCxmBQP2s7pFSJ>

started. Instead, the livestream format draws viewers' attention more keenly to the narrative playing out on their screens, directing the audience's gaze to particular, individual places, spaces, and moments in time as the rodeo unfolds. These intentional, curatorial choices on the part of the videography and production teams at the NFR provide a clear picture of the rodeo's message: to be a real cowboy, to be a real American, you must act.

This chapter will explore moments of performance in the arena over the course of the 2020 NFR with an eye toward the ways that contemporary rodeo makes use of music and sound to present a particular interpretation of the cowboy icon. The NFR brings rodeo, music, and cultural history and identities into the present through evocations of nostalgia and glorified violence that harken back to the Old West, updating and preserving sets of values that prioritize action, honor, and freedom. In the case of the 2020 NFR, the rodeo unfolds like a ritual, following a pre-set order of operations that works to ground its participants in a sense of familiarity and custom. Rodeo has long been studied and discussed as a ritual performance of Old Western identity and expansion (Lawrence 1982, Stoeltje 1989 and 1993), but through analyzing this year's NFR I argue that it also represents a performance of a particular definition of American patriotism rooted in the willingness to act, no matter the cost. In this chapter, I examine the musical and structural rituals of rodeo performance, and posit that the carefully layered soundscapes of military bands, rock and metal tracks, and country-western music and instruments operate in tandem to produce a unified aesthetic and message of American and Western identity that is built upon and expanded over the course of all ten nights. Combining rodeo's history of patriotism with the performed kinship between cowboy and soldier that country and rodeo both have in common allows rodeo producers,

competitors, and audiences to actively participate in the identity-making happening at the rodeo.

### **Making the NFR Virtual**

For the last 34 years, the National Finals Rodeo has been held in the city of Las Vegas, Nevada, where for ten days each December cowboys and cowgirls flock to the Vegas strip and take over the hotels, casinos, and bars. When I attended in 2018, it was impossible to go anywhere without seeing a sea of white and black cowboy hats bobbing above the crowd or hearing the click of boot heels on the floor. Hotel conference spaces were transformed into exhibition halls, arenas, and livestock housing, and every bar on the strip was broadcasting replays of the previous night's rodeo action. For many, attending the National Finals each year is an act of pilgrimage, and tickets for the ten-day extravaganza have sold out every year since 1987 (O'Harver 2015). However, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, the National Finals' fate was undetermined for many months. As December approached, the Professional Rodeo Cowboys' Association (PRCA) debated whether or not to even put on such a major event after Nevada's health and safety rules prohibited large gatherings for sporting events. After polling their ticketholders and PRCA members, it was decided that the NFR would continue as planned, just in a different state where COVID-19 rules were more relaxed. Arlington, Texas put in a successful bid to host the 2020 National Finals Rodeo, and with a few modest concessions to the pandemic (i.e. attendees and competitors would be required to wear masks while in the stadium, and seats were sold in socially-distanced blocks) the Superbowl of rodeo went off without a hitch (PRCA Staff 2020).

Much of the footage from both the rodeo itself and the affiliated expos and barbeques covered by daytime streaming show folks milling about in close quarters with masks down on their chins (or completely absent from view). For the most part, however, any overt commentary on the pandemic is absent from the narrative of the 2020 NFR and its opening ceremonies. As this chapter will explore, the story of this year's NFR instead focused on a kind of home-grown Americana that pays homage to the military, to frontier history, and to a kind of quiet toughness that pairs with a deep-seated and personal patriotism. While the NFR might have heightened these themes—which have always been present but were less explicitly highlighted in earlier years—as an attempt to avoid explicit engagement with the pandemic, I suggest that this focus was specifically triggered by the way the pandemic was politicized in popular American culture, alongside the wave of renewed public engagement with the Black Lives Matter movement and other social justice projects throughout 2020.

Political discourse pitted liberals and conservatives against each other, and divides between rural and urban populations widened as government and popular responses to the pandemic highlighted competing sets of priorities, values, and perspectives on masking, vaccines, and racism. In previous chapters of this dissertation, I examined the social media posts and conflict that dealt with these exact issues in the months leading up to the 2020 NFR, noting how audience comments registered a deep distaste for any perceived curtailment of pandemic-related freedoms at the NFR itself. In response, not only did the NFR's administrators and producers stay silent on the pandemic and the current political climate in America, but they also centered the concept of freedom in such a way that almost pretends those issues don't exist, or that it can transcend them. Instead, the music, announcers, and



performers at the NFR turn the audience's gaze back in history, evoking nostalgia and national pride while avoiding the pitfalls of engaging with current political events.

While the visual aesthetics and Western associations of the NFR are partially responsible for the legibility of these themes, this chapter explores several noteworthy opening ceremonies spread over those ten nights of rodeo to suggest that music and sound play a deeply important role in creating that story. I argue here that the NFR's producers and performers utilize a mixture of country, rock, metal, and folk music to draw connections for the audience between cowboys, soldiers, and law enforcement, reinforcing a brand of patriotism that is built on the commitment to act on and defend personal and national freedoms. As previous chapters have laid out, the connection between rodeo, country music, and the military has been in place for decades, but at the end of such a divisive year in American history those associations take on more urgent meanings than in years prior. Over the course of the NFR's ten nights of rodeo, entertainers, contestants, and producers alike create a cohesive narrative of patriotism, freedom, and American identity that speaks to the continued value of rodeo for contemporary audiences.

### **Events and Structure at the National Finals Rodeo**

Every rodeo looks a little bit different. Venues, announcers, and entertainers may change from rodeo to rodeo and state to state, and the PRCA's expansive season means that competitors don't appear at every single event held throughout the year—in fact, on any given weekend during the height of rodeo season, there could be as many as four or five professionally-rated rodeos taking place in different locations across the United States. Different events have different traditions that make them feel unique; Cheyenne Frontier

Days' historical reenactments give a very different ambience to the venue than the National Finals' Cowboy Christmas shopping expo does. But while the aesthetic and commercialized trappings of rodeo may differ from event to event, the underlying structure remains remarkably consistent at all levels of the sport. The National Finals Rodeo, as the biggest rodeo event of the year and a sort of mecca for rodeo fans who make quasi-religious trips each year, puts this structure on glorious display.

The events of rodeo are divided into two categories: roughstock and timed events. The roughstock events are the most physical, pairing a single cowboy against a bucking horse or bull with the goal of making it eight seconds in the arena without falling off, riding with as good a form as possible and encouraging the animal to perform its best—all while holding on with only one hand. Disqualifications can be given for not “marking out” of the gate properly (i.e. not having one's legs in the proper position when the animal leaves the starting chute), for having one's off hand touch the animal at any point during the ride, or any number of other infractions involving form and conduct. These events are scored by judges on a point basis, where the cowboy and the animal are each responsible for half of the points to a total of 100. Points may be added or subtracted for difficulty of maneuvers, degree of control displayed by the rider, and the degree of wildness and vigor shown by the animal. Most rodeos include three roughstock events: saddle bronc riding (where the bucking horse wears a small facsimile of a Western saddle, giving the rider a horn to hold onto), bareback bronc riding (where the saddle is not present, and the rider holds a rope tied to the horse's halter instead), and bull riding (where the rider holds onto a rope tied around the bull's chest). These are usually evenly spaced throughout the evening, interspersed with timed events, and bull riding always is the final event of the rodeo when it is included.

The timed events are also largely consistent, though there is some variation in these events across different rodeos based on arena size and livestock availability, among other things. The NFR includes four timed events in its nightly rounds: tie-down roping, team roping, barrel racing, and steer wrestling, or “bulldogging.” Tie-down roping, also called calf roping, involves releasing a young calf from a chute while a cowboy on a horse gives chase, lassoes the calf from a rope tied to his saddle horn, and leaps off his horse to catch the roped calf while his horse stops, backs up, and tightens the rope. He then flips the calf onto its side and ties three of its legs together with a short rope known as a tie-down rope or a “piggin’ string,” ensuring that the calf will not be able to stand. The clock stops when the cowboy throws up his hands, signaling that he’s finished his tying (also known as putting a “wrap and a hooley” on the calf), but he must then go back to his horse, mount up, and release the tension on the rope connecting the calf to the saddle horn. If the calf remains down for six seconds without untying itself, the cowboy’s time stands, and on average this event takes under ten seconds per contestant. Team roping is somewhat similar, but involves teams of two catching and roping cows after their release from a chute. One cowboy, the “header,” ropes the cow’s horns. Once he is successful, the “heeler” ropes the cow’s back legs, aiming to catch both in their loop and tighten it enough to essentially string the cow up from nose to hooves. If he only catches one leg, a time penalty is added, and the team with the fastest time is the victor, with an average time of under 15 seconds.

Steer wrestling, or “bulldogging,” involves no rope at all. A cow is released from a chute, like the other timed events, but when the cowboy and his horse chase after them, the cowboy’s goal is to launch himself from his running horse and onto the cow, aiming to grab it by the horns and wrench it to the ground. Time stops in this event when all four legs are off

the ground and the cow is on its side, which often takes fewer than five seconds start to finish. Barrel racing, the final timed event included in the NFR, is unofficially a women's-only event, and is usually the only event that women participate in at high levels. Three barrels are placed in the arena in a triangular pattern, and the event is timed by how long it takes a cowgirl and her horse to race around them in a cloverleaf pattern. Knocked-over barrels or missed barrels constitute time penalties, with an average course completion time of 14-17 seconds depending on the size of the arena making it the longest event of the rodeo. This event is usually held late in the evening, and is often the last event before the bull riding because it gives the animal handlers ample time to get ornery bulls into the chute after the other roughstock have been moved back to their holding pens.

At the National Finals Rodeo, the structure of each evening's competition—a "round" in NFR jargon—is the same. Over ten consecutive nights of rodeo, the only things that change in this format are the theme and personnel of each opening ceremony. The messages highlighted in these opening ceremonies set the tone for how the rest of the evening should be perceived, coloring the ritualistic unfolding of events with overtones that range from patriotic to religious. 2020's NFR uplifts the ritual struggle between man and beast that is exemplified in the often-violent antagonism of the rodeo events by drawing clear parallels to the fight for American freedoms in their opening ceremonies. Explicit commentary on the COVID-19 pandemic and volatile political climate are strikingly absent from this ten-day event, but the NFR is anything but apolitical. Beliefs about both national and identity politics undergird many of the messages being displayed by the National Finals Rodeo producers and entertainers, and music and sound throughout these opening ceremonies are used to promote a right-leaning agenda tinged with nostalgia, assumed whiteness, and calls to action that are

embodied in the figure of the American cowboy. This agenda is set up gently in the first round of the National Finals, but as the ten-day event stretches on, that story deepens and grows more nuanced as each evening's opening ceremonies add another layer to the complex narrative being shaped by producers, competitors, and audiences alike. Since most attendees hold ten-day passes, allowing them attendance at each evening's rodeo, the individual opening ceremonies are not observed as independent performances, but rather parts of a deeply meaningful whole.

### **Round One: Setting the Stage**

The first night of the 2020 NFR is one of the shows that does not follow a set theme each year, unlike Round Four (“Tough Enough to Wear Pink Night”) or Round Ten (“National Patriot Night”), which have been consistent across the years. As the at-home viewer's first foray into the rodeo, Round One functions as an excellent introduction to the kind of spectacle and soundtrack one can expect from the rodeo's opening ceremonies, and it sets the tone for the longer narrative to be explored in depth over the next ten days. In 2020, the rodeo opens with the lights in the Globe Life Field Stadium going dark as a folksy version of “Battle Hymn of the Republic” plays over the sound system, featuring harmonica, twangy violin, and low strings, and immediately placing audiences in the West.<sup>70</sup> One of the rodeo announcers—Roger Mooney, Andy Seiler, and Bob Tallman take turns throughout the event, though they are never visible to livestream viewers—speaks over the sound system, extolling the virtues of the United States' protected freedoms and transitioning smoothly into a stadium-wide prayer:

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<sup>70</sup> See “Battle Hymn of the Republic” in the YouTube playlist for a similarly-styled recording.

How blessed are we to live in the greatest nation known to man? Freedoms, privileges that are second to none and unparalleled in the history of the world. The freedoms of assembly, of speech, and religion, indeed we're truly blessed. Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, we ask you to join us as we exercise these rights. Join us as we rise and remove cover. We take time for tonight's invocation as well as our national anthem as we bow our heads in a word of prayer (Round 1 video: 0:01-0:35).

The relationship established here between having these rights and actively using them is an important theme in the NFR's opening ceremonies that continues to be explored over the next ten nights, as is the intimate closeness between religion and expressions of patriotism. As this connection is verbalized, the music changes, the folk march fading and being replaced by a more gently lilting violin melody of "Amazing Grace," underscoring the announcer's emphatic prayer with simple country-style flourishes and embellishments.<sup>71</sup> The prayer begins like many rodeo supplications do, with pleas for protection and safety on behalf of the competitors and livestock, but includes a "special request" that speaks to this most fundamental theme of so many of these opening ceremonies:

Protect all those service men and women who put their lives in harm's way to perpetuate our brand of freedom. We are so blessed as a nation, 325 million strong, with over 300,000 churches, but tonight we come to you dear Lord and ask you to give us your guidance, your light, and your hands over Arlington, Texas on Thursday night. These things we ask, in your name we pray, amen (1:09-1:46).

Over the identifiable strains of "Amazing Grace," this prayer serves to remind the audience that freedom is something that must be fought for and protected, that though it is perceived as a God-given right it is also something that requires action. Notably, it also again makes explicit in just a few sentences the connection between the military, patriotism, and religion that supports and underlies many of these opening ceremonies, providing the framework through which a call to action can be made. The drawling hymn playing in the background

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<sup>71</sup> See "Amazing Grace" in the YouTube playlist for a similarly-styled recording.

sonically reinforces these connections, its country-western styling creating a link between the rural West and the God-fearing patriotism being put into words by the announcer.

At the conclusion of this prayer, moving now to a solo guitar, a lone horse and rider mirror the soundscape's quiet individualism, galloping out into the arena under the light of the spotlight and carrying an American flag (1:50). The announcer introduces the flag, praising "the colors that never run, that never go quietly into the night" (1:58-2:03), and the audience cheers at the sight of Old Glory, our nation's flag. Horse and rider stand there for the duration of the National Anthem, sung this first night by country trio Runaway June.<sup>72</sup> A cappella three-part harmony echoes around the stadium, the women's twangy voices leaning heavily on added grace notes and lilting cut-offs that give the anthem a definite country flair, and as they finish the crowd goes wild. The horse and rider bearing the flag turn and race out of the arena as the mood suddenly shifts, the electronic beat of "John Wick Mode" by EDM artist Le Castle Vania pumping through the sound system as the lights strobe and flash on for the Grand Entry.<sup>73</sup> It's a much more visceral, loud sound than the gentle anthem that preceded it, and it functions to build up excitement for the Grand Entry while also preparing the audience for the kinds of music that will populate the rest of the rodeo that evening.

The Grand Entry is another NFR tradition that takes place each night; every competing cowboy and cowgirl mounts up on a horse, whether they can ride one or not—some of the bull riders are hanging on to their saddle horns for dear life, reminding us that not every cowboy these days is at home on the range—and makes a lap around the arena when the state or country they represent is called.<sup>74</sup> They then cram into the center of the

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<sup>72</sup> See "Runaway June – Star Spangled Banner" in the YouTube playlist to hear the same group perform in a different venue.

<sup>73</sup> See "Le Castle Vania – John Wick Mode" in the YouTube playlist to hear the song.

<sup>74</sup> In 2020, there were international cowboys competing from Brazil, Australia, and France.

arena in a tight formation until everyone is present and accounted for, at which point they exit at a full gallop the same way they came in (see Figure 4). It's a lengthy process, since over a hundred cowboys and cowgirls come to the NFR to compete each year, and the loud music that is blasted through the arena during the Grand Entry serves to both keep the audience entertained and keep the energy in the stadium up as everyone prepares to begin the night of competition.



**Figure 4.** Grand Entry at the 2019 NFR in Las Vegas, Nevada. (Reproduced by permission of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association)

Benje Bendele, the sound coordinator for the National Finals Rodeo, is responsible for curating the Grand Entry playlist. In an interview with Nevada Colwell and Steve Goedert for the NFR Extra podcast, he notes that he will often program songs that clearly reference specific states, like playing the opening guitar lick of “Sweet Home Alabama” when contestants from Alabama are introduced.<sup>75</sup> He says that there are “some songs I can jab in a few words or a few lines to enhance the state and where they’re from as they’re riding around in the arena” (Bendele 2020: 17:45). In 2020, with thirty percent of contestants

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<sup>75</sup> See “Sweet Home Alabama” in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song.



hailing from the state of Texas, country tracks like Little Texas’s “God Blessed Texas” and The Charlie Daniels Band’s “Texas” played a particularly prominent role in the Grand Entry.<sup>76</sup> The combination of country-western sounds with geographic place names serves to remind the audience that being proud of where you come from is essential to being a cowboy. We can see that attachment to an imagined geographic place still matters to the kind of American identity being curated in these ceremonies, but as the landscape of the West has changed those notions of cowboy authenticity have changed with it. As long as your boot heels are dusty and your runs are fast, it doesn’t matter if you’re from Texas or Maine, you’re still a cowboy.

While this first night of the 2020 National Finals Rodeo lacks a titled theme, it very clearly lays out the basic musical and narrative structure of the opening ceremonies from which every other round draws, developing a more complex and layered idea of authenticity, patriotism, and American identity as each night passes. The announcers’ prayers, the quiet reverence attended to the presentation of the flag, and the simply styled hymn and folk tunes that support the ceremonies’ more intimate moments lend the whole production an air of something sacred. The nightly ritual of the National Finals Rodeo begins almost like a church service, with congregants gathered under a banner of shared beliefs and values to experience something transcendent. The rodeo’s various musical components gently set the tone for the patriotically colored performance that is to follow while appealing directly to God to keep everyone safe through the dramatic violence yet to come. We move swiftly and smoothly from patriotism to religion to rodeo and back again, undergirded by sonic markers of country music, military bands, and folk songs that tie everything together under the banner of the Old

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<sup>76</sup> See “Little Texas – God Blessed Texas” and “The Charlie Daniels Band – Texas” in the YouTube playlist to listen to both songs.

