



Cowboys and Indians: Putting the Indian into Cowboy Music

Indians have a particular affinity for country music. This is not surprising in view of their shared isolation with other country folk in North America. Early in the twentieth century, country music could be tuned in on radio late at night, even in the Canadian North. The simple English words of the country songs could be understood readily by Algonquian and Athabaskan speakers, and the tunes could be played on guitars and fiddles, instruments that can be obtained and maintained in the North.

Farther south on the plains, the Native languages were different, e.g. Siouan, Shoshonean, but still country was the music of everyday people—Native and non-native. When the everyday people were cowboys their songs were called country western. Much of the country western music heard on the air waves had its roots in the folksongs sung by the cowboys of the mid-nineteenth century. As they drove cattle north from Texas, they sang about life on the range.

Cowboy knowledge of plains life and horsemanship is usually attributed to the Mexicans. Indians too acquired horses and knowledge of horses from the Spanish and by the 1770s horses were an integral part of their life. They became skilled horsemen and outfitted their horses elaborately, often to match their riders. Horses became essential to surrounding and killing herd animals, especially the bison. Like the cowboys, Indians sang songs to, and about their horses.

It's my belief that Native Americans, as well as the Mexicans, must have contributed cultural knowledge of plains life to the cowboy. Anthropologist, John Bennett points out the similarity of the rancher and the Indian as follows:

...."some of the values of the Indian were shared with those of the rancher. Masculinity, taciturnity, individualism—these are all values which find an echo in the old Plains Cree social organization. The Indians were aware of their similarity and so found it possible to identify with the ranching and riding culture...." (Bennett 1969:114).

The songs of the cowboy were part of this riding culture, that is, the songs about horses, sagebrush and open space, with some yodelling added. Is it possible that hunting songs sung by the Indians contributed new sounds and even songs which were adapted into the cowboy repertoire?

Unfortunately, these questions are rarely asked, because the movie industry has led us to believe that cowboys and Indians met only at the opposite ends of Colts and Winchesters. It is just as likely that there were exchanges of all kinds: was corral construction influenced by the Indian-

designed surrounds built to contain the bison? Did cowboys learn horsemanship from the Indians as well as the Mexicans? If cowboys copied the Indians in putting moisture conducting fringes on their clothing, perhaps they learned other aspects of plains life and culture, perhaps even songs.

It is difficult to prove such intangible exchanges between Native and non-native—yet I suspect it happened. Why else would the American personality, most of whom have European ancestors, be so different from the European? Different natural environments may be a partial explanation for the divergence, yet it seems to me that the first dwellers were, and continue to be, a significant influence on plains American behaviour.

Although it may be impossible to sort out what is cowboy and what is Indian in country music, but we can begin to acknowledge the Indian contributions. Music scholar, Bill C. Malone, lists all but Indians as significant in the development of country music:

"In the Southwest there was an abundance of musical influences from which the country musician could borrow; the Mexicans in south Texas, jazz and Cajun music from Louisiana, southern traditional and gospel music, the cowboys, popular music, and the Negroes" (1968:161).

But on the vast dry plains it was Indians who shared the quiet setting where wind was, and remains the only ambient sound. It's not surprising that the inhabitants of this environment tend to silence. Certainly, Indians are characterised in non-native folklore as silent and laconic in speech. Cowboys too, were portrayed as men of few words. I have observed that, even now, rural westerners are quieter, less verbose than easterners and Europeans. Before settlement, the silence of the great plains was broken abruptly by wolf howls, or the rumble of a passing bison herd. With imagination we might compare this sound environment to the long human silences which were broken only by sudden rages, resolved more often with physical violence than with words. Of course I am writing here of the male personality and the cultures of the plains which were generally male-dominated. We know that women sang—lullabies, songs for chopping, carrying water etc. but the songs which have been recorded are men's songs: the war, sacred, dance and social songs of the Indians and the well-known songs of the cowboys.

An obvious adaptation of Indian sounds into cowboy music is the high pitched, warbling whoop or cry. Writing about the songs "Rye whiskey", musicologist, Alan Lomax says, "The drunken refrain, tacked on as the tail end of the tune,

should sound like a combination of an Indian war-whoop, a panther scream, and a drunk just going into the e.t.d.'s" (1947:199). Another sound in common was the whistle. Indians whistled extensively for signalling to each other and to their horses. They made whistles from bones and wood and decorated them for ceremonial purposes. Cowboys too are known for their whistling: think of the theme tune for "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" film. Did cowboys and Indians exchange whistling sounds?