American West. In the twenty-first century, rodeo's musical heritage has been synthesized into a narrative soundscape that forms the backdrop to the pageantry of Americana that plays out night after night in the NFR arena.

### **Round Two: Combat Cowboys**

The second night begins on a very different tone than the first. While six identical horses and riders race into the darkened arena under fast-moving strobe lights, all carrying flags that read "NFR," the metal guitar of Volbeat's "Hallelujah Goat" explodes through the speakers.<sup>77</sup> The audience is welcomed to the NFR by the announcer, and they cheer loudly as the horses make a lap around the arena before exiting just as quickly as they appeared. As the guitar fades, the announcer sets the stage by uttering a single word: "Patriotism." After a pause, he continues: "Patriotism in America is older than the nation itself" (Round 2 video: 0:21-0:30). From here, a video begins to play on the screens suspended above the audience, broadcast live on the internet as well. This video features old rodeo footage from the 1930s of a man on horseback carrying an American flag, and a voice says, "So what is the meaning of the journey to the West, what have these people stood for, what do men and women of professional rodeo today stand for? It is symbolized best by the banner we present now, the greatest flag in the world, Old Glory." (0:30-0:50) The old, slightly distorted sound of this twentieth century recording is mixed with clear sentiments of patriotism and standing—not kneeling, as we will see later—in the presence of the flag.

When 1930s audio and video meet explosive metal guitar, the shocking difference in affect between tracks causes an abrupt sonic rupture. The driving rhythm of Volbeat's track

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<sup>77</sup> See "Volbeat – Hallelujah Goat" in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song.

is visceral and abrasive in its rhythmic loudness, mimicking the galloping horses' hooves hitting the dirt in rapid succession. Even though the livestream somewhat (though not entirely) flattens the volume difference between Volbeat and old recording, my in-person attendance at the 2018 NFR reminds me that for the folks in the arena, the pounding beat of "Hallelujah Goat" would be amplified as loudly as possible so that it reverberates in the audiences' ears and chests. The sudden shift to a soft, crackling old recording then feels a bit shocking, but in the video's framing reference to Westward expansion we can begin to see the thread of historical violence that undergirds the entire project of rodeo. The "journey to the West" introduced by the video clip indexes American expansion, which is then immediately linked to cowboys, to rodeo, and to the flag under an umbrella of standing for shared values. The aggressive beat and in-your-face amplification of rock-and-roll and metal that frame these opening ceremonies are always softened and paired with country or folk sounds and images that trigger nostalgia for the Old West. Those country-western sounds overwrite the violent and colonialist history that is suggested by the loudness and sonic aggression of what came before it, instead turning the audience's ears toward nostalgia and tingeing the sounds of violence with a more empowering, prideful bent. We can see in this opening ceremony how rodeo cowboys are then being held up as the bodies in which these combined and sanitized narratives are coming to rest. Cowboys, as tangible reminders of the freedoms and honor-bound values associated with the Old West, present these narratives in a palatable package, one made legible to rodeo audiences in Round Two through the combination of the cowboy and the soldier. The video montage that follows this old recording makes this combination explicit.

As the next video begins, a sparse string and piano track begins as a child's voice recites the lyrics to "America the Beautiful," originally written by Katharine Lee Bates:

O beautiful for spacious skies,  
For amber waves of grain,  
For purple mountain majesties  
Above the fruited plain!  
America! America!  
God shed his grace on thee  
And crown thy good with brotherhood  
From sea to shining sea!

These words are overlaid with images of mountains and rural landscapes, wild horses running free, and men in military uniforms standing in front of a tattered American flag framed with fire (see Figures 5 and 6). As the track begins to pick up, the poem concluded, the video switches back and forth between more overtly patriotic images (fireworks behind the Statue of Liberty, children holding American flags high over their heads) and clips of famous rodeo professionals speaking vaguely about the value of patriotism in rodeo (1:19).



**Figure 5.** (Left) Deployed soldiers standing in front of a flag with fire in the background.  
**Figure 6.** (Right) Military platoon in fatigues standing behind an upheld flag.  
(Both images reproduced by permission of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association)

The video then shifts to team roping world champion and Navajo cowboy Erich Rogers, who says, "If you're willing to dream the dream, the dream can come true here in America." Next, nine-time world champion bull rider Ty Murry adds, "Rodeo is a great example of the grit and toughness that built this nation." Six-time bull riding world champion Sage Kimzey asserts, "America has [been] and always will be the greatest country in the world."

Drums and soaring strings underscore images of the Constitution, bulls on a range, flags being raised, and individuals saluting Old Glory. Tilden Hooper, a seven-time NFR qualifier in bareback riding, says, “The American spirit is resiliency, hope,” followed by several unidentified voices who speak over an increasingly fast-paced montage of rodeo contestants standing with stoic faces, interspersed with clips of military professionals wearing combat fatigues and holding up the American flag (1:38). The clip finishes with this statement from two unnamed voices: “The land of the free, and the home of the brave. I choose to believe the best in America is the character of the people that constitute this country” (1:40). The visual link being forged between cowboys and soldiers is hard to miss, and it connects the nostalgic project of Westward expansion symbolized by the cowboy with the nationalistic violence of war, both under the umbrella of patriotic action. The “journey to the West” referenced by the earlier archival footage is linked to the overseas battles that the military are fighting today, and the fast flashes between cowboy and soldier on the screen suggest that the struggles and victories each individual experiences have the same end goal: the preservation of freedom.

As the video comes to a conclusion on a short clip of an American flag rippling in the wind against a bright blue sky, the rodeo announcer again takes over as the music shifts to a low drone marred only by a military snare drum pattern, march-like in its bounded rhythm. The shift from rodeo to military is seamless, aided by smooth musical transitions and the pre-established relationship between country music and martial soundscapes. The announcer tells us, “Willing to serve, committed to defend, please make welcome from Fort Hood, the United States Army Color Guard” (1:59). Folks in military uniform and mounted on matching dark horses slowly make their way into the arena as the snare continues to set a

marching pace. The Color Guard is joined by the First Division cavalry from Fort Hood, and together these mounted groups of military personnel take up positions around the arena as the announcer continues, introducing the military recruits who will take their oaths tonight in front of an audience of NFR attendees, competitors, and remote viewers. The announcer introduces them: “To give the full measure of sacrifice, to perpetuate our brand of liberty, tonight we have a special group of 15, willing to swear an oath to God and country to sacrifice and protect” (2:45). As the recruits file into the arena, the music shifts from the drone and snare to Kid Rock’s “Born Free,” met with thunderous applause from the audience as the recruits and presidors are introduced.<sup>78</sup> After these fifteen cadets are sworn into their various branches of the military under a common oath, Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” is pumped through the sound system and they exit to wild cheers.<sup>79</sup>

From here, the now-familiar strains of the country-western “Battle Hymn of the Republic” arrangement fill the stadium as the announcer transitions into the traditional pre-rodeo prayer that frames each evening’s contest.

The freedoms that those men and women just swore to defend mean nothing if we don’t utilize them. At this moment in time tonight, we would ask that you join together as friends, family, and fans as we enjoy one of the greatest freedoms ever administered to us, that is our freedom to go to our lord and father for a word of prayer (7:10).

“Amazing Grace” again rings out, playing beneath the announcer’s emotionally, performatively-phrased prayer. He thanks the Lord for “the opportunity to join here and celebrate the Western way of life, and the spirit of the cowboy,” among other things, and ends with a call to keep athletes safe from harm during the show (7:20). From here, the same plucked guitar interlude plays as the governor of South Dakota, Kristi Noem, rides into the

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<sup>78</sup> See “Kid Rock – Born Free” in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song.

<sup>79</sup> See “Bruce Springsteen – Born in the U.S.A.” in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song.

arena carrying the American flag with a wide smile. Melodic fragments from the country-western tune “Home on the Range” are audible this time as the spotlight is trained on this evening’s flagbearer, but they fade as the singer of the national anthem is introduced as tenor Steve Amerson. Amerson’s version of “The Star-Spangled Banner” relies heavily on the same military drum patterns that underscored the swearing-in of cadets earlier in the ceremony, accompanied by brass fanfare and ringing bells that lend a patriotic air to the soundtrack that harkens clearly back to both rodeo’s and the military’s history of brass bands, as discussed in Chapter Two. At the anthem’s conclusion, the show transitions into the Grand Entry, which is presented in the same way each night (10:44).

In sum, Round Two’s opening ceremonies move past the general introduction to rodeo provided by Round One to more overtly center one of the key themes of the 2020 NFR: the upholding of rodeo cowboys as icons of American patriotism akin to soldiers. Musically, Round Two mixes military soundscapes, country music, and rock songs to subtly remind audiences of America’s expansionist past (and present) while simultaneously justifying it through the lens of patriotism, freedom, and duty. By visually and sonically collapsing the distance between soldier and cowboy, audiences are led to intuit that it takes the same brand of toughness and bravery to ride a rank bull as it does to go to war. Military recruits are sworn into service on the same dirt that cowboys will compete on, in front of the same audiences and to the same soundtracks. This connection is continually built on and expanded over the next several nights of the NFR, further inscribing nuanced shades of Americana, nostalgia, and freedom onto the rodeo through sound and story.

### **Round Three: Western Justice and the Texas Rangers**

The third round at the 2020 NFR continues to build on the military theme established in round two, though with a particular focus in the third round on the iconic Texas Rangers. The opening ceremonies begin with the announcer's vague introduction: "Beneath the cowboy hat, they bring Western justice" (Round 3 video: 0:32). The video footage that follows this introduction is an homage to the Texas lawmen, narrated by footage of Colonel Homer Garrison and other unseen voices describing the work of the Texas Rangers as archival photos and clips from mid-twentieth century popular media scroll across the screen (0:49). Much like the video on the second night of the NFR, we then skip to rodeo athletes discussing their respect for the Texas Rangers. Ty Murray, featured again, notes, "Texas Rangers? They don't mess around" (1:25). The video quickly introduces the idea that "before planes and automobiles," the Texas Rangers kept law and order in the otherwise lawless Wild West of Texas, and were "developed to combat the evil forces of the times" (1:45). Once again the violence of the Old West is foregrounded, but made palatable and even exciting by the rose-colored glasses of nostalgia.

Perhaps most explicitly here, a connection is made between law enforcement and Western heritage; current Texas Ranger Gary Phillips comments that "We have a lot of pride in our Western traditions; we look back at Western movies from back in the golden days when they would show Rangers wearing the white hat... We wear the cowboy hat because it represents honesty, integrity, and courage" (2:02). The aesthetic link between rodeo cowboys, whose cowboy hats seem glued to their heads even through roughstock events, and the Texas Rangers is overt. Phillips later adds, "The Texas Rangers stand up for what's right, and we stand against what's wrong" (2:17). Foreshadowing the theme of Round Five, "Why



We Stand,” the message that being pro-America means standing up, whether it’s for the flag, for the military, or for “what’s right,” is powerfully stated here as well. This commentary is sonically mixed with rollicking fiddle music that lends a forward-driving energy to the video, almost like a high-speed chase. To close the video, the line between cowboys and law enforcement is further blurred through a series of rodeo athletes thanking the Texas Rangers for their service, and stating “I’d ride the river with you,” which is one of the highest compliments that could be paid to a cowboy. Rivers were historically dangerous in the Old West when bridges were scarce, and having a tough and dependable cowboy at your back that you could trust to help with river crossings and long cattle drives was imperative to survival. Being someone that someone else would “ride the river with” means you’re trustworthy, tough, and capable (Braddy 1940: 220). Invoking this expression during this video ties the rodeo athletes and the Texas Rangers together in a bond of toughness and dependability, yet another example of the ways that the NFR’s opening ceremonies repeatedly collapse the boundary between rodeo competitor and soldier or law enforcement officer. Additionally, in referring to the Texas Rangers as “legends” come to life, a more historic bond is forged between Old West mythology and contemporary individuals.

The last section of the opening ceremonies for Round 3 concludes with the Texas Rangers being introduced in person, over alternating soundtracks of a dark, march-like country-western track and a zippy song called “The Fight” from the 1990 Western film *Quigley Down Under*.<sup>80</sup> We then transition into the ritual, emotional prayer, the announcer’s voice wobbling with emotion, and the national anthem, sung tonight by Josh Weathers as the spotlight shines on “the banner that the world recognizes,” Old Glory (7:35). As the opening

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<sup>80</sup> See “Quigley Down Under 02. The Fight” in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song.

ceremonies conclude, the rollicking sounds of a Nickelback cover of Elton John's "Saturday Night's Alright (For Fighting)" are blasted through the speakers as heavily-edited, grainy video clips of the most violent and exciting moments from the previous night are broadcast on the floor of the arena.<sup>81</sup> The logos of the Texas Rangers and the NFR appear in quick succession, again linking the two together visually as loud, pounding rock sounds blare through the sound system in a shared ethos of masculinity and aggression. From here, we transition again into the Grand Entry, which proceeds the same way it does each night.

Round Three's zoomed-in emphasis on the Texas Rangers reminds the audience that the West was won by folks like the Texas Rangers and the old-school cowboys rodeo competitors emulate: rough-and-tumble men who weren't afraid to get their hands dirty to uphold American ideals. As Bob Tallman introduces the Rangers in the arena, he clearly lays out why he holds them in such high esteem: "The pride of Texas comes with a gun and a badge. They have fought for justice for 197 years in the Republic of Texas...They are tough, but they're fair. They bring strength, but quietly. They use power without prejudice" (3:50). Tallman's comments here illustrate how early-twentieth century cultures of masculinity, so rooted in the capacity for necessary or justified violence, have continued to be updated and carried through into the present day by contemporizing their historical roots in American cowboy culture. By upholding cowboys, Texas Rangers, soldiers, and law enforcement individuals as paragons of patriotism through their commitment to action, the NFR's opening ceremonies also highlight what they perceive to be the important values inherent in those kinds of patriotism. Round Three's particular brand is deeply indebted to Western history and aesthetics, as Texas Ranger Gary Phillip's comments in the earlier video suggest, and also

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<sup>81</sup> See "Nickelback – Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting" in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song.

isn't afraid of a little violence. Standing against "what's wrong" is not a passive act, and Round Three's focus on this idea sets up Round Five's overt calls to action seamlessly.

### **Round Five: Why We Stand**

After a somber opening ceremony for Round Four, where the NFR remembered its fallen cowboys and cowgirls from the past year in a kind of funereal ritual, with black-and-white photos of deceased rodeo personnel broadcast onto screens around the arena over soft music, Round Five swung back around to an extreme show of patriotism and pro-military pageantry. The theme, "Why We Stand," is introduced by the announcer over a now-familiar soundtrack of military snare drum rolls and brass fanfare: "December the seventh, a date which will live in infamy.<sup>82</sup> Tonight we remember those who have fought and died for our country, heroes that have paid the ultimate sacrifice and have given the full measure for freedom. As cowboys, this is why we stand" (Round 5 video: 0:10). The issue of whether or not to stand for the national anthem has been a contentious one in the world of mainstream sports for the past several years, beginning with quarterback Colin Kaepernick's 2016 kneeling during the national anthem at NFL football games (Woodward and Mindock 2020). Referencing it here, at the end of a long year marked by pandemic restrictions, racial injustices that culminated in weeks-long Black Lives Matter protests across the nation, and an election season full of hateful commentary and America-first rhetoric, is a rather pointed display of patriotism. In re-drawing a connection between military heroes, freedom, and the values of rodeo cowboys that has been set up over and over again for the past four nights, the

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<sup>82</sup> Presumably this is in reference to the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, but Tallman does not ever clarify during the show.

National Finals Rodeo is making clear that bravery, freedom, and patriotism are pillars of not just America but the sport of rodeo itself.

Sonically, Round Five is a hodge-podge of sounds from previous nights. In an opening video of Medal of Honor recipient Sammy Davis, who speaks of a visit to Arlington Cemetery, we hear a soft, gentle piano soundtrack that might have been lifted from Round Two's "America the Beautiful" video. Interspersed with footage of grave markers at Arlington, archival video of American troops invading foreign beaches, and American flags flying high over buildings and backyards, the effect here is to inspire emotions in the viewers of patriotism, pride, and the desire to stand. As the track picks up, strings and drums taking over and adding a sense of movement to the previously sparse music, we briefly see shots of racially diverse individuals who are likely intended to represent the different "beliefs, cultures, and upbringings" who all come together under the American flag before returning to the overwhelmingly white faces of rodeo athletes and military veterans (1:20). Rodeo cowboy Larry Mahan brings us back concisely to the center point of Round Five's theme when he says: "Well, I stand for the flag number one because it represents the foundation of this country. It's the freedom, and the independence, the self-reliance, and the accountability, and this is one nation that was created under God" (1:51). Standing for the flag thus equals being a true American, one who respects the military and God in equal measure and who values freedom above all else.

The rest of the video passes in a blur of patriotic imagery, admonishments to be proud of country and heritage, and a thick orchestral score unusual for rodeo events, until the texture thins out at the end and softens to that same piano track that began the video. In many ways, this feels similar to the kinds of stock videos used by mega-churches in worship

services; generic orchestral music paired with evocative images of the natural world and emotionally performed speeches about general concepts like love, family, or religion. Indeed, this video's presence contributes to the opening ceremonies' ritual feel, its sweeping score providing a kind of emotional build and release not unlike that of religious worship. As the piano takes over in the video in the moment of textural relaxation, lending weight to Sammy Davis's words, he adds that what the American flag most fundamentally represents is love; because America is the best place in the world, "the love of all of us Americans who come from all over the world to be an American" is stitched into every stripe and star on Old Glory (2:20). He continues, "we're not just one people, one person, we're from all over the world and we have come here to stand up and be an American, and that's love" (2:40). The footage here moves from a fast-paced montage of multi-ethnic faces flashing almost too quickly to parse into a slow-motion shot of a rodeo crowd standing and removing cover for the flag; the irony of the actual rodeo audience being entirely white-presenting in contrast to the more diverse footage is not commented on. But perhaps more important is the way that Davis equates "love" with "standing up" for the flag, implying that if someone chooses not to stand they therefore cannot love their country and therefore are not really an American.

The video ends on this note, transitioning quickly into trumpet calls blaring into a dark arena as the rodeo announcer introduces three war veterans and Medal of Honor recipients, spending several minutes extolling specific details of their heroic actions while military band music plays in the background, the crowd cheers, and fireworks are lit in the arena. These three men are held up as exemplary American heroes, and their deeds represent something to be aspired to while also being impossible for the average citizen to achieve outside of an active war zone. As the opening ceremonies transition into the evening's

prayer, a call to action is made by the announcer to this effect. As “Battle Hymn to the Republic” plays in the background, the announcer says, “Friends, the things that all men and women fight for mean absolutely nothing if we don’t take those freedoms and utilize them in our daily lives” (7:00). In this instance, he is referring to the freedom of religion that allows them to pray in this arena before the rodeo, but in the context of what has come before it also speaks to the overarching theme that freedom requires action, not complacency. It is not enough to respect the flag; a true American must stand for it.

After the conclusion of the prayer and national anthem, the PRCA logo again appears on the floor of the stadium as Mötley Crüe’s “Kickstart My Heart” plays over the loudspeakers.<sup>83</sup> As in previous nights, this choice of music is not thoughtless; it expertly weaves together aggressive rock soundscapes and messages of violence and adrenaline with imagery of rodeo cowboys and cowgirls performing athletic feats of domination and power, brought to a close tonight with the phrase “WHY WE STAND” projected on the arena dirt as fireworks go off around it. While war veterans were the focus of tonight’s ceremonies, the cowboys weren’t left hanging. The opening ceremonies in Round Five have been crafted to highlight patriotism as an act of love, and then expertly tie that patriotism to the visual representations of the violent competition yet to come after the ceremonies conclude. Once again, all of this comes to rest in the rodeo cowboys and cowgirls who compete during the ten days of the NFR.

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<sup>83</sup> See “Mötley Crüe – Kickstart My Heart” in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song.

### **Round Seven: I'm Mighty Proud of That Ragged Old Flag**

The previous night, Round Six had moved away from the military to put the focus squarely back on the cowboys and cowgirls competing at the NFR. They discussed the grit, the determination, the physical conditioning, and the mental state required to “take the abuse” of being a rodeo athlete, and Round Seven quickly moves to make those qualities visible on a national stage, linking the icon of the rodeo cowboy to an American spirit born of grit and suffering. More specifically, Round Seven’s mixture of classic country music in the form of Johnny Cash and overtly militaristic imagery draws out a particular narrative of patriotism that focuses primarily on the link between flag, violence, and the growth born of suffering. This is then applied to the rodeo cowboy as an embodied form of that growth and patriotism, once again holding up the cowboy as the ultimate figure of an American identity predicated on freedom, grit, determination, and the capacity for necessary (violent) action.

Just like many of the other opening ceremonies, this round begins with a darkened arena, and the sound of military snare drums fill the air. The announcer sets the scene for the audience, stating, “Ladies and gentlemen, over the past 244 years America has been through a lot. But the one symbol, the one symbol that has withstood all of this is the banner that unites us all as one. Tonight, we remember and respect the path to where we are today and what our flag has been through. Because we unite as one, we stand together as one, and together, we are America” (Round 7 video: 0:20). We have moved seamlessly from round six’s emphasis on what rodeo cowboys have been through to a larger exploration of the things America as a nation—and, more specifically, Old Glory—has endured on its way to greatness. As a squadron of firefighters enters the arena to raise the flag on a flagpole beneath the fluorescent lights of the Globe Life Field Stadium, country singer Randy Houser

takes the stage to perform Johnny Cash's "Ragged Old Flag," a song whose history adds layers of meaning to the evening's ceremony (1:39).<sup>84</sup>

"Ragged Old Flag" is a track from Johnny Cash's 1974 album of the same name, and represents a complex intersection of patriotism, blue-collar identity, and political scandal. At the time of the song's release, Nixon had just resigned as President of the United States post-Watergate, and many have interpreted "Ragged Old Flag" as Cash's reaction to the state of U.S. politics at the time. A few months prior, Cash had performed at the White House at the request of Nixon after having publicly stated his appreciation of the President in an attempt to garner support for a peaceful end to the current war in Vietnam (Graney 2019). Trying to distance himself from the former President, Cash makes it clear in the lyrics of "Ragged Old Flag" that despite "the government for which she [(the flag)] stands" being "scandalized throughout the land," "she can take a whole lot more" and will not be defeated by the current state of affairs in this country (see Appendix C for complete lyrics). Country music scholar Leigh Edwards has written of how this song demonstrates a "staunch patriotism" that is connected to the "plight of the working man," articulating a blue-collar American identity through its references to small-town America that has kept this song relevant today among country fans (Edwards 2009: 150). The narrator condemns flag burning, disrespect, and denial as he walks through a story that is both individual and collective, and the flag about which the song is written is both small-town and multi-contextual. The man to whom the narrator speaks insists that their flag was taken across the Delaware river by Washington, that it "survived the Alamo, both world wars, Korea, and Vietnam" and yet has never touched the ground because they "fold her up right" (Ibid.).

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<sup>84</sup> See "Johnny Cash – Ragged Old Flag" in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song.



This song connects blue-collar, small-town America, where the flag is treated with the respect and reverence it deserves, to American historical greatness through a detailed list of all the places this particular flag has been. It also makes these connections through its sonic components. The music, orchestrated by Chuck Cochran, incorporates many traditional American tunes like “Oh Shenandoah” and “Yankee Doodle Dandy” on country-western instruments like fiddle and harmonica. Additionally, the track prominently features banjo lines by Earl Scruggs, who invented and popularized a three-finger style of banjo playing that is synonymous with American bluegrass, played over yet another military march-style snare pattern. Just as in the lyrics, the music of “Ragged Old Flag” connects the rural American West with sonic indicators of violent patriotism through the intersection of folk songs and military soundscapes. War and peace coexist in this song, contrasted through the sonic and visual imagery of slow, small-town life set against famous historical battles. In the context of Cash’s larger album, Edwards argues that this anti-flag-burning patriotism apparent in the lyrics is nuanced by structural critiques in other songs of both big businesses and the romanticization of working-class life, all of which point to larger trends in Cash’s work of “social critiques and a refusal to glorify war” (Ibid.: 151). Indeed, perhaps the injuries to the flag that are listed in “Ragged Old Flag” symbolize deep structural damage to America herself that persist into the present. However, this context is notably missing from the overall pageantry of the 2020 NFR, as it has been in most performances of this song in recent years, the narrative of the rodeo’s ceremonies instead suggesting that personal and national struggle bear strength rather than trauma.

“Ragged Old Flag” experienced a popular revival post-9/11, when it was re-released three months after the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as a reminder that

the flag, and thus America, would endure that struggle as she always has. The song has since made several newsworthy appearances, including one at the 2017 Super Bowl, when it was played during a pre-game show and introduced by musician Harry Belafonte and Olympic gymnast Simone Biles. It appeared as a call to action, to patriotism, sponsored by FOX Sports. In a clip discussing the making of the video short, FOX Sports Coordinating Producer Jennifer Pranksy notes, “FOX Sports likes to take advantage of the giant audience that it gets for the Super Bowl. Not just spend that talking about sports, but use that platform to actually promote the things that matter to us. And, for us, that’s really our country and America” (FOX Sports 2017: 0:10). FOX Sports explicitly chose to endorse this idea of American patriotism during the biggest sporting event of the year, ensuring that the connection between sports, the military, the flag, and patriotism would be seen by the widest possible audience. This was an homage to the folks who have served in the military, yes, but it also served the more economic purpose of tapping into an America-loving audience and ensuring that their support of the sport continues.

While this video met with largely positive reviews from Super Bowl audiences, the song was re-used in a modified ad at the 2020 Super Bowl that ruffled more feathers. Some viewers perceived the 2020 video, which sets the song against video clips of historical reenactors for each major event reference in the lyrics, as well as more contemporary tragedies like 9/11, as a sideways commentary on the state of patriotism in the NFL. In particular, some viewers thought it was a “slap to the face” to Colin Kaepernick and other kneeling football players because of how it glorifies the flag—and by extension, the act of standing in respect for it—despite FOX knowing that Kaepernick’s protests had nothing to do with the flag and everything to do with systemic racism (Joseph 2020, Spellberg 2020).

However, simply scrolling through the YouTube comments for either video illustrates the depth of patriotism and love of country that these commercials evoked in many Super Bowl viewers, notably without the critiques of larger structural inequalities that have been swirling around the NFL.

The inclusion of “Ragged Old Flag” as the center of the NFR’s opening ceremonies in Round Seven carries this history into the rodeo arena in a meaningful way. The NFR, too, is capitalizing on the re-branding of this song as straightforward patriotism without dissent. Much like previous evenings, where themes like “Why We Stand” seem so pointed toward those who kneel for the flag, Round Seven’s opening ceremony calls attention to the ways that military history is American history. Stripped of its original context and assigned a new one, “Ragged Old Flag” no longer benefits from the nuancing of either Johnny Cash’s live introduction or the rest of the album.<sup>85</sup> Without the structural critiques of American politics that would have been carried with the song when it was first released and performed, the song has morphed into an expression of patriotism that is linked to suffering and war. Within the NFR’s pageantry, I argue that things go a step further and connect the suffering of the rodeo cowboy—broken down at length in Round Six—to the suffering of the soldier, and then to the suffering of the nation. And from that suffering is born an American spirit that values the grit, determination, and the ability to keep going that are central to the cultural icon of the American cowboy.

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<sup>85</sup> Cash usually opened live performances of this piece with the following statement: “I thank God for the freedoms we’ve got in this country. I cherish them and treasure them—even the right to burn the flag. We also got the right to bear arms, and if you burn my flag—I’ll shoot you. But I’ll shoot you with a lot of love, like a good American.” Edwards interprets this as Cash “limn[ing] American tautologies” of “natural” rights by calling attention to the irony in the logic of folks who choose to believe in some fundamental rights but not others (Edwards 2009: 2-3).

After the song's conclusion comes the nightly prayer, tonight making sure that the audience not only recognizes the thread of patriotism that ties cowboys to firemen to national identity, but also actively participates in affirming it. The announcer asks,

Tonight, as you look at those contestants, men and women, to those firemen, to this story and that flag, what would you say? I ask each and every one of you to raise a right hand or a left, open-handed to the heavens, and say with me what we say so often and it just gets blown away. Three words: God bless America. You ready? Let's do it together" (6:10).

As the crowd murmurs the words together, hands outstretched, the act of speaking "God Bless America" becomes tied to the act of gazing at the rodeo athletes about to compete. The audience says "God Bless America," but they are also saying "God bless these cowboys" in the same breath. America, for the moment, comes to be embodied in the cowboys who occupy the arena.

### **Kickstart My Heart: Violent Extremes of Sound at the 2018 and 2020 NFR**

In analyzing the opening ceremonies of the 2020 NFR, the roles that country, folk, and military band music play in shaping the narrative of rodeo have been significant. The connections between these kinds of music and rodeo are, as laid out in previous chapters, historically rooted, ideologically overlapping, and rely on common audiences. The only genres that seem at first glance to stick out are the rock and metal tracks interspersed throughout the opening ceremonies, often used to introduce or conclude sections of the show. While rock has increasingly made appearances at rodeos through associated concerts by big-name bands that take place on rodeo grounds—usually intended to help increase revenue by bringing in a wider audience—metal's overlap with rodeo is not as immediately obvious. However, I argue that because of the violence and danger of the roughstock events, the metal

sounds incorporated into rodeo serve a very specific set of functions. This music reminds audiences of the violence of rodeo through causing feelings of responsive adrenaline to be embodied in listeners, calling attention to the excitement of the potentially deadly encounters playing out before us, while simultaneously linking the suffering and pain the cowboys experience to an ultimate outcome of victory. In the following section, I analyze the moments during the competition itself when rock and metal appear during live rodeo events to provide context for how we are supposed to view and interpret the same music when it appears in the remotely-broadcast 2020 NFR, where volume is regulated and the experience of listening in an arena is harder to imagine.

In the roughstock events, violent injury—even death—is always a possibility. It is this ubiquitous presence that started the PBR (Professional Bull Riders, Inc.), and the very real danger to the riders is emphasized in every aspect of the spectacle that this sport has become.<sup>86</sup> The appeal of bull riding and other roughstock events for many spectators lies in this material reality; violence and injury are at the forefront of roughstock events' aesthetics, and they are highlighted and emphasized for the audience musically as well as visually. During most bull riding events, heavy metal, punk, or classic rock music gets blasted through the speakers at the highest possible volume.<sup>87</sup> It's so loud, in fact, that a lovely older couple who sat near me on the first night of the 2018 National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas offered me a spare pair of earplugs. They told me that they attend the NFR every year, and that many years ago they'd started to bring earplugs because it gets so loud up in the stands. Despite

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<sup>86</sup> As discussed in earlier portions of this dissertation, the PBR was formed in 1992 after the violent death of Lane Frost, a world champion bull rider, and ushered in a new golden era of bull riding and spectacle that capitalized on the imminent possibility of death.

<sup>87</sup> Exactly what music gets played here is often the choice of the competitors, who contact the sound curator with requests for tracks. If no request is made, the music director will select something from these genres for them.

being up in the second-to-last row of the massive Thomas and Mack Center, I could feel the music pulsing in my chest, making my whole body vibrate. That first night I (foolishly) refused the earplugs because I wanted to experience the event without a muffling barrier, and my ears were still ringing when I got back to my hotel room later that evening. And during the bull riding, despite being hundreds of feet away from the action in the arena, the force and volume of the music caused me to feel in my own body an imitation of the jarring impact of each leap and hit, as though I were the one riding the bull. In this context, the music facilitated a unique incorporation of my own material body with those of the bull and the rider.

More specifically, rock and metal music play a key role in the way audiences respond to the roughstock events. The driving force of each track, the pounding rhythm and ear-shattering volume, serves multiple functions. First, the rhythmic intensity of the soundtrack to this event creates a uniquely embodied sense of thrill and impact in the audience. With each buck, twist, and lurch, our breath catches in our throats and our heart seems to stop beating. When a man's body sails through the air, either landing lightly on his feet or with a heavy *thud* in the dirt, our own bodies respond. The audience is an active participant in this multimedia event, and our voices are raised in cheers and shouts of encouragement for the riders we love, or in sharply taken-in breath and silence when someone does not get up again. Looking at the people around me during these violent events proved this; I saw people violently jerk backward in their seats when one rider was roughly slammed against the side of the chutes when his bull, not yet released from the confines of that coffin-shaped enclosure, started trying to escape. Some swore under their breath, some simply muttered "ouch!" After all, cowboys tend to take their injuries in relative silence. These imitative

spectator bodies and voices are an integral part of the rodeo soundscape, contributing to this space of mediated embodiment and participation.

Music also contributes to the rodeo's construction and perception of animality in this event; its harsh timbre, aggressive rhythm, and exceedingly loud volume exaggerate the perception of antagonism between roughstock and rider, particularly on the part of the bull or bronc. Animality is emphasized here, the unpredictable, agential nature of the animal's powerful body functioning in an equal relation to the rider's skill at matching its movements through the combined scoring system. Roughstock animals are responsible for half of the score during each ride, the rider for the other half. The composite score depends on the perceived wildness of the animal; the more unpredictable and aggressive they seem to be, and the more difficult it is for the rider to stay on, the higher the score. In what seems to completely contrast this rubric, the rider is then scored on his ability to coordinate spurring and upper body movement with the bull's motions (and, of course, to stay on for the requisite eight seconds). The rider is supposed to make it look easy, and the bull is supposed to make it look difficult. This partnership is often described as a dance, a carefully choreographed routine where life can hang in the balance (Brooks 2018).

Sound curator Jill Franzen, owner and operator of Jill's Sound, spoke to me about managing this choreography in her own work. She describes the importance of having "the right beat" when picking songs for roughstock events like this, so that the audience can appropriately "feel" the action in the stands. She chooses songs to play during each event that correspond directly to the rhythm of the pair in the arena: "bareback riding is a little more fast, electric, wild. Bronc riding is a little more composed and... kinda more Old West. It's also a little slower. They're still buckin' and stuff, but the beat [changes]" (personal

communication, March 10, 2021). In the same vein, she argues that for the bull riding events, she tries to “build that suspense, that drama” (Ibid.). Her current favorite song to use for bull riders is ACDC’s “Hard as a Rock,” which was released in 2013; she says, “when the [rider] nods, I play the cut of the chorus, which is 'hard as a rock' and it just hits really hard. And it's just really cool when you're building up a world champion and his life, and then he nods and it just explodes... the music explodes when the stock comes out of the chute” (Ibid.).<sup>88</sup> For Jill and other sound curators, picking the perfect song like that “gets me excited... and the people feel it, too” (Ibid.). In this way, the music of the roughstock events serves to bring us closer to this event in an embodied relationship to the rider, battling against the overwhelming power of the horse or bull, while simultaneously distancing us from the physical, material danger and aggression of the animal. When considered in the context of the opening ceremonies described above, where narratives of aggression and domination are clearly present on the screen and stereo, rock and metal’s presence throughout the rodeo brings that violence into the stands. The story of Westward expansion and the war machine of American patriotism are once again distilled down into the body of the cowboy, suffering through an eight-second battle to reaffirm their greatness and dominate the animal, the West, and the world. The rider plays out this victory of Westward expansion with a sonic backdrop of aggression, and the audience rides along with him.

It is no coincidence that the harsh sounds of hard rock and heavy metal proliferate during the roughstock events, either. Beyond the obvious associations being made with the way they sound and the loudness at which they are played, these genres also offer opportunities for individuals who feel disenfranchised by the perceived “masculine crisis” in

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<sup>88</sup> See “AC/DC – Hard as a Rock” in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song.



twenty-first century America to identify with a narrative that speaks to them. A great deal of work has been done on the ways that working-class white masculinity in the last century has continually had its dominance “threatened” by the increase of women in the work force, the increase of people of color in higher-paying jobs, and other factors (Worthington 2018). While country music, another rodeo staple, often engages with these threats through commiseration and introverted consideration, rock and metal offer a more action-oriented look at the same issues. Sociologist Adam Rafalovich argues that contemporary metal music offers men the chance to see themselves reflected in a kind of “individualistic masculine ideology” based on an appeal to internal sources of strength attained through suffering, to the desire to dominate others, and to hyper-emphasize traditional masculine identity markers through “the invocation of war metaphors [and] graphic depictions of victory” (Rafalovich 2006: 28-29). These desires and images map directly onto the pageantry of rodeo’s opening ceremonies, where connections to war and victory are linked intimately with calls to action, but they also correlate with the ritual domination that plays out in rodeo contests themselves. Cowboys put their bodies on the line, often painfully, in order to achieve victory over their animal opponent, and from that victory comes a sense of pride in one’s own strength. The way rock and metal are woven into the soundscape of roughstock events also provides a sonic link back to those opening ceremonies, where even the gentlest of arrangements of *Amazing Grace* are hemmed in on either end by the explosive tracks that start and end the show, always reminding us that America’s rise to greatness was not a peaceful, passive affair.