As we expect of Cowboy and Indian songs passed on orally, there was much repetition of both melodic and word phrases. Moreover, cowboys, like Indians sang about the natural world around them. Here are two examples from folksong collectors; note the words "whooping" and "Injuns".

v2

"It's whooping and yelling and driving them dogies,

O, how I wish you would go on:

It's whooping and punching and go on, little dogies,

For you know Wyoming will be your new home".

v6

"Your mother she was raised way down in Texas,

Where the jimson weed and sand-burrs grow;
New we'll fill you up on prickly pear and cholla

Till you're ready for the trail to Idaho."

v7

"Oh, you'll be soup for Uncle Sam's Injuns;

It's beef, heap beef, "I hear them cry.

It along, it along, git along, little dogies,

You're going to be beef steers by and bye".

"Git along Little Dogies" Folksongs John and Alan Lomax, p.205

Indian and cowboy songs also share fatalism about life and death. The songs do not protest, they have an introverted and accepting quality. The following well-known song is the final pathetic cry of a dying cowboy:

O bury me not on the lone prairie
These words came low and mournfully
From the pallid lips of a youth who lay
On his dying bed at the close of day

v4

O bury me not on the lone prairie
Where the wild coyote will howl o'er me
In a narrow grave just six by three
O bury me not on the lone prairie

v7

O bury me not on the lone prairie
Where the buffalo paws over the prairie sea,

Where the buzzard sails and the wind goes
free
O bury me not on the lone prairie
v9
Yes, we buried him there on the lone prairie,
Where the owl all night hoots mournfully,
And the blizzard beats and the wind blows
free
O'er his lonely grave in the lone prairie.'

Compare the two previous songs to a Pawnee song which has actual "whooping" sounds on the vocables (sung syllables) and, like many country songs, mentions wide blue sky and loneliness.

He-e-e-e-e-e
Yo-e-yo ha
e yu... e ye... e yo
O great expanse of the blue sky
See me roaming here
E ro he-e-e-e-e
Again on the warpath, lonely
I trust in you, protect me
He-e-e-e-e-e-e yo!

"Skiriki" (Coyote Warrior Song)

The Indians' book, Natalie Curtis, 1987:129-30. New York: Bonanza Books

The rhythms of Indian music evoke the rhythms of the animals. This is evident throughout my collection of subarctic Cree hunting songs, but here's an example from the plains. Dakota singer, Mike Hotain, sang the horse song, *Painted Light*, which he says would bring the horse running to him and his Dad.

In like manner, the rhythms of cowboy songs reflected the rhythms of the animals with which they worked. Lomax says that..."the stirring beat of the most common tune (The Old Chisholm Trail) fits the rapid pace of a galloping horse in pursuit of a steer which has broken from the herd." (1947:193) He quotes an old woman who sang "Git along, Little Dogies" for him: "To me," she said, "that's the loveliest of all cowboy songs. Its rhythm comes from the movement of a horse. It's not the boisterous hell-for-leather, wild gallop of "Old Chisholm Trail", nor the slow, easy canter of "Goodbye, Old Paint" The dogies get nervous in crowds. You mustn't frighten 'em. Lope around them quietly in the darkness as you sing to them about their new home in Wyoming." (1947:194)

American life, particularly in the West, is characterised by informality. There is a tendency, to this day, to do what works, to not fuss about *how* it is accomplished. Songs for both cowboys and Indians were tools for survival. Songs calmed the animals and made men strong. Songs could be carried in the head and everyone could sing; there was no right or wrong performance, although some singers were acknowledged as better than others. Even as I write Natives continue to enjoy country

music because "there's no formality, no dress code, and it's relaxing" (Personal Communication, 1982)

I hope that his brief essay, which deals only with western-influenced country music, may serve to inspire further research into the shared cultural history of Natives and non-natives. Around 1900 the cowboy and Indian era ended abruptly. Cowboys, stopped by the fences of the settlers, could no longer trail-drive; while the Indians, defeated in the Indian wars of the 1890's, were secured on reservations. Cowboys and Indians, sharing common time and space, suffered the same fate from the encroaching settlers. Indian songs and languages are no longer in common usage on the northern plains but I like to think that a faint echo of their sounds may live on in country songs.

Lynn Whidden is a former editor of the Bulletin. She teaches Native Studies at Brandon University.

The Saskatoon Skier's Lament

By "The Prairie Higglers" (Hugh Hendry, Kathie Rae, Bill Serjeant) in tribute to Saskatoon's own artificial mountain.

To the tune of "On Top of Old Smokey".

On top of Mount Blackstrap
All covered in ice,
I fractured my femur
Which was not very nice.

To the T-Bar they led me,
Sayin', "You'll not come to harm,"
But the first jerk it gave me
Dislocated my arm.

Down the hill I went tumbling
In a flurry of snow,
But six skiers slid o'er me,
I was going too slow.

They made a real mess of
My designer ski clothes,
They've blacked both my eyes
And they've broken my nose.

On a stretcher they placed me
All screaming with pain,
I'm sick of Mount Blackstrap,
Won't go there again!