During the 2020 NFR, there were also moments of extreme silence that became particularly striking because of the sudden absence of aggressive sounds. During Round

Seven, when the eliminator pen<sup>89</sup> was out, bull rider Ty Bingham hopped aboard Big Stone Rodeo Inc.'s Spotted Demon, the 2018 PRCA Bull of the Year. Up to this point it had been a difficult NFR for Bingham, and he only placed in the money once, with a third-place finish in Round Two. This was an exciting match-up, since Spotted Demon had a buck-off percentage of 86% (meaning 86% of riders who drew Spotted Demon that season didn't make it eight seconds) but riders who do make the eight regularly score above 90, which is very high for this event.<sup>90</sup> A successful eight-second ride on Spotted Demon could've won Ty Bingham the go-around that night, but it wasn't meant to be. Spotted Demon stands patiently in the chute, surprisingly calm while Bingham adjusts his bull rope and seat. An unidentifiable metal track plays over the loudspeakers, covered up for remote viewers by the stream of observations from retired bull rider and commentator Don Gay, but we can hear the track get turned up as Bingham nods, the gate opens, and Spotted Demon flies out into the arena (Round 7 video: 2:10:09). For 3.71 seconds, Bingham tries to hold on as Spotted Demon twists and jumps and kicks, but he quickly loses control and the camera clearly catches Bingham's head come down with an audible *thud* onto the tip of Spotted Demon's thick horn, so hard that his helmet flies off once he hits the dirt. As Bingham falls to the arena floor, Spotted Demon steps on him several times in quick succession as he continues to kick and whirl, knocking Bingham out cold with such force that he doesn't even have time to close his eyes. The overhead camera catches all of this in sickening detail, but what is most chilling for the viewer is the sudden quietness of the arena. The metal track that had been blasted for those

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<sup>89</sup> The eliminator pen refers to the toughest pen of bulls at the NFR, with the highest buck-off percentages over the course of the rodeo season. There is also an eliminator pen in the other roughstock events (saddle and bareback bronc riding). A good draw in the eliminator pen can win you a lot of money or help you break records. A bad draw can get you seriously injured.

<sup>90</sup> <https://pbr.com/athletes/bulls/profile/14863/spotteddemon>

few short seconds has stopped, and nothing has replaced it. As the camera pans around the arena, we can see the medical team race out onto the dirt to stabilize Bingham, and the only sounds we hear are the announcers saying a few words that largely fall on deaf ears as we wait with bated breath to find out Bingham's condition. Having been at local rodeos many times in person, the silence that settles over the crowd when a cowboy is seriously injured is deafening in a way that no speaker system could ever replicate. This feeling of electric uncertainty still manages to come through in the remotely-broadcast NFR, although the sudden lack of sound is smoothed out by the foregrounding of commentator's voices above the arena soundscapes.

It took upwards of ten minutes to safely remove Bingham, still unconscious, from the arena, and the medical team was met with cheers and applause when they finally got him onto the stretcher. Later that evening, we learned that Bingham suffered nine broken ribs, a broken sternum, a broken clavicle, two bruised lungs, a bruised heart, a serious concussion, and internal bleeding (Higgins 2020). In many other sports, these would at least put an athlete's career on pause, if not spark a reconsideration altogether. However, while Bingham did not compete in the remaining rounds of the NFR, he has been back on the circuit and competing since the San Antonio Stock Show and Rodeo in February of 2021, a mere two months after sustaining those injuries.<sup>91</sup> From this anecdote, it becomes clear that the violence lurking beneath rodeo's surface is always one swift kick away from rearing its ugly head.<sup>92</sup> It also reveals how the rock and metal tracks that play throughout the opening

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<sup>91</sup> <https://prorodeo.com/bio/contestant/tyler-bingham/60248>

<sup>92</sup> In a recent study, it was revealed that 20 out of every 100,000 rodeo contestants can expect to suffer a catastrophic (i.e. life-ending or significantly life-changing) injury in their careers. By contrast, in football the rate is less than one in every 100,000 (Butterwick et al. 2011). Since 1989, there have been 21 deaths and 49 catastrophic injuries on the rodeo circuit, more than any other professional sport (Ibid.)

ceremonies serve the same purpose that the event music does; they remind us that death is always a possibility, that injury is a risk worth taking in the act of putting one's body on the line to achieve victory and glory.

## **Conclusions**

So what do all of these ceremonies and interstitial musics tell us about the deeper nature of rodeo, of American patriotism, of the kind of country masculinity and freedom-oriented mindset cultivated by rodeo crowds? As a sporting event, rodeo allows a very particular kind of narrative to be crafted by producers, audiences, and competitors through sound, image, and action. This narrative relies heavily on a kind of nostalgia for the Old West that comes to rest in the upheld figure of the rodeo cowboy. The audience's feelings about freedom, strength, and devotion to one's country are played out through not just the athletic events themselves but also through the way those cowboys interact with these lofty ideas in each opening ceremony. Most audience members will never hop on the back of a 2200-pound rank bull and try to win hundreds of thousands of dollars, but we can identify with the desire to exercise our freedoms and express our love of country. The sweeping and ever-changing soundscapes of the rodeo pull us in with their meticulously crafted narratives, make tangible connections that otherwise would only be subconscious, and remind us that it's not enough to just watch these cowboys and cowgirls fight for victory, for domination over the land and beasts and Nature itself. If we want to be like them, if we want to be real Americans, we need to take action in our own lives, manifest in using the freedoms we have to pray, to bear arms, and to stand for the flag. The images and sounds of the National Finals Rodeo direct our gazes towards patriotism—militant or otherwise—as an actionable idea. As

discussed in earlier chapters, both rodeo and country music history show us that this is no accident.

In this chapter, I have laid out the key ways that the National Finals Rodeo utilizes music and sound to craft a cohesive narrative in their opening ceremonies. First, the use of military soundscapes, including snare drums and military bands, evokes deep feelings of patriotism at the same time that it calls the audience to action. The overlap between the military and the country music industry, discussed in Chapter 3, further cements the idea that most audiences of rodeo are primed to be supporters of both, as much (but not all) country music post-9/11 carries undertones of pro-America and pro-military values. Country music, too, forms a central pillar of the National Finals' soundscapes, varying in currency from traditional American folk tunes played in a country-western style to contemporary artists performing in various opening ceremonies across all ten days. Country has found a home in rodeo for many reasons, as discussed in Chapter 3, but its fixation on American authenticity and identity provides ample space for rodeo-goers and athletes to see themselves reflected in the opening ceremonies. The final musical facet of the NFR opening ceremonies is the collection of rock and metal tracks played (or markedly absent) at varying points throughout each evening, reminding audiences of the danger rodeo athletes face by creating an embodied, reactive experience of adrenaline in listeners.

All of these sounds craft a sense of Americana that relies on audience members and competitors alike seeing themselves reflected in the spectacle before them, and being compelled to act by it. Whether it's a compulsion to pray with the rest of the crowd each night, to jerk back and forth with the riders in the arena, or to stand up for the flag during the national anthem, rodeo attendees are being physically, mentally, and emotionally

incorporated into the tapestry of American identity that goes on each night in part through the way the rodeo's soundtrack threads together multiple histories, embodied effects, and narrative associations. In addition, this particular constellation of musical sounds all converge on the body of the cowboy, that icon of Americana that carries Old Western history, aesthetics, and values into the twenty-first century. Through the collapsing of the distance between cowboy and soldier, the 2020 NFR not only reinscribes the cowboy's hegemonic grip on Western authenticity but also updates it through invoking contemporary political issues to encompass the kind of militant patriotism that has come to characterize many right-leaning political factions in the twenty-first century, a trend that has been part and parcel of rodeo since its early twentieth century beginnings.

I have illustrated in this chapter how rodeo serves as a site for musical narrative- and identity-making, where athletes, production staff, and audience members alike can see themselves and their values reflected. Music and sound play a key role in that work, as they have since rodeo's origins as an organized sport. However, rodeo is not simply a repository for external influences, and the cowboy figure has continued to circulate and have a life of its own in popular culture across the globe. In the final chapter of this dissertation, I explore how the rituals of cowboy performance and identity-making have been translated into popular music, carrying with them the conflicting values and complicated histories rodeo has worked so hard to veil.

## **Chapter 5: Western Iconography in Popular Music**<sup>93</sup>

“I always thought everybody wanted to be a cowboy or a cowgirl. It’s a way of life, it’s very romantic. It’s honesty, it’s Mother Nature, it’s what God gave you.”

— Reba McEntire in the 2021 trailer for Cody Johnson’s upcoming documentary *Dear Rodeo*

In the last several chapters of this dissertation, I have focused specifically on professional rodeo as a site where music and iconic figures have been utilized by rodeo producers, performers, and audience members alike to make visible their versions of frontier history. I have argued that rodeo is a sporting event where particular intersections of identity are idealized, dramatized, and personalized, and where working-class white nostalgia finds a comfortable home. However, this is not a complete picture of rodeo’s or the cowboy’s impacts on the American cultural imagination. As discussed above, music—particularly country music—has often been used in rodeo and rodeo-adjacent contexts by producers, performers, and audiences to ensure the cowboy’s continued relevancy as a cultural icon, because music creates a malleable space where markers of identity can be transmitted to and taken up by listeners. In this final chapter, I turn to the ways that visual and sonic markers of cowboy and rodeo identity have continued to circulate outside these contexts, and how they are activated by performers and audiences in other popular music genres to nuance, reclaim, or embody the cowboy icon.

I further argue that visual aesthetics and fashion matter deeply to how we interpret cowboy codes in popular music, and that fashion is an integral part of the embodied musical

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<sup>93</sup> To listen along with the musical examples in this chapter, follow this link to the YouTube playlist: <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLVZ1WtQdnGkjR31qTirsGAT-nnAGPG6Vm>

experience that ethnomusicology often leaves out or glosses over. I also contend here that the cowboy figure is and always has been in flux, constantly being shaped and molded by different communities and different contexts. The cowboy is not a one-size-fits-all icon, but rather an imagined entity made up of a million different personal figures. What makes the usage of the cowboy in rodeo and country so powerful is not that it is the correct or only definition of what a cowboy is or should be, but rather the fact that so many people believe in its particular brand of authenticity so strongly. This chapter will explore some of the alternatively authentic cowboys that exist in various genres of popular music today through the lens of performance, connecting performative strategies and visuals back to the ones utilized by rodeo producers and audiences. I argue that a recent resurgence of popular interest in the cowboy and Western aesthetics is related to a larger project of pop culture creators and consumers using their platforms to rectify the whitewashing of American frontier history (and American history in general).

### **Music, Fashion, Aesthetics**

For many consumers and creators, music and fashion are inextricably linked. As embodied forms of authentic personal expression, both aesthetic realms are rife with meaningful symbols that individuals use to define who they are, where they come from, and what they value. Different genres of music correlate to different fashion choices—for example, think about the difference in clothing between the audience at a punk concert and people attending an opera at the Met—and while not everyone dresses in accordance with their favorite genre of music, some musical communities are at least partially defined by the way their members dress themselves. Fashion also offers tangible, concrete ways to represent



musical style. Many museums, rather than somehow displaying an artist’s music, structure their exhibits around memorable outfit choices: the ABBA Museum in Stockholm, Sweden has hall after hall dedicated to the clothing worn by the band at various engagements and concerts, while the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History’s exhibits are full of iconic outfits like MC Hammer’s hammer pants, Ella Fitzgerald’s yellow dress, and James Brown’s black “SEX” jumpsuit (Figures 7-9).



**Figure 7:** MC Hammer’s hammer pants; **Figure 8:** Ella Fitzgerald’s yellow dress; **Figure 9:** James Brown’s “SEX” jumpsuit. All images reproduced courtesy of the Smithsonian Institute ©.

In academia, music and fashion are most frequently discussed together in the field of cultural studies. Scholar Dick Hebdige argues in his 1979 monograph *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* that “style” is constructed through the combination of such aesthetic and embodied forms as music, dance, make-up, clothing, and the use of drugs or alcohol. His work focuses on Britain’s postwar working-class youth, and thus on the subgenres—and subcultures—of punks, skinheads, rockers, mods, and Teddy boys, arguing that these groups of young people were responding to dominant cultural ideologies through symbolic forms of resistance (Hebdige 1979). For these subcultural groups, fashion and music simply

represented different facets of the same core aesthetic or identity; while punk music emphasized the DIY aspect of its creation, punk clothing at the time was made of an amalgamation of found objects, often held together by safety pins. More recently, ethnomusicologist Benjamin Teitelbaum's 2017 monograph draws on Hebdige's argument to explore how Nordic radical nationalists employ fashion and musical style to position themselves as distant from the skinhead movement while holding similar ideological beliefs. In this context, both are used to shift the subculture "toward new ways of looking, acting, and sounding like a nationalist" while navigating differing in-group perceptions of culture, race, and group identity (Teitelbaum 2017: 9).

Other scholars have also written about the connection between fashion and music in recent years, discussing how both aesthetic realms allow and encourage the circulation and innovation of cultural symbols (McRobbie 1999), enhance each other through the ways that they index notions of authenticity and value (Miller 2011), and operate in tandem to undergird complex economic systems of consumption and production (Strähle 2018). In the context of country music, the most popular fashion choices linked with the genre include cowboy hats, cowboy boots, denim jeans, and occasionally the other trappings of cowboy identity (chaps, big belt buckles, pearl-snap shirts, etc.). These aesthetic markers all suggest connections—either real or imagined—to the American West, to rurality, and to a working-class life through how they call the cowboy to mind. And further, each of these fashion items has its own history, moving from pragmatic items with working ranch purposes to accessories that marry practicality with personal expression.

For example, variations on the cowboy hat have been in use for centuries, with roots in the headwear of Mongolian horsemen, Mexican vaqueros, and Argentinian gauchos

(Sanders 2013). Practically, the broad brim provides shade to the rider as well as keeping rain or snow out of the wearer's eyes. In the United States, John Batterson Stetson turned the cowboy hat from an individual object into a utilitarian fashion symbol in 1865 with the manufacturing of the original "Boss of the Plains" hat, Stetson's earliest cowboy hat (Cartaxo and Holdworth 2010). By heavily marketing this hat across the country, Stetson was able to standardize the look of the cowboy hat; by prioritizing durable, well-made hats that would be able to weather working ranch life, he also cemented the connection between the cowboy hat and the hard-working, strong nature of its assumed wearer. Over the last century, some small changes have made their way into the Stetson's iconic design—for example, turned-up edges to avoid the hat being knocked off when swinging a lasso—but for the most part, the Stetson is just as familiar now as it would have been to nineteenth-century consumers. Most rodeo competitors today wear cowboy hats every time they compete, including the roughstock event riders, who seldom retain their hats longer than the first jump, but always make sure to pick up, dust off, and re-position their hat before leaving the arena. Audiences and admirers also flock to cowboy hats as accessories, even if they've never been on a horse or gone for a hike; in the twenty-first century, flimsy straw hats decorated with turquoise, leather, and rhinestones have become all the rage among country music and rodeo fans. When I attended the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas in December of 2018, I saw a fairly even mix of authentic Stetsons and cheap straw hats in the stands, though the folks in the arena and production areas wouldn't dare be caught dead without a Stetson. For rodeo attendees and competitors, the cowboy hat suggests different ways of relating to the cowboy image—as a real part of their lived experience or as a focus point for nostalgia and longing—but in both

cases it presents a visual component of the wearer's identity, unified in how it connects people to the American West.

The cowboy figure's deployment as a symbol in country music takes these localized markers of personal identity and places them on a national (sometimes international) stage through the popular musicians who inhabit that figure. This process has been in operation since country's earliest days and has continued up through the present, with famous country singers like Gene Autry, Hank Williams, George Strait, and Tim McGraw donning cowboy hats and boots for nearly every public appearance made over their long, prolific careers. In the following sections of this chapter, I turn to country and other popular music genres to explore how differing levels of engagement with, embodiment of, and personal connection to the cowboy figure and its accompanying aesthetics have been used by musicians to claim, affirm, question, or negotiate American, Western, cowboy identity and authenticity on a national stage. Just as rodeo aficionados perform a specific type of cowboy identity, so too do musicians and audiences in country, hip hop, and other genres of popular music. Examining how cowboy identity and aesthetics manifest in popular music spheres reveals how rodeo values continue to circulate and be modified by other actors outside of the realm of sport.

### **Bronc-Bustin' Country Stars**

Within the genre of country music, some performers who have made explicit the connection between cowboy and country through personal history of involvement with the rodeo. The most widely famous of these is country singer Reba McEntire, but other individuals like Cody Johnson, Chancey Williams, George Strait, Kylie Frey, Justin

McBride, and Chris LeDoux all competed as rodeo athletes on some scale before making it big as country performers. They are universally beloved by rodeo audiences and committees, and many of them perform frequently at rodeos across the country to stay connected to their rodeo roots. In each of these performers' careers, having a history of rodeoing lent them a particular kind of Western cowboy or cowgirl authenticity that opened up space in the country genre for them. Several of these singers have turned their rodeo experiences into song lyrics, too, contributing to the small but steadily growing body of country music specifically about rodeo. In this section, I will examine a selection of songs relating to rodeo or cowboy aesthetics by these artists, and argue that the lyrics, music videos, and contexts of these pieces all speak to the ways that rodeo's and country's values overlap in performance. Fashion is an important piece of how musicians, competitors, and audiences all perform identity, and in examining how cowboy performance plays out in music by bona fide rodeo musicians I also connect these aesthetic choices to the performances that take place in the rodeo arena.

The most recent country song to explicitly center rodeo is a single originally released in 2019 by bull rider-turned-country singer Cody Johnson, known to his fans as CoJo. The song, aptly named "Dear Rodeo," tells the story of someone who has left rodeo behind to chase other dreams but can't quite let the sport go.<sup>94</sup> The single was re-released in 2020 as a duet with famous country singer and former barrel racer Reba McEntire, who was born into a rodeo family and grew up on the circuit. Both her father and grandfather were champion steer ropers, and she competed in rodeos for many years before being "discovered" as a country singer while performing the national anthem at the 1974 National Finals Rodeo in Oklahoma

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<sup>94</sup> See "Cody Johnson & Reba McEntire – Dear Rodeo" in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song and watch the music video.

City. This performance launched her career in country music, which has now spanned five decades and included dozens of awards and accolades. “Dear Rodeo” pays homage to that history with a lengthy and dramatic music video set in an arena, opening with extended documentary footage of various rodeos that plays in the background as Johnson makes his way slowly from behind the chutes and into the dirt ring. A single warm, yellow spotlight flashes on as Johnson, silhouetted in his cowboy hat, sings the opening verse of “Dear Rodeo” unaccompanied and unamplified, voice echoing off the metal panels and high ceiling of the arena. Reba McEntire enters next, and the first thing we see of her is a shot of her bedazzled cowboy boots, somehow both incredibly glamorous and broken-in, covered in dirt but sparkling. We get a variety of shots of her attire, a glittering rodeo queen-style suit bedecked with fringe and rhinestone-encrusted crosses, before she looks up dramatically into the camera. Another light flashes on, and both McEntire and Johnson stand on opposite ends of the arena for a moment in silence before beginning to sing “Dear Rodeo” together, this time with a full musical accompaniment of twangy guitar and pedal steel as more videos of rodeo competitors flash across the screen, intermingling with shots of Reba and Cody performing. The entire music video tells a story of how rodeo is “the love that got away” from both singers, and it chronicles the tough relationship between a rodeo athlete and the sport that never truly loves them back (Johnson 2021a).

Lyricaly, the song also draws connections between the cowboy fantasy, a working-class work ethic that glorifies hard labor, and the sport of rodeo. In the chorus, Johnson and McEntire sing, “Between the almost-had-‘ems and broken bones / The dream of the buckle I’ll never put on / I’m jaded, woah, I hate it / But somehow the highs outweigh the lows / And I’d do it all again even though we both know / I’d still have to let you go.” Rodeo is a

sport that's incredibly tough on the body, as discussed in earlier chapters, and in this chorus, Johnson and McEntire justify all of that pain and loss (the "almost-had-'ems and broken bones") because "the highs outweigh the lows." This is a common sentiment in both rodeo and the narratives of country music, where the trials of working low-paying, hard-wearing jobs—or competing in rodeo after rodeo and getting injured or not winning—pale in comparison to the personal victory of working through that pain. We also see this chorus point towards the importance of aesthetic markers in supporting that struggle-born country authenticity; the "buckle I'll never wear" refers to the elaborately engraved rodeo championship buckle, a common prize for the top-scoring competitor in each event and a major part of the cowboy aesthetic. Often plated in gold, silver, or other precious metals, belt buckles are an important indicator of a cowboy's identity in how they inform other cowboys about his accomplishments (Bushy 1990, Guzmán 2014).<sup>95</sup>

Reba and Cody's music video takes a turn after the completion of the original song's final verse. Reba's voice is heard speaking over footage of old concert performances of hers, paired with a musical interlude featuring twangy steel guitar and plucked strings, and she comments that "It's kinda like rodeo... released me, said c'mon, you go do what you're supposed to be doin' over here" (Johnson 2020: 4:40). In the "Dear Rodeo" music video, Reba's not the only one who has rodeo to thank for her career; Cody Johnson speaks after her, commenting on his own past as a bull rider: "Looking back on it now, I think the bull was just a representation of something I was lookin' for. I didn't know then that that was

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<sup>95</sup> Much like Stetson hats, these large, engraved belt buckles were popularized from a mixture of practicality and presentation; originally, cowboys would've simply used suspenders to keep their pants up, but the combination of (1) army-regulated friction belt buckles becoming popular in the late 1800s and (2) the development of TV and film cowboys' aesthetics (large, shiny belt buckles) throughout the first half of the 1900s led to a rise in popularity of this kind of belt buckle among cowboys. They're not really conducive to regular ranch work, but are certainly a status symbol at rodeos and other Western events.

going to lead to the things I've done now" (Ibid.: 5:10). This commentary plays over footage of Cody riding around the RodeoHouston arena after his sold-out concert in 2017, which he describes as something he'll "never forget" (Johnson 2021b). This inspirational tone is not unlike the videos prevalent throughout the 2020 NFR's opening ceremonies, where rodeo competitors and military personnel speak vaguely about the value of rodeo, patriotism, and national and individual freedom over the top of generic instrumental tracks. In this case, listeners get the same sense of a generic inspirational tone from this music video. In this case, rather than inviting listeners to participate in a quasi-religious nightly rodeo ritual, Reba and Cody are attending to their own rodeo histories with a kind of reverence that imbues the markers of rodeo authenticity in their personas with a similar degree of sacredness. For both Reba and Cody, rodeo represents a mythic force that gave them the push they needed to achieve a dream greater than winning, as well as the actual catalyst for their musical careers. "Dear Rodeo" is just as much about how rodeo shaped and led to Reba and Cody's success as it is about both singers' love for the sport itself, and that's what has made it such a hit among rodeo and non-rodeo audiences alike.

Another recent single that exemplifies the close relationship for many performers between rodeo and their country identities is Kylie Frey's 2016 "Me and These Boots."<sup>96</sup> Much like "Dear Rodeo," Frey's song holds toughness, grit, and willingness to work (and play) hard up to the light as an important part of her country, cowgirl identity; she sings, "We work hard and we play rough / We turn heads when we get shined up / We go together, just a pair of ramblin' souls / Just count the scrapes and scuffs, yeah, they're my story told." In these lyrics, Frey clearly aligns "scrapes and scuffs," both on her boots and on her psyche, as

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<sup>96</sup> See "Kylie Frey – Me And These Boots" in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song and watch the music video.



“[her] story told,” things to be proud of that are inextricable from her identity as a country musician. In the music video that accompanies this song, akin to “Dear Rodeo,” we see a young Kylie Frey dressed in a bright pink rodeo queen ensemble, complete with rhinestones and a spotless white Stetson, as she wins the 2010 Louisiana High School Rodeo Queen title. This image epitomizes the trope in rodeo culture of the rodeo queen: always immaculately dressed, bedecked in rhinestones and glitter and long, flowing hair, but also capable of wrestling a steer to the ground and roping cattle with the best of the men (Burbick 2002, Laegrid 2006, Shields and Coughlin 2009). Her dirt-covered boots seem to stand in stark contrast to the rest of her spotless ensemble, but this tension between beauty and toughness is central to the rodeo queen identity that Frey portrays in this and other songs.

Frey’s tone of voice in “Me and These Boots” also draws on a long history of women within the country genre who have navigated difficult, gendered conventions for lyric content and singing style. Musicologist Stephanie Vander Wel discusses this history through the lens of voice studies, suggesting that female country singers’ voices’ invoke practices and roles of the past, including the voices of “honky tonk angels, angry housewives, and demanding women negotiating the terms of their sexual and domestic lives” (Vander Wel 2017: 171). She also discusses the voices and performed identities of such famed country singers as Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, and Kitty Wells, all of whom utilize shifts in register and timbre in their singing to add complexity and nuance to their lyrics (Vander Wel 2020); Frey, unlike her predecessors, never strays from her nasal, twangy tone, belting the entire song from start to finish. The overall effect, when combined with the gradually building guitar and drumbeats and the dramatic rodeo visuals, is one of unbridled strength and boldness without ever tipping into an unpleasant or ugly sound. This affect is in keeping with the rodeo queen

figure she inhabits throughout “Me and These Boots,” pairing strength and a certain rough-and-tumble quality with beauty and glamour. The young Frey we see in the video, decked out in pink and rhinestones, highlights those qualities through evoking visual archetypes that will be understandable to her listeners even as she makes them explicit in her lyrics. At the end of that silent opening sequence of the music video, young rodeo queen Frey fades to black as another woman places a tiara on the crown of Frey’s hat, and the music of “Me and These Boots” begins. During the first verse, we move back and forth between shots of Frey walking around her ranch and footage of her and other folks rodeoing, exploding out of the gate as the chorus hits.

The juxtaposition of pastoral ranch life and the excitement of the rodeo contest is paired with repeated shots of cowboy boots that vary from one setting to another; stylized fashion-forward boots appear on the ranch alongside dirty, worn-in boots with low roper’s heels at the rodeo. “Me and These Boots” is remarkable for how explicit it makes the connection between fashion and personal identity through Frey’s on-the-nose lyrics and the close-up shots of boots, timed to correlate perfectly with her words. This phenomenon is not dissimilar to footwear like sneakers functioning as markers of status for hip-hop and rap artists. Just like Stetson hats and big championship belt buckles, a cowboy or cowgirl’s boots are a central part of how they visually project their personality and identity, and they have stayed remarkably consistent in aesthetic over time even as particular fads come and go. Western boots are a huge industry, and when I attended the National Finals Rodeo in 2018, nearly half the exhibitors in the NFR’s “Cowboy Christmas” vendor hall were selling hats, boots, or both. They can be made in a wide range of colors and materials, including regular cowhide leather but also alligator, snake, ostrich, and buffalo skin, among others; “authentic”

boots also usually feature decorative stitching, while the more fashion-oriented pairs sometimes come encrusted with rhinestones or gems. There are several heel options, as well as several options for how the toe box is shaped, but all are equally functional even if the wearer elects to prioritize fashion over practicality. Choosing a pair of cowboy boots involves at least a dozen choices, and each of those choices has a lot to say about the wearer's activities, personality, and how they want to present themselves to others.

Frey also utilizes her rodeo past to establish herself as a musician with a unique claim to country music in the twenty-first century, emphasizing how being a rodeo athlete growing up gives her a traditional kind of authenticity. Her self-authored Spotify profile hails her commercially as a country artist who has escaped the “identity crisis” that seems to predominate the genre in the twenty-first century, characterized by “shifting from one ‘lane’ to another, adopting a new sound and style as trends change” (Frey 2021). In the last two decades, country music has increasingly shifted towards a more pop-inflected sound, taking on the rock guitar and drum kit backing tracks and incorporating more poppy vocal styles as subgenres like bro-country have gained popularity in the United States.<sup>97</sup> Frey does some of this in her music, but her deep-seated twang and heavily emphasized rodeo imagery keep her from tipping over the edge into pop music territory in the way that singers like Carrie Underwood or Kacey Musgraves have. Frey's Spotify bio also deftly connects fashion, authenticity, and her rodeo heritage with her right to belong in the country sphere:

Born and raised as country as it gets, Frey is a third-generation rodeo girl and Louisiana state goat-tying champion—and a rising star as genuine as her

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<sup>97</sup> “Bro-country” was first named as a subgenre in a 2013 New Yorker article on band Florida Georgia Line, written by Jody Rosen (Rosen 2013). Other performers like Jason Aldean, Jake Owen, and Luke Bryan are often mentioned as originators of this style, which is characterized most popularly by its topical focus on hot girls, partying, alcohol, and trucks. Musically, bro-country usually mixes country-pop instrumentation and singing styles with musical features borrowed from hip-hop, rock, and electronic music: trap beats, electric guitar riffs, more present drum kits, etc.

Wranglers. Sincere in her convictions and too real to dismiss, even for ardent country haters, her sound both typifies and transcends the genre (Ibid.).

Wrangler denim—yet another iconic fashion choice for cowboys—is assumed to be a genuine marker of country authenticity because it’s a brand whose image is built on being traditional, being practical, and being primarily worn by working-class people like cowboys. Wrangler’s social media feeds are full of nostalgia-tinged images of cowboys and cowgirls posing dramatically against weathered wooden fences or against an expansive Western backdrop, and they’ve been the title sponsor of the National Finals Rodeo since 2001, not to mention their involvement with the military through rodeo, as discussed in Chapter Three. Frey’s bio smoothly connects this multi-layered concept of Wrangler’s American authenticity with her own musical prowess through her involvement with the rodeo, labeling her as somehow more “genuine” and “real” than your average country music singer.

This not only drives home the importance of authenticity as a concept for country music in general, but it also makes clear the connection between rodeo and country as predicated on the possession of a genuine claim to the particular kind of working-class life that rodeo and country both symbolize. In contrast to the characterization of rodeo as an amorphous entity that pushed Cody Johnson and Reba McEntire to achieve their dreams in “Dear Rodeo,” Kylie Frey uses rodeo in “Me and These Boots” to differentiate herself from other country singers, marking her as more “real” because she’s not afraid to work hard or play rough. Frey sets herself up as being a performer who typifies the country genre because of that authenticity, but she also claims to transcend it in the same way; she’s so genuine in her performance that she argues even “ardent country-haters” can’t help but respect her music for its authenticity (Frey 2021). Through incorporating the visual markers of country and rodeo authenticity and fashion into her work, trading on the associations they carry in

popular culture, Frey makes this bold statement feel believable, even if there is no quantitative evidence to back up her statement.

My final example of how country artists combine country and rodeo aesthetics in their work is cowboy musician Chris LeDoux, who passed away at age 56 from a rare form of cancer in 2005.<sup>98</sup> LeDoux, like the other musicians discussed in this section, was a rodeo competitor for much of his life, and he was perhaps the most successful; after winning several championship titles for bareback riding in high school, he attended Casper College in Wyoming on a rodeo scholarship, where he also won the Intercollegiate National Bareback Riding Championship in 1969. Upon graduating from college, he became a professional card-carrying member of the PRCA and qualified for the National Finals four times, eventually winning the World Champion title in 1976. He began writing songs while on the rodeo circuit, and played in a band called The Western Underground for many years until country singer Garth Brooks included his name in a hit song of his own, “Much Too Young (To Feel This Damn Old),” in an attempt to gain a little rodeo street cred.<sup>99</sup> This song caused an abrupt spike in LeDoux’s popularity outside the rodeo sphere, and he eventually signed a contract with Liberty Records in 1991. He released thirty-eight albums before his untimely death in 2005, a mixture of studio, live, and compilation albums. After his death, he was posthumously awarded the Academy of Country Music’s Pioneer Award and was inducted into the ProRodeo Hall of Fame.<sup>100</sup> LeDoux has attained legendary status among country and

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<sup>98</sup> He was diagnosed with cholangiocarcinoma, a type of cancer of the bile ducts, in 2004 after receiving a liver transplant in 2000 for primary sclerosing cholangitis.

<sup>99</sup> See “Garth Brooks – Much Too Young to Feel This Damn Old Live 1989” in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song and watch a live performance.

<sup>100</sup> Notably, his first twenty-two albums were released on his own record label, American Cowboy Songs. After releasing six albums with Liberty Records, he then released nine more with Capitol Records. Several more compilation albums were released after his death.

rodeo fans, with many cowboy musicians, including Brooks, claiming him as a source of inspiration.

In a recent trailer for Cody Johnson’s documentary on the making of “Dear Rodeo,” LeDoux’s widow Peggy Rhoades discusses her late husband: “Chris knew the two things he wanted to do in life: he wanted to be a cowboy, and he wanted to be in the military. He was a rare breed. I know people like to say they don’t make ‘em like that anymore... they just don’t, though. He was just a great mix of a good, strong soul, could endure just about anything... he learned so much from that cowboy part of him” (Johnson 2021, 0:30). Once again, being able to endure hardship and come out the other side stronger is interpreted synonymously with being a bona fide cowboy. Much like Kylie Frey, he is set up as somehow different from and more authentic than the run-of-the-mill country stars of his time (“they don’t make ‘em like that anymore”). This reputation, alongside his substantial rodeo career and list of accolades, positioned Chris LeDoux during his lifetime and after his death as an iconic figure who fully embodied both cowboy and country singer. The majority of his music is related to the life of a cowboy and a rodeo competitor; for the purposes of this chapter I will focus on “This Cowboy’s Hat,” from his 1982 album *Used To Want To Be A Cowboy*, because it most clearly highlights the importance of visual aesthetics to the performance of cowboy authenticity and grit.<sup>101</sup>

“This Cowboy’s Hat” tells the story of LeDoux meeting a friend in a coffee shop, “just havin’ a cup to pass the time.” He sings of overhearing some “motorcycle riders” poking fun at his friend’s cowboy hat, threatening to “rip it right off [his] head.” LeDoux’s friend responds, telling the riders that they’d have to, among other things, “bulldog the

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<sup>101</sup> See “Chris LeDoux – This Cowboy’s Hat” in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song and watch the music video.

Mississippi and pin its ears down flat / Long before you take this cowboy's hat." From there, the cowboy waxes poetic about each part of the hat—handed down to him from his dead father—and his personal connection to it, from the rattlesnake-skin hat band made by a nephew who died in Vietnam to the eagle feather that adorns it, gifted to him by an Indigenous friend who was murdered in the desert, to the hat pin that was a gift from a woman he doesn't know if he'll see again. The hat itself is heavily romanticized as an object with deep personal meaning that goes far beyond stereotypical cowboy associations, with each component of the hat connected to an important relationship in the owner's life. Like Frey's boots and Wranglers or McEntire and Johnson's belt buckles, LeDoux's friend's hat (and by extension LeDoux's as well) reveals a great deal of information about what matters to its wearer, telling his life story through its materials and the memories each represents.

The music video for this song is much less narrative than most contemporary music videos in the twenty-first century. It mainly comprises live concert footage interspersed with (and over the top of) black-and-white videos of LeDoux walking around backstage, climbing up and down stairs and over railings. Garth Brooks has publicly credited LeDoux as inspiring the way he performs in his stage shows, and in this music video we see the blueprint for many other twenty-first century country shows clearly laid out. LeDoux walks around the stage in a white button-down shirt, jeans, cowboy boots, and a white Stetson, playing his guitar in front of a backing band while pillars of fire shoot up behind him and colored lights shift around the stage. He sings into a headset microphone, and actively interacts with the crowd, many of whom hold up their own cowboy hats in response. Pyrotechnics in particular are notably a fixture of many rodeo and country performances—especially patriotically-

themed ones, as earlier chapters of this dissertation explored—and LeDoux’s use of them here foretells their popularity in future years.

All the country artists and songs discussed here are brought together by their rodeo histories. Laying out the performers’ aesthetics and the lyrics of these songs side by side reveals one of the most important ways rodeo identity appears in country music: through the conflation of cowboy fashion (boots, hat, belt buckles, and denim in particular) with the personality traits of work ethic, determination, and grit. In most country music, these aesthetic trappings of cowboy identity are primarily visual aids to situate a performer as being within the country genre, but for performers with rodeo histories, each individual fashion item has deep meaning connected to their own personal sense of identity. Even though most country performers in the twenty-first century are not rodeo competitors, country’s historic engagement with the rodeo as well as the continued presence of rodeo professionals in the country genre (and, conversely, country’s continued presence at rodeo events) has maintained the relationship between aesthetic markers and rodeo values in the commercial sphere. In the next section of this chapter, I turn to musicians working outside the realm of country music to see how those same visual (and sometimes sonic) markers are activated in other genres while still retaining their connection to their rodeo points of origin. Where country musicians most often engage with the cowboy to reaffirm their authenticity and rightful place in American history, other popular musicians utilize cowboy aesthetics and rodeo culture to complicate that history.



## The Yeehaw Agenda: Twenty-First Century Cowboys in Popular Culture

In popular culture, cowboy and Western aesthetics have never been confined to country music or to white people. Pop culture archivist Bri Malandro proved this to be true when she started her Instagram account [@theyeehawagenda](#) in 2018, which traces decades of cowboy-themed outfits worn by people of color in popular culture. She also coined the phrase “Yeehaw Agenda,” which refers to the aesthetic of the West when reclaimed by people of color, in 2018, when she posted a tweet captioned “the yee haw agenda is in full effect” and shared an image of singer Ciara posing in Western-themed attire on the cover of *King Kong* magazine (Malandro 2018). The tweet was widely shared, and as of mid-2021 her Instagram account has over 24,000 followers. In an interview with *Texas Monthly*, she says of the project:

The primary goal was to create an archive for the culture... I knew about mainstream country, but I also knew about Bone Thugs-N-Harmony making a song called ‘Ghetto Cowboy’ in 1998. I knew Westernwear always had a place in hip-hop and R&B fashion because I was a huge fan of Sisqó, Mary J. Blige, and Destiny’s Child. A lot of people don’t have the range to look past certain stereotypes—that’s never been a problem for me (Dao 2019).

For many people, the aesthetic of the Yeehaw Agenda is more than just a fun homage to Southern roots. It’s a political statement, a reclamation, a subversion of traditional country culture. Cowboys and ranch workers were never entirely white—as many as one quarter of cowboys in the early days of ranching in America were Black, often freed slaves, and at least a third were Mexican, vaqueros who had found employment north of the border.<sup>102</sup> Popular conceptions of the cowboy figure and its accompanying fixtures of authenticity and nostalgia

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<sup>102</sup> In fact, working as a cowboy after the Civil War represented real economic power for freed slaves; many Black men had been forced to work as cowhands while enslaved, and after the war many herd owners found themselves suddenly lacking in the skilled labor necessary to control their cattle. Black cowhands were suddenly in great demand and found themselves with a large degree of financial freedom and influence. Interested readers should see William Loren Katz’s *The Black West* (1973) for a more detailed history.

have painted the cowboy as historically and contemporaneously white, but the Yeehaw Agenda's adherents point out that this is not and has never been true. In this section, I will explore the political power and nuance of the Yeehaw Agenda in popular music by considering several recent case studies that highlight how performers use its aesthetics to make their own commentary on authenticity, identity, and the value of the cowboy figure, and therefore question or reaffirm the cultural relevance of rodeo in the twenty-first century.

Megan Thee Stallion is a rapper and singer who was born and raised in Houston, Texas—a fact she proudly promotes as an important part of her persona. She rose to fame in the United States via social media, where her freestyle videos were widely circulated and eventually culminated in her signing a contract with 300 Entertainment in 2018. Since then, she has skyrocketed to widespread success, winning three Grammy Awards—including Best New Artist, making her the first female hip hop artist to do so since Lauryn Hill in 1999—and being named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by *Time* magazine in 2020. As a Southern-born performer, Megan often makes use of Western aesthetics in her music videos, textual influences, and even her fashion line with online retailer Fashion Nova, launched in November of 2020 and described as a collection that “will make customers feel like they are on a wild Western moto speed chase” (Kai 2020). However, she does more than simply display those aesthetics in her work; she reclaims them by pushing the boundaries of what is considered to be acceptably Western. Her style choices, as well as the people with whom she collaborates, allow her to make subtle statements about identity, authenticity, and belonging without being explicit—though she is also well-known for publicly taking stances

on the mistreatment of Black women in the United States.<sup>103</sup> Megan’s career is complicated and full of nuance. For the purposes of this chapter I will focus specifically on her relationship with the Compton Cowboys and their combined performance at the Apple Music Awards in December of 2020 because it specifically brings the visual markers of cowboy identity together with explicit reference to the rodeo.

Megan’s first publicized connection to the Compton Cowboys, a group of Black equestrians who do activist work with young people in Compton, Los Angeles, came in late 2019 when *Vogue* did a video chronicling 24 hours spent with the rapper.<sup>104</sup> In the video, we see her and her friends eating lunch and talking about their plans for the rest of the day; Megan tells the camera that they’re going to go “ride horses with the Compton Cowboys” to excited sounds from her entourage. At first viewers might be surprised that the rapper would want to do something that seems so distant from the world of rap, but Megan quickly follows up by saying, “I’m the fuckin’ stallion, of course I ride horses... In Texas, you’re gonna get on a horse a few times. And on the south side of Houston where I’m from, like, somebody would literally ride a horse to the store” (Hahn 2019).<sup>105</sup> When we see her riding around Richmond Farms with the Compton Cowboys later in the video, she rides with an ease and competence that suggests an abundance of time spent in the saddle. Urban horse ownership is

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<sup>103</sup> One good example of the way Megan Thee Stallion publicly speaks about racism and sexism is found in the controversy and conspiracy surrounding her 2020 injury, when she was shot in both feet by male rapper Tory Lanez. Lanez denied all charges and allegedly started a smear campaign to malign and discredit Megan, as well as offering her money to keep quiet about the incident. He has since pled not guilty to the assault. Megan addressed this issue in both the opening track to her 2020 studio album *Good News* (a complex diss track directed at Lanez) and an October 2020 op-ed in the *New York Times* entitled “Why I Speak Up For Black Women.”

<sup>104</sup> See “24 Hours With Megan Thee Stallion” in the YouTube playlist to watch her interview.

<sup>105</sup> She also tells viewers that in the South, a girl who is “stacked... big booty, big boobs, long legs... they call ‘em stallions.” In the horse world, a stallion refers to a male horse who has not been castrated. Both uses of the term suggest an individual that is sexually active, virile, and masculine or aggressive in some way (for women, this means they are larger than other women and often larger than many men).

not what comes to mind for most people when thinking about equestrianism, but for Black folks in the South (and, to a lesser degree, in other places like Philadelphia) it's surprisingly normal, and the relationship between urban equestrianism and hip-hop is more commonplace than one might think.

In Megan's hometown of Houston, as well as other urban areas in Texas and Louisiana, many Black folks own horses that they use for all sorts of things, including but not limited to leisure riding. In fact, a tradition of zydeco or hip-hop trail rides has been a part of Southern Black culture for a very long time, the product of Creole cowboys being pushed out of white-only rodeos and other ranching opportunities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>106</sup> As the oil business started booming in Texas, Creole families from Louisiana moved west and brought their culture with them. In the last decade as hip-hop and zydeco have experienced more musical cross-over in the South, these trail rides have become increasingly popular among wider audiences (Balsam 2018). These trail rides usually consist of a mix of people on horses, ATVs, motorcycles, passenger trolleys, and other vehicles, and they blast zydeco and hip-hop tracks at ear-splitting volume as they ride, usually followed by a night of zydeco dancing at the end of the trail. For many folks, it's a fun way to spend a day. For others, it's deeply important to commemorating a history that has been whitewashed by the popular media; in an interview with *The Guardian's* Joel Balsam, Texas cowboy Robert Brown said, "The reasons we honor being a Black cowboy is because of all the struggles we went through. Not just a Black cowboy, to be a cowboy. To be respected" (Ibid.).

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<sup>106</sup> See "BarnYard Posse's 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Trailride" in the YouTube playlist to watch footage of one of these urban trail rides.

For the Compton Cowboys, Megan’s collaborators, urban horse ownership is a little different. Rather than the sounds of zydeco underscoring trail rides through Compton, the Compton Cowboys are active consumers and producers of hip-hop and rap. Their members are all accomplished horsemen—many of them compete locally and nationally, both in rodeos and in sports like dressage or show jumping—and they formed their collective in a mission to “uplift their community through horseback and farming lifestyle, all the while highlighting the rich legacy of African-Americans in equine and western heritage” (Compton Cowboys 2021).<sup>107</sup> The group does a lot of inter-community activist projects, working with the youth of Compton to build positive community relationships, and they also are making waves in the music and fashion industries through recent collaborations with Ariat International (a well-known equestrian brand), Tommy Hilfiger, Adidas, and other brands as well as with Megan Thee Stallion. Co-founder of the Compton Cowboys Randy Savvy released his first EP early in 2021, titled *Late Night Ride*.<sup>108</sup> His Spotify bio situates him firmly between honky-tonk and hip-hop: “Randy Savvy rolls in like a cool breeze with storytelling prowess evocative of golden-era West Coast rap and a guitar-centric soundscape perfect for a John Wayne classic” (Savvy 2021). The tracks on his EP match this description, filled with a mixture of soft, plucked guitar and trap beats. In an interview with podcast *Slauson Girl Speaks*, Savvy talks about his musical background and how it influenced this EP; he describes growing up with a mix of traditional country music that would be “played at rodeos and seen in Westerns,” which he refers to as “the cowboy thing,” and the hip-hop that

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<sup>107</sup> Compton Cowboys member Kenny Atkins, who also goes by the name Stona Mane, started his equestrian career on the dressage circuit, a particularly exclusionary equestrian sport where very few non-white riders have ever had professional careers at a high level. He credits it with giving him a deeper connection to his horses and better riding skills.

<sup>108</sup> See “Randy Savvy | COLORBLIND” in the YouTube playlist to listen to some of his music.

was coming out of Compton and other West Coast areas at the time (Compton Cowboys 2021). His sound is a mixture of those influences, and it's become the soundtrack to the Compton Cowboys' social media presence. The group's hip-hop authenticity, based in their roots in musically significant Compton, is combined with Savvy's country authenticity, the result of being raised on a ranch and growing up entrenched in rodeo and country culture, to create a specifically Black, urban, community-oriented cowboy authenticity that meaningfully contrasts with popular stereotypes of cowboys as white, rural men who thrive on freedom and individualism.<sup>109</sup>

When the Compton Cowboys collaborated with Megan Thee Stallion for her Apple Music Awards video performance in 2021, they brought that alternative Western authenticity to it in a way that meshed neatly with Megan's provocative, activist, feminist take on the American West. Her performance opens with long shots of the Cowboys' horses, the drawn-out instrumental intro to her song "Realer" punctuated by snorts and whinnies, as she says, "Sometimes I feel like people try to silence you. I've been through so many things in life, I don't let the disappointments keep me disappointed. How can I turn these nos into hell yeahs?" We then see the Cowboys race across a dark racetrack, lit by spotlights, as banners tell viewers we're at the Apple Music Awards, watching Megan Thee Stallion win Breakout Artist of the Year. It's dramatic, but not as dramatic as the sudden shift indoors to a rodeo arena that happens as soon as the "Realer" intro hits its stride; we see a black horse rearing against a flaming star-shaped frame, with a banner proclaiming "Houston's Own" in the background. We then see Megan herself, bedecked in a head-to-toe gold outfit, complete

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<sup>109</sup> To learn more about the Compton Cowboys and their history, I highly recommend Walter Thompson-Hernández's 2021 book *The Compton Cowboys: The New Generation of Cowboys in America's Urban Heartland*.

with a jewel-encrusted gold cowboy hat, elbow-length gloves, and a gold bustier (see Figures 10 and 11).



**Figure 10 (left):** Horse rearing in front of a star-shaped frame on fire; screenshot from Megan Thee Stallion’s Apple Music Awards performance

**Figure 11 (right):** Megan Thee Stallion’s outfit from the same music video, screenshot.

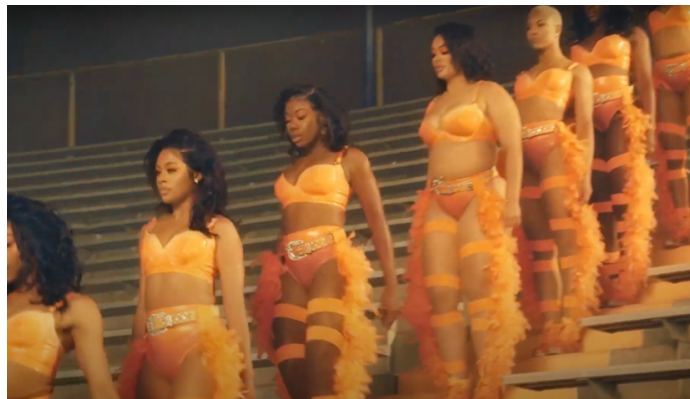
Speaking about this introduction in behind-the-scenes footage, Compton Cowboys members described it as “amazing” and “inspiring” to be a part of the work Megan was doing with this performance; one member said, “to watch what Meg is doing with the culture, the Black cowboy thing, the Black cowgirl thing... I’m just so happy to be a part of that because that’s what we’re doing, you know, we’re elevating the people, we’re bringing it back to the vibes” (Compton Cowboys 2021). Another member connected Megan’s performance to the way she centers the Black cowboy experience, noting that he felt “proud of her, proud of the cowboy, all of that” (Ibid.). Other members repeatedly mentioned how hard she works to put together performances like this one; one cowboy said, “being on set and seeing her... work ethic, it’s unmatched. She’s really, really dope” (Ibid.). Another simply said “her work ethic is crazy, man” (Ibid.). Just like with the country singers who credit their relationship with rodeo as the source of their work ethic, the Compton Cowboys’ comments about their experience working with Megan focused almost exclusively on her willingness to work hard and the importance of her portrayal of the Black Western experience. Her own words, playing over the introduction to her performance, also suggest a connection between these

two things: her spoken intro, as referenced in a previous paragraph, talks about hustling to turn the nos she gets from the industry “into hell yeahs.” The song that emerges from this amorphous introduction, “Realer,” discusses how Megan keeps it “realer than real,” making money by working hard and keeping her haters out of her way. As she raps this track, the Compton Cowboys ride into the arena and circle around her, visually linking her lyrics about being real with the kind of alternative cowboy authenticity the Compton Cowboys possess.

Throughout the rest of her performance, Megan alternates between several performance spaces—and outfits—as she raps about working hard, making money, and being a hot girl. After a brief interlude where she speaks about growing up in Houston and becoming a rapper, we see her transported to an area behind the arena where her performance began, now clad in a skin-tight, see-through red bodysuit. She performs her song “Cash Shit” in front of construction equipment, a paddock, and some horse stalls while her backup dancers—all Black men in cowboy hats—gyrate around her. Even when she’s not dressed like a cowgirl, Western aesthetics are rife in the visual world she’s curated. As she begins “Don’t Stop,” she struts through the chutes and back into the arena, where her female backup dancers greet her dressed in cow print and thigh-high boots. This rodeo setting has transformed into a stage, but between the cowboy-inspired fashion choices and the cloud of dust being raised by all the dancing, the rodeo is still present in Megan’s performance. After this song finishes, we get another interlude from Megan speaking about how hard she’s worked to get where she is today, but also how deeply indebted she is to the women in her life for getting her there, and for making her feel confident and beautiful. This marks a transition in her performance to its final section, a trio of songs that are about being a woman, living in a female body, and being proud of female sexuality—“Savage,” “Body,”



and “Work It.” In this final section, we see a third set of costumes, this time featuring another iconic fashion choice of the American cowboy: chaps. Megan’s dancers all sport bright orange fringe down the sides of their legs, rigged to their bodies with straps and a large rhinestone-encrusted belt buckle reminiscent of rodeo queen buckles (see Figure 12). These chaps are certainly more revealing than conventional chaps, but that’s part of the point—they highlight the dancers’ legs and bare asses in the same way Megan’s lyrics (and their dance moves) do.



**Figure 12:** Megan Thee Stallion’s backup dancers, screenshot from her performance.

This entire performance is full of cowboy and rodeo imagery, both through Megan’s and her backup dancers’ outfits and through the repeated appearances of the Compton Cowboys. Their individual histories bring complex notions of musical and cowboy authenticity to the table, and their combined performance on Apple Music’s virtual stage presents that authenticity and claim to Western history to a diverse audience. Both Megan and the Compton Cowboys are open about working to reclaim the cowboy image and Western aesthetics. Their performance at the Apple Music Awards puts that reclamation front and center by intertwining lyrical motions toward authenticity, pride, and confidence in one’s identity with visual representations of Black people’s cowboy and Western history. Megan Thee Stallion is a great example of the ways that cowboy aesthetics have made their

way into other popular music genres like rap and hip-hop, and for the most part no one has questioned her engagement with them. However, it's likely that part of the reason why she has not met with backlash from non-rap fans for embodying the cowboy in the way she has is because she has not yet attempted to stray beyond the generic boundaries of rap. Other Black artists, like Beyoncé, Nelly, and Lil Nas X, have been the recipients of major backlash from the cowboy's home genre when they've attempted to break into the country sphere from their respective genres. I suggest that this is true because, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three, country is a genre whose gatekeepers are very invested in a nostalgia-tinged white genre history, and when Black artists from other more popular genres attempt to break in, they feel that history is threatened.

The most famous example of this trend is also highly controversial: newcomer Lil Nas X's debut country rap song "Old Town Road."<sup>110</sup> The song, like Compton Cowboy Randy Savvy's EP, pairs a trap 808 beat with a plucked country guitar, while Lil Nas X raps and sings over the top: "I'm gonna take my horse / to the old town road / I'm gonna ride 'til I can't no more." Like many of the country songs referenced earlier, Lil Nas X continues the country trend of highlighting the visual trappings of cowboy culture. He says, "I got the horses in the back / horse tack is attached / hat is matte black / got the boots that's black to match," and later, "Cowboy hat from Gucci / Wrangler on my booty." While Gucci cowboy hats aren't quite the same as a working cowboy's Stetson, Wrangler remains the favored brand of denim for rodeo and ranch cowboys alike. Sonically and lyrically, the song is undeniably country, particularly in the context of the myriad country-hip-hop crossovers that populated the country charts in the 2010s as the genre's current standard sound. Even though

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<sup>110</sup> See "Lil Nas X – Old Town Road (Official Movie) ft. Billy Ray Cyrus" in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song and watch the music video.

Lil Nas X raps portions of the song, he also utilizes the sing-song-y tone that other country artists like Chris LeDoux and Garth Brooks do, affecting his voice with a little twang and country ornaments as well. The lyrics match the themes of other country songs popular over the last decade, covering horses, tractors, independence or freedom, and cowboy fashion. For example, Florida Georgia Line's famed 2012 track "Cruise," which featured rapper Nelly, spent twenty-four weeks in the number one spot on the *Billboard Hot Country Chart*, the same chart that would later make national news for its mistreatment of Lil Nas X's song. "Cruise" not only features rapping throughout the song, but its lyrics also cover hot girls, trucks, and bikini tops, arguably less traditionally "country" topics than those Lil Nas X raps about.<sup>111</sup>

"Old Town Road" began charting on the *Billboard Hot Country* chart in 2019, peaking at spot 19 before being quietly removed and re-allocated to the *Hot 100* chart instead. When questioned about why it was removed, *Billboard* representatives stated that it did "not embrace enough elements of today's country music to chart in its current version" (Leight 2019). However, Lil Nas X specifically released and marketed "Old Town Road" on Soundcloud, Spotify, and other streaming and social media sites as a country song. Lil Nas X as an individual also has plenty of geographic connection to country music; he grew up in the South, born and raised in Georgia. The song became so popular that the Wrangler brand announced that it was launching a Lil Nas X collection in May of 2019, which was met with major backlash and calls from conservative consumers to boycott the denim company. Some country music fans even took to social media to protest this pairing, arguing that a country lifestyle brand teaming up with a rapper constituted cultural appropriation by Lil Nas X.

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<sup>111</sup> See "Florida Georgia Line – Cruise (Remix) ft. Nelly" in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song and watch the music video.

When Wrangler posted some images from the new collaboration on Instagram, fans came out in droves to protest in the comments section; one user wrote, “This makes me not want to buy wrangler jeans anymore tbh, the cowboy spirit is nothing to be made fun of.”<sup>112</sup> Another wrote, “Can’t believe @wrangler stooped to that level, stop trying to conform and stay loyal to your roots,” with another user commenting below, “Wow what a bunch of sells out [sic]... Keep taking the cowboy outta country.”<sup>113</sup> Wrangler quickly came to their own defense, stating in another post, “We have a long history of using the platform of popular music to embrace a new generation of fans, while staying true to our Western heritage... We believe the cowboy spirit is about having courage, independence, and confidence, which are the same qualities encapsulated in this limited-run, one-of-a-kind collection” (Wrangler 2019). This backlash eerily foreshadows the vitriol spewed on the National Finals Rodeo’s Instagram page when concessions were made to the COVID-19 pandemic, but what it illustrates here is how deeply engrained the idea is that the cowboy figure and the country genre belong solely to white people. Arguing that Wrangler’s collaboration with a Black man, acknowledging his presence in the Western lifestyle sphere, constitutes cultural appropriation means that, on a fundamental level, there is no room for him in the country world in the first place, that his Blackness marks him as external despite his Southern upbringing, his engagement with the cowboy figure, and his country lyrics and instrumentation. So how did his single become so popular among country and non-country fans alike in the first place?

When “Old Town Road” took off in 2019 and began climbing the charts, its success was attributed in part to the original release of the track at a time where social media app TikTok was experiencing a resurgence of use by young adults in the United States (Leight

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<sup>112</sup> User @jc\_bennett

<sup>113</sup> Users @carter\_petite and @wagz9312

2019). Within a few weeks of the track's release, short videos of teens dancing to "Old Town Road" had taken over the app, and popular music journalists suggest that the song was a viral sensation because it subverted listeners' expectations of what it should sound like based on the genre category they thought it should fall under. *Rolling Stone* describes this as an example of how "songs can go viral before labels, radio programmers, and playlist curators can sort them into genre buckets" (Ibid.) This becomes problematic when the music industry retroactively tries to enforce genre borders. In the case of "Old Town Road," the controversy over which chart it was allowed to be on "[became] part of a power struggle about who has the right to make what and, in this case, whether black artists can fit in predominantly white genres" (Ibid.). Lil Nas X, as an individual artist who decided to market his music on streaming sites like Spotify and Soundcloud as country, threw existing conventions for categorizing genre into question, and called attention to the ways in which the *Billboard* charts' convenient simplifications could never be all-encompassing. This flagrant disregard for country's traditional mechanisms of gatekeeping infuriated a lot of people, even if many country stars like Billy Ray Cyrus—who would later be featured on a remix of the song—came out in support of the track's country characteristics. Cyrus tweeted, "It was so obvious to me after hearing the song just one time. I was thinking, what's not country about it? What's the rudimentary element of a country and western song? Then I thought, it's honest, humble, and has an infectious hook, and a banjo. What the hell more do ya need?"<sup>114</sup>

Lil Nas X didn't wait long before releasing a new version of the song featuring Billy Ray Cyrus, which cemented the song's popularity and ensured that it stayed in the number one spot on the *Top 100* chart for a staggering 19 weeks, shattering previously held records.

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<sup>114</sup> Now-deleted April 5, 2019 tweet.

The song's massive popularity supported the making of a music video for the song as well as an elongated "movie," clocking in at over five minutes and featuring an extended introduction in the style of an old Western film. The film opens with shots of Black men on horses galloping across a nondescript frontier-esque landscape set in 1889. Lil Nas X pulls away on his horse, holding a brown sack with a black dollar sign printed on the front, implying that he's just pulled off a robbery and is running from the law. The lawmen pull up their horses, shaking their heads as he runs off. One man yells, "Boss, I'm flabbergasted. Why'd we stop?" His boss—the sheriff, portrayed by Chris Rock—responds, "When you see a Black man on a horse goin' that fast, you just gotta let him fly." Lil Nas X disappears off the edge of the camera, only to meet up with Billy Ray Cyrus, also on horseback. The two of them come to a stop outside a rural house, where a white woman inside looks concerned and calls for her father. Billy Ray and Lil Nas X commiserate about their tough escape and begin to settle in outside the house to spend the night before continuing their journey. Lil Nas X looks concerned, however, and says, "I don't know, man... last time I was here they weren't too welcoming to outsiders." He's speaking of the residents of the house, but we can also interpret this house and its inhabitants as a stand-in for the country genre and its gatekeepers, who we see lurking around the corner with a loaded gun. They creep closer as Billy Ray laughs and says, "You're with me this time. Everything's gonna be alright."

As he says this, the shooting starts, and we see Lil Nas X fleeing the scene, throwing himself into what looks like a mining tunnel and crawling toward a light as gunshots ring out behind him. He then begins to fall through the tunnel as it inverts, flying through the air and landing in a Southern Black neighborhood in 2019. The music video proper starts here, with the plucked banjo and backing vocals punctuating awed looks from the neighborhood's

residents as Lil Nas X rides his horse through the streets, decked out in nineteenth-century cowboy gear. As the video progresses, we see him engage in a dance-off with a teen girl, race a car, upgrade his look (and his horse), and meet up with Billy Ray Cyrus, who takes him to a Bingo game where they perform for a bunch of white people in Stetsons as they line dance. In contrast with the stereotypically Western imagery of the opening movie, this music video pokes fun at country stereotypes while making space for Lil Nas X and his collaborators at the same time. The Bingo game is dull and dry, its players' dancing nondescript and square, but they welcome Lil Nas X with little hesitation, and the video even ends with one of the older women in his arms looking up at him adoringly. He looks the part of a twenty-first-century cowboy, albeit a very flashy one, and he gets the reception of a cowboy in these predominantly white spaces of the music video—once they realize he's there to make music for them.

Lil Nas X makes good use of the cowboy figure in “Old Town Road,” but not in a traditional way. His lyrics contain standard elements of country tracks, with references made to the iconic fashion markers of cowboy identity, but always with a twist. He might have the “Wranglers on [his] booty,” but his hat is Gucci, not Stetson. The instrumentals of “Old Town Road” include a traditional-sounding banjo, but they also feature a trap beat. Billy Ray Cyrus, a quintessential country cowboy, might be featured on a verse, but Lil Nas X is the main event. Country's traditional identity markers are a constant throughout this entire song and its accompanying music video, but they are always inflected with something else. Lil Nas X and his alternative embodiment of the cowboy are just as historically authentic as Billy Ray Cyrus's, especially considering both the cowboy and country music's deeply Black

histories, but they only gain popular acceptance—or at least a lack of overt backlash—because of Billy Ray’s presence.

This commentary on country’s racist gatekeeping is particularly poignant in the context of other popular songs of the time, where white country artists feature black guest stars from other genres to widespread success. White country artists have been capitalizing on Black musical traditions for decades, most recently via something called “hick-hop,” which refers to a cross-over segment of country music that incorporates elements of rap and hip-hop in an attempt to make itself relevant to a broader audience (Cottom 2018). Florida Georgia Line’s 2012 single “Cruise,” featuring Missouri-born hip-hop singer Nelly, and Brad Paisley’s 2013 “Accidental Racist,” which features LL Cool J, are two recent songs that feature black artists as guests in the country genre. Tressie McMillan Cottom argues that these singles represent white country artists’ attempts to borrow cultural accessibility and legitimacy from hip-hop while maintaining the structural, racialized hierarchies of the country genre (Ibid.: 247). By utilizing musical sounds and conventions from a genre more popular with a wider range of audiences (hip-hop) but pairing those conventions with country styling, country artists appropriate Black musical culture for their own commercial ends. Bringing in a Black artist like Nelly legitimizes Florida Georgia Line’s use of hip-hop in “Cruise,” while keeping Nelly appropriately contained as a “featured” artist, a temporary visitor to the country genre who would never be allowed to stay.

Other country artists dispense with this entirely in favor of a more overt cultural minstrelsy, most infamously Trace Adkins in his 2005 hit “Honky Tonk Badonkadonk.”<sup>115</sup> While on the surface Adkins’ single looks like an expression and celebration of utopian

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<sup>115</sup> See “Trace Adkins – Honky Tonk Badonkadonk” in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song and watch the music video.



hybridity, its use of hip-hop musical codes and language (specifically “badonkadonk”) without any visible Black musicians instead reinforces country music’s hegemonic whiteness through its persistent suppression of its historical and constitutive Blackness (Morris 2011: 468). Sturgill Simpson, a country artist whose reputation is built on his self-proclaimed distancing from mainstream country, illustrates a more subtle manifestation of this same tendency.<sup>116</sup> Through utilizing the classical country figure of the “outlaw,” Simpson is able to maintain a claim to country authenticity while making extensive use of Black music. He still manages to cement whiteness as normative within country music, arguably “rework[ing] white masculinity through the figure of the outlaw” while “recuperat[ing] privileged values of recognition, respect, and creative license” through his use of soul and R&B idioms in his music (Hollowell and Miller 2019: 136). White men who utilize Black music seem to face none of the backlash within the country community that greets Black artists who perform music that sounds the same. As Hollowell and Miller so eloquently put it, “Simpson is able to make race mean what he wants it to mean within country music; Lil Nas X is not” (Ibid.: 135). Lil Nas X only gained a modicum of begrudging acceptance from the establishment and a place on the country chart when Billy Ray Cyrus was featured in his remixed song, while white artists need no such permission to make use of Black music in their own tracks.

Lil Nas X’s possesses all the markers of an authentic country artist—born and raised in the South, from a working-class family, a self-made success story—and his music contains country elements alongside trap ones, much like other popular crossovers. But because he sidestepped country gatekeepers and began his career by going viral, an entity and a song totally outside of country’s control, he was met with suspicion and overt racism. By

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<sup>116</sup> See “Sturgill Simpson – Call to Arms” in the YouTube playlist to listen to Simpson’s music and get a feel for his style.

embodying an alternative cowboy figure informed by Black history and aesthetics, Lil Nas X has staked a claim to the country genre, its history, and its context, reminding white conservative audiences that their version of country is a heavily constructed one. Since “Old Town Road,” Lil Nas X has turned away from country and leaned more heavily into trap, but he still regularly appears in public dressed in cowboy-themed outfits, like his famous hot pink cowboy attire from the 2020 Grammy Awards. Miraculously, as soon as he was no longer looking to climb the *Hot Country* chart, country fans didn’t have anything to say about his flamboyant cowboy outfits. The sanctity of genre restored, the threat removed, audiences settled down. Of course, Lil Nas X has continued to make waves in the broader popular music community—particularly ruffling conservative Christian feathers—in some of his more recent songs and music videos, like his 2021 single “Montero (Call Me By Your Name),” but this has less to do with his use of the cowboy archetype and more to do with his queerness, caricatures of religious iconography, and the moral panic his video inspired.<sup>117</sup>

## Conclusions

Throughout this chapter, I have examined popular musical embodiments of the cowboy from two different angles, tied together by their reliance on deeply meaningful and historically-informed performance choices. First, I discussed the white country artists who use their personal rodeo histories to give their cowboy personas an air of rodeo authenticity, accomplished through emphasizing specific cowboy fashion items as markers of country identity, as well as connecting their rodeo pasts to their present work ethic and willingness to

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<sup>117</sup> Lil Nas X’s queerness is certainly an important facet of his identity and plays a large part in how his more recent music has been received. However, because at the time of the release of “Old Town Road” Lil Nas X was not out of the closet, and the recent music videos in question do not invoke the cowboy archetype, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to discuss how his queerness intersects with his more recent music.

play rough. Kylie Frey’s muddy, scuffed-up boots are a stand-in for her personal story and tell beholders that she’s tough, while Chris LeDoux’s cowboy hat represents his web of relationships and deep connection to his country. Reba McEntire and Cody Johnson’s competitive rodeo histories have turned them into the success stories they are today, and they remain committed to the cowboy way of life because it defines who they are and who they want to be. Connections between rodeo, cowboy, country, and authenticity are tangled but firm in this subgenre of country, and fans of performers like Frey and Johnson are the same folks who attend local and national rodeos in droves each year, as evidenced by the fact that most of these performers’ shows take place at rodeos each year. Exploring this body of music also reveals the deep importance of fashion not just as a marker of personal identity but also as a connection between personal identity, group identity, and national mythos. Stetsons, Wranglers, cowboy boots, belt buckles—these things are insignificant as isolated utilitarian items, but combined with their frontier history and use in popular media, they have become symbols of a particular way of life. The cowboy figure, who wears all these things, represents the working-class work ethic, grit, and determination, and by embodying that figure through engagement with its aesthetic trappings, performers can gain a pinch of the legendary authenticity it carries.

Second, I turned to popular music performers in other genres who also make use of the visual markers of cowboy identity to reclaim, subvert, or engage with the cowboy figure in their own genres through performing variations on the conventional cowboy. Megan Thee Stallion, a Houston, Texas native who proudly proclaims her Southern roots and horseback-riding history, has never attempted to squeeze into the country arena, instead preferring to do her groundbreaking in her home genre of rap. Analyzing her performance at the Apple Music

Awards in 2020 alongside her relationship with the Compton Cowboys, musicians and groundbreakers in their own right, reveals that she, too, makes use of the aesthetic symbols of the American cowboy in unconventional ways. Her cowgirl persona is risqué, provocative, sexually empowered, and swerves between masculinity and femininity with ease. She makes the cowboy “sassy, bougie, and ratchet” even as her use of the icon infuses her own performance with a frontier authenticity that speaks to her own willingness to work hard and bear down to make things happen. Her exponential rise to fame and success shows us that this equation has worked for her, and she’s used her star power to elevate other Black cowboys like the Compton Cowboys on her way to the top.

In contrast, Lil Nas X was the target of a great deal of controversy and racism with the release of his single “Old Town Road.” Despite including many features of a traditional country song, “Old Town Road” was not allowed to stay within the generic boundaries set by country’s gatekeepers until Lil Nas X incorporated a white country artist into a remixed version of the song. The music video that resulted from that collaboration highlights the hypocrisy of the country music industry through its double-meaning dialogue and the over-the-top visuals, especially when considered in light of other successful country crossovers of the 2010s that feature Black artists from other genres. The way Lil Nas X and his song were treated reveal racism and the assumption of whiteness to be foundational to the country music industry’s generic boundaries, and through the way that reception changed with the addition of Billy Ray Cyrus. The music video for “Old Town Road” makes it very clear to audiences that the rapper is calling attention to those discrepancies. Lil Nas X’s continued choice to dress like a brightly-colored twenty-first-century cowboy in public shows the power of his own alternative embodiment of the figure, suggesting that he has gleaned a

different kind of cowboy authenticity through engaging performatively with the cowboy's aesthetic markers while simultaneously calling out the constructed, bland whiteness of country's cowboys.

Comparing these differing takes on the cowboy in contemporary popular music reveals both how country music remains invested in a very traditional model of this American icon and how other genres have pushed forward in rectifying historical erasures in popular culture, particularly of the Black West. At the 2016 Country Music Association Awards, the CMA celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary with an evening dedicated to the last one hundred years of the genre. To do this, they put together a lengthy music video entitled “Forever Country” that featured award-winning acts and songs from the last one hundred years.<sup>118</sup> Of all the artists who appear in the video, only two of them—Darius Rucker and Charley Pride—are Black, and they are only briefly on screen. This was also the year that Beyoncé and The Chicks performed “Daddy Lessons” at the awards ceremony, an event also met with racist backlash.<sup>119</sup> For an event meant to celebrate country's long history as a genre, the video and the awards event made it clear that for audiences and industry professionals in 2016 country was an exclusively white genre, despite Black performers' foundational role in creating it. Megan Thee Stallion's and Lil Nas X's contrasting foregrounding of contemporary Black iterations of the cowboy figure has the effect of highlighting Black and other POC cowboys' historical erasure as well as claiming space for future performers.

Both ways of performing cowboy identity are important for understanding its complexity in the twenty-first century, and the ways that the cowboy myth is always under

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<sup>118</sup> See “Artists Of Then, Now, & Forever” in the YouTube playlist to listen to the song and watch the music video.

<sup>119</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this event, see Chapter Three.

construction, being deployed and modified and held up by different people in different contexts every day in pursuit of different goals. For some, the cowboy represents a traditional white America that has been lost to urbanization and diversification. For others, it represents a chance to reclaim a space in history and way to imagine alternate futures. Understanding these differences in conceptualization is vital for analyzing the ways that different communities use and engage with broader concepts and ideologies about American life, history, and identity, and in this chapter I have aimed to point out the importance of visual culture and aesthetics in unraveling these tangled threads of identification. Just as rodeo producers, competitors, and audiences perform their cowboy identities through visual markers, musical soundscapes, and fashion choices, so too do popular musicians. The symbol of the cowboy, with all its sonic and visual trappings, has not lost its cultural cachet in the twenty-first century, and the frontier has managed to retain an almost mythological appeal as a canvas for manifesting that identity in popular culture.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

*cw: discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic*

One of the most important contributions this dissertation makes to the broader body of literature on rodeo is a historical overview of the musical changes undergone throughout the twentieth century, tying genre and sport together through a combined look at larger trends and influences in both. Chapter Two thus follows the development of rodeo from Wild West show to professional sporting event, tracing the key themes of authenticity, nostalgia, and the American frontier from the late nineteenth century into 2021. Alongside this overview I have analyzed the musical components of rodeo and how they have changed in the last century, noting particularly how martial soundscapes, brass bands, and American roots music have accompanied rodeo's events from its earliest days as a spectacle even as they have taken different forms across the years. Exploring these two interrelated trajectories of representation and performance, I have further argued that both musical cues and the figure of the cowboy as an American folkloric icon have been deployed by rodeo competitors, producers, and audiences alike to reinforce a particular narrative of the American frontier that is white-dominated and patriotism-forward. From the framing device of the national anthem to Gene Autry's shaping of rodeo's rules and regulations to Merle Haggard's nostalgic popularity among rodeo audiences, the music of rodeo has always served a very specific set of purposes. By engaging with a bucolic rural past, making statements of authenticity and ownership rooted in displays of patriotism, and marginalizing non-white musical genres, professional rodeo's organizers and audiences have created a space where a white frontier past is musically highlighted and held up as the pinnacle of authentic American identity.

The third chapter of this dissertation builds on the idea established in the previous chapter that country music, while far from the only musical genre found at rodeos, is the

genre most popularly associated with rodeo. Through a comparison of existing literature on identity in both rodeo and country, I argue that whiteness has become integral to the project of rodeo because of the way the sport's roots and country's history combine to craft a narrative of struggle, hard work, and patriotism that are deeply connected to the working-class white experience in rural and semi-rural America. While cowboys in media and rodeo both stereotypically fight to dominate the proverbial wildness of the American frontier, country musicians croon about the struggles of poverty, rurality, and an industrializing and diversifying workforce. My work takes this connection further through exploring both country and rodeo's deep connections to the military as the core reason for their heavy themes of patriotism, love of country, and willingness to transfer the working-class or frontier struggle to the theater of war. I compare country and rodeo's history of engagement with the military, particularly noteworthy from the 1980s through to the present day. Similarly, country music's response in the wake of 9/11 and its increasingly right-leaning associations with unquestioning and jingoistic patriotism in popular media only deepens those connections. I further argue that rodeo—through the establishment of themed rounds, sponsorships and corporate partnerships that benefit veterans and active duty soldiers like the Wrangler National Patriot Project, and an international military rodeo circuit—symbolically draws connections between soldier, cowboy, and citizen throughout its history, connections that are understood and internalized by competitors, audiences, and producers alike.

My fourth chapter, which contains ethnographic analysis of the bulk of the fieldwork I accomplished before and during the pandemic, utilizes the 2020 National Finals Rodeo in Arlington, Texas to provide a site-specific example of how all these issues of music, sport, patriotism, and whiteness intersect in a contemporary professional rodeo under the umbrella



of authentic American identity. Each rodeo performance weaves together military soundscapes, folk and country tunes, and the intense sounds of metal and hard rock music to create a cohesive sonic narrative of patriotic Americana, violence, and an underlying whiteness that both comforts rodeo's audiences and challenges them to be active participants in the spectacle playing out before them. Repeated calls to action are paired with musical swells and evocative imagery of soldiers at war, fallen cowboys, and illuminated crosses, and announcers pray to the Christian god for competitors' safety and the military's success while encouraging audiences to stand up for what's "right" at home in their own lives. The combined spectacle of music, text, and visuals encourages audiences to also see themselves reflected in the narratives put forward in the arena each night, and the particular identities embodied by the cowboys and cowgirls that compete are thus disseminated and spread to a wide range of audiences who carry those messages of victory, domination, and grit with them into the world the next day.

Anthropologists, sociologists, and historians alike have long argued that American identity as it is refracted in the cowboy has been negotiated, transformed, and disseminated via media like dime novels, TV shows, and Western films, and music scholars have conversely argued that country music's debt to the singing cowboy represents similar negotiations of American identity. My work builds on both of these bodies of literature, but also argues that the sport of rodeo and the music that surrounds, imbues, and comes from it has played an equally important role in shaping how the cowboy figure has circulated both locally and abroad in the last century and a half. My final chapter extends these ideas further, arguing that iterations of the cowboy that appear in other genres of popular music actively draw on the tropes and identity markers generated by rodeo, reclaiming and nuancing them in

myriad ways that reflect increasing attention to and pushback against whitewashed past and present of the American West. From Megan Thee Stallion's incorporation of a ratchet cowboy aesthetic into her videos, lyrics, and rapper persona to the Compton Cowboys' musical and iconographic reclamation of the West as undeniably Black, hip-hop, and often urban, contemporary performers and consumers in popular genres have demonstrated that nothing about the cowboy is or has ever been entirely white. Through their interpretive use of cowboy aesthetic markers, from boots to hats to belt buckles to fringe, they posit a different kind of country, cowboy authenticity that takes as its basis an American identity where unquestioning patriotism matters less than grit, determination, and hustle.

### **Directions for Future Research**

In many ways, the concessions made in this dissertation to the COVID-19 pandemic have allowed me to lay the groundwork for a number of future research projects that use this one as their basis. Through exploring rodeo's musical history in the United States, I have drawn connections between the definition of American identity, the cowboy figure as an icon of the Old West, and the context of rodeo as a sport and a national pastime where myths are recreated and reembodyed. Having come to a better understanding of the way that the cowboy icon is deployed, activated, and negotiated in these sporting and musical arenas has raised many questions about not just the national and local uses of the cowboy in the United States, but also about its use abroad. Further, while the bulk of this dissertation relied on archival sources, virtual fieldwork, and culturally-situated analysis of albums, music videos, and marketing strategies, there is great opportunity in this topic for face-to-face ethnographic work relating to all the inflections suggested above. In this section, I will provide some more

detail about the areas for future expansion of this research that I find most exciting and potentially fruitful.

Domestically, the contextual, historical, and media-focused data provided by this dissertation will lend itself well to support ethnographic studies of rodeo circuits in the United States. One vein of inquiry for studies building on this one comes from my original research plan, which involved spending a year following the professional PRCA rodeo circuit around the United States and conducting in-person fieldwork and ethnographic interviews with contestants, producers, staff, and audiences at different sites across the country. While the 2020 National Finals Rodeo and several other rodeos during the COVID-19 season broadcast their main events virtually, allowing me to complete the virtual fieldwork I did, there is much more to be gleaned about the musical events associated with various rodeos that take place outside the actual competitive event itself. For example, one of my historical field sites, Cheyenne Frontier Days, has several frontier-themed musical pageants each year, as well as a whole lineup of performances that take place in bars, tents, and smaller arenas during the week-long rodeo. The National Finals Rodeo, whose event soundscapes I discussed in Chapter Four of this dissertation, is also host to many artists' residencies in Vegas theaters each December, and many bands play at the Cowboy Christmas expo, in Vegas bars where watch parties take place, and at afterparties across the city. These musical contexts are important to the rodeo experience for attendees, and an ethnographic study that focuses on fan identity as it relates to the mythology of the American West and the working cowboy would necessitate fieldwork done at these smaller performances that take place within the larger event.

Alternatively, other domestic projects might focus on ethnographic studies more deeply rooted in specific places. By centering local amateur rodeos, or even a particular region of the rodeo circuit, future expansions of this project might examine localized inflections of American cowboy identity. Chapter Five of this dissertation briefly discussed Texas and Louisiana's culture of zydeco and hip-hop trail rides, and those events are one good example of ways that rodeo and other equestrian sports and events vary in their musical offerings in different geographic locations throughout the United States. Local, non-professional rodeos look different in Santa Barbara, California than they do in rural Wisconsin, and musical programming—and how that programming reflects audience and competitor demographics—is an important part of why that is true. Specific, local studies of rodeo in various parts of the country might also take a similar approach to this dissertation, mixing ethnographic work with more site-oriented histories and deep dives into local archives to provide a fuller picture of rodeo in the United States, as well as drawing connections between amateur, college, or even high school rodeos and the professional circuit in interesting ways.

Future developments in this project might also involve international research into the many complex ways that rodeo culture circulates outside the United States. I gestured toward this in several chapters of this dissertation, where I discussed Buffalo Bill's international tours, the U.S. military's international rodeo circuit, and the recent influx of competitors on the U.S. circuit from such distant locations as Australia, Brazil, and France. There are some excellent recent articles and books discussing international rodeo in these places (i.e., Davis 2005, Kelm 2012, Laegrid 2014, Snyder 2011), but beyond this there is little work on rodeo elsewhere in the world, with none of it discussing intersections with music or sound. As this

dissertation has shown, music is a key part of how rodeo's articulations of the cowboy figure and American identity circulate within the United States, and a future expansion of this project that explores international rodeo would have the opportunity to be inflected by the increasing amount of literature on the global circulation of other American symbols and musics, country included (i.e., Abramson 2002, Dent 2009, Jirattikorn 2006, Martin 2015). There is also great opportunity specifically for historical and ethnographic English-language work on the international military rodeo circuit; it is currently active in many European countries in particular, but there is little to no writing on it and no centralized website with any details available in the United States.

Finally, future expansions of this project might draw on current research trends in ethology, biology, media studies, zoomusicology, and other adjacent fields to explore the interspecies musical relationships formed in rodeo. As an event where sound is of high importance to human participants, rodeo also represents a scholarly arena where the effects of music and sound on nonhuman bodies might be studied. Opportunities for interdisciplinary and collaborative projects abound here, as do many ethical considerations of consent, understanding, and the line between music, sound, and speech.<sup>120</sup> Building on work that examines the material impacts of noise on human and non-human bodies, the relationships and assemblages formed between living and non-living actors and agents in mediatized settings, and the differing ways audiences are encouraged to identify with or villainize certain actors through musical and sonic cues, I suggest that rodeo contains a vast network of interspecies relationships that would benefit from both qualitative and quantitative study. This kind of research requires a somewhat different set of skills and

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<sup>120</sup> For detailed and lengthy discussions of ethical and practical considerations in this kind of research, see the masters' theses of both myself and my colleague Alexander Karvelas (Karvelas 2019, Vanderlinden 2019).

equipment than conventional ethnographic work, particularly the kind of research coming from fields like cognitive science and Animal-Computer Interaction (Mancini 2011 and 2017), and with interspecies topics, having quantitative data alongside qualitative observations allows for a wide range of creative and rigorous projects to take place.

In laying out these future routes for research, I hope to have illustrated why work like this dissertation is important. At the time of this writing, rodeo's musical history has not been documented elsewhere, and any ethnographic studies of music and rodeo—my originally intended project included—can benefit from having a document that lays out historical trends from which to begin building their own historical and contemporary work. Of course, this document is not comprehensive. COVID-19 didn't just shut down live events; archives and libraries were operating at reduced capacity for the bulk of this dissertation writing as well, though many institutions graciously provided me with digitized copies of the things I needed. By moving from archival sources to interviews to (virtual fieldwork) to media analysis and back again, I hope this dissertation demonstrates in these pages not only the value of interdisciplinary work but also the larger historical processes by which the cowboy and the rodeo have cemented their places as icons of American identity. Any future work that emerges from my research will build on, develop, and nuance these ideas.



**Figure 13:** The author, age 12, making a new friend at a horse show in Burbank, California while Carrie Underwood played on the radio. Photo taken and used by permission of the author's grandmother, Kathy Vanderlinden (2007).

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## Appendix A

### Track listing from the 1995 album *Wild West Music of Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band*, performed by the Americus Brass Band

1. The Star Spangled Banner (National Anthem, USA) – arr. Edward Beyer
2. See the Conquering Hero Comes (from Judas Maccabaeus, HWV 63) – George Frederick Handel, arr. Froehlich
3. Introduction of the Congress of rough Riders of the World (Spoken Word) – William “Buffalo Bill” Cody
4. Gilmore’s Triumphal March – Thomas Preston Brooke
5. Color Guard March – Thomas H. Rollinson
6. Offenbachiana: Selections from Offenbach’s Operas (*Bluebeard, La Perichole, La Belle Helene, Genevieve de Brabant, La Jolie Parfumeuse, La Grande Duchesse*, and *Orpheus*) – E. Boettger
7. Equestrian March (Buffalo Bill March) for band – William Paris Chambers
8. Marche Russe -- arr. Louis Ganne
9. Cavalcade (Sweeney’s Cavalcade) – William Paris Chambers
10. Albion: Grand Fantasia on Scotch, Irish and English Airs (*Blue Bells of Scotland, Garry Owen, Charlie Is My Darling, Annie Laurie, British Grenadiers, Last Rose of Summer, Minstrel Boy, Home Sweet Home, Tulloghorum*, and *God Save the Queen*)– Charles Baetens, arr. M.E. Meyrelles
11. The Two Bills’ March and Two Step – William Sweeney
12. Buffalo Bill’s Farewell March and Two Step – William Sweeney
13. Wyoming Days, intermezzo for band – Karl L. King
14. On the Warpath, Indian War Dance, intermezzo for band – Karl L. King
15. Grass Dance (Crow Tribe version) – Gordon Plain Bull, Samuel Plain Feather, and Phyllis Plain Bull
16. The Passing of the Red Man, for band – Karl L. King
17. Galliant Zouaves March – Karl L. King
18. Tenting On the Old Campground – Walter Kittredge

## Appendix B

### Lyrics to “Who’s Gene Autry?” from Johnny Cash’s 1978 album *I Would Like to See You Again*.

Whoopi tai ai oh, rockin’ to and fro  
Back in the saddle again

My little boy said, “Daddy, who’s Gene  
Autry?”

His old movie was comin’ on TV  
And I said, “Let me tell you about him,  
son”

And I took him upon my knee

“Why, when I was a little boy about your  
size

And just about every Saturday night  
When I could scrape up a dime for the  
movies

And when my Daddy said alright”

“I’d be right downtown at the picture show  
Like everybody else that could  
To see a handsome man  
On a big fine stallion goin’ about, doin’  
good”

Singin’, “Whoopi tai ai oh, rockin’ to and  
fro

Put him back in the saddle again

Whoopi tai ai yeh, let him go on his way  
Back in the saddle again”

“Well he could ride his horse and play his  
guitar

And sing all at the same time

And I was ridin’ right along there beside  
him

On that broomstick pony of mine”

“And you know his pistol never ran out of  
bullets

When the bad guys had to be stopped  
And somehow his bullets never drew any  
blood

But the bad guys dropped when he shot”

“Yeah, old Gene was an image of justice  
And goodness and purity

And in the eyes of a poor, little country  
boy

He made the world look better to me”

Singin’, “Whoopi tai ai oh, rockin’ to and  
fro

Put him back in the saddle again

Whoopi tai ai yeh, let him go on his way  
Back in the saddle again”

“And you know the way

He rescued the rancher’s daughter

He’d send a thrill right up the aisle

And the endin’ would always send us  
home

With a good victorious smile”

“Now you ask me, ‘Who’s Gene Autry?’

Well, son, go ahead and watch the show

And then ride off into the sunset with him

Like I did forty years ago”

Singin’, “Whoopi tai ai oh, rockin’ to and  
fro

Put him back in the saddle again

Whoopi tai ai yeh, let him go on his way  
Back in the saddle again



## Appendix C

### Lyrics to “Ragged Old Flag,” written and performed by Johnny Cash (1974)

I walked through a county courthouse square,  
On a park bench an old man was sitting there.  
I said, your old courthouse is kinda run down.  
He said, naw, it'll do for our little town.  
I said, your old flagpole has leaned a little bit,  
And that's a ragged old flag you got hanging on it.

He said, have a seat, and I sat down.  
Is this the first time you've been to our little town?  
I said, I think it is.  
He said, I don't like to brag,  
But we're kinda proud of that ragged old flag.

You see, we got a little hole in that flag there when  
Washington took it across the Delaware.  
And it got powder-burned the night Francis Scott Key  
Sat watching it writing “say can you see.”  
And it got a bad rip in New Orleans  
With Packingham and Jackson tuggin' at its seams.

And it almost fell at the Alamo,  
Beside the Texas flag, but she waved on through.  
She got cut with a sword at Chancellorsville,  
And she got cut again at Shiloh Hill.  
There was Robert E. Lee, Beauregard, and Bragg,

And the south wind blew hard on that ragged old flag.

On Flanders field in World War One  
She got a big hole from a Bertha gun.  
She turned blood red in World War Two,  
She hung limp and low a time or two.  
She was in Korea and Vietnam,  
She went where she was sent by Uncle Sam.

She waved from our ships upon the briny foam,  
And now they've about quit waving her back here at home.  
In her own good land here she's been abused,  
She's been burned, dishonored, denied,  
and refused.

And the government for which she stands  
Is scandalized throughout the land.  
And she's getting threadbare and wearing thin,  
But she's in good shape for the shape she's in.  
'Cause she's been through the fire before,  
And I believe she can take a whole lot more.

So we raise her up every morning,  
We take her down every night.  
We don't let her touch the ground and we fold her up right.  
On second thought, I do like to brag,  
'Cause I'm mighty proud of that ragged old flag.