

Sagebrush Serenade or Farewell to Paradise?
Western Myth and Popular Music Lyrics of
Twentieth Century America

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During the twentieth century, music has constituted an enormous part of American popular culture, and has very often reflected and embraced the popular mythology of the West. After the cultural upheavals of the 1960s, many rock musicians continued to embrace some aspects of Western myths yet quite soon began reflecting disillusionment with many distorted views of the past in much of their lyrics. In order to fully understand the somewhat ambiguous nature of the treatment and use of images of the West in rock lyrics, one must first examine how American popular music until the late sixties often perpetuated misconceptions of the American West. More specifically, one must ask, how did the changing nature of various rock music lyrics during the last decades of the twentieth century reflect changes in our society and how we view Western myth? A careful study of changing musical and songwriting styles reveal that although some musicians continued to embrace parts of Western myths, many increasingly challenged long-held traditional ideas and started presenting new, far less optimistic interpretations of the American West and Western history.

Any discussion of the treatment of Western mythic themes in rock music first requires a brief overview of the history of popular American music since the early twentieth century. Not long after Frederick Jackson Turner announced the closing of the frontier, even before Owen Wister wrote his prototypical western novel, *The Virginian*, many Americans were already embracing the mythic West through popular western folk ballads and cowboy songs. While songs such as “I Ride an Old Paint,” or “Home, Home on the Range” celebrated freedom and adventure in the West, other ballads like “The Dying Cowboy,” and “My Love is a Rider” depicted the rough, individualistic, and often tragic existence of the cowboy.¹ Other popular ballads romanticized the violence of the West such as “Jesse James,” and “Billy the Kid.”

¹ Alan Lomax, *The Folk Songs of North America* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1960), 383-384

With the growth of radio and music recording as well as nostalgia for the passing frontier, the celebration of the mythic West became more and more a part of mainstream popular music. In her article related to the commercialization of western myth, Ann Butler shows the parallel rise of the rodeo as a popular sport along with the growing appeal of western “singing cowboys” such as Gene Autry, the Sons of the Pioneers, and Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys.² In songs like “Tumbling Tumbleweeds,” western-clad musicians characterized the cowboy’s life as romantic, independent, and free. Wildly popular, these tunes helped Americans base their identity in the mythic West.

Broadway’s adoption of cowboy and pioneer themes during the thirties and forties greatly increased the popularity of Western myth in mainstream popular music. Beth Levy describes this development in her book that focuses on Western mythology in American music and theatre. Earlier composers led the way. Arthur Farwell, Charles Wakefield Cadman, and many others strived to create a distinctly American music, and turned to Western mythic images to do so. Musical productions such as *Oklahoma*, *Annie*, *Get Your Gun*, and Aaron Copland’s *Billy the Kid* gained great praise and basically paralleled America’s love affair with the western genre.³ Turnerian themes of brave white men conquering and taming a savage, wild and largely empty frontier to bring “civilization” westward thrilled Americans and gave them a sense of identity.⁴

During the mid-fifties and early sixties, a new form of music emerged, one which blended country and western with rhythm and blues, and celebrated youthful rebelliousness and young love more than themes of the West. In the early years of its development, rock and roll

² Ann M. Butler, “Selling the Popular Myth,” in *Major Problems in the History of the American West*, eds. Clyde A. Milner, Ann M. Butler, and David Rich Lewis, second edition (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 546.

³ Beth E. Levy, *Frontier Figures: American Music and the Mythology of the American West* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 169,205.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 192-195.

rarely utilized western myth, yet before long, various rock musicians began writing songs that celebrated ideas of the West being a beautiful land of opportunity where people lived the good life. In 1962, the Beach Boys recorded a song called “Surfin’ Safari,” singing about a wild and free youthful lifestyle in southern California, surfing and playing under the sun. Soon thereafter, they released other similar songs such as “Surfer Girl,” “California Girls,” and “Surfin’ U.S.A.,” songs that sounded somewhat hedonistic for the time and clearly touted the myth of California being a beautiful land of paradise, freedom, and plenty.⁵ In popular culture, California soon epitomized the mythic Western theme of abundance, happiness, and prosperity – a veritable Garden of Eden. However, during the mid- to late sixties, rock music styles and lyrics began drastically changing. How young Americans identified with Western symbolism also changed.

Changes in rock musical styles and songwriting reflected the culture of protest emerging during the sixties. Resistance to U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Rights Movement, the American Indian Movement, and a growing counterculture all affected changes in rock lyrics. As Richard Aquila has pointed out, many songs still reflected traditional mythic Western symbols yet along with these came “newer songs that either challenged the mythic West or used traditional western images in new ways to critique American society and culture.”⁶ While the Mamas and Papas still celebrated the west coast as the land of paradise and opportunity in their song, “California Dreaming,” many others began showing disillusionment with this idea. Albert Hammond’s 1972 hit, “It Never Rains in Southern California,” expressing one young man’s continuous disappointments, concludes that life was not so wonderful in the Golden State.

⁵ Richard Aquila, ed., *Wanted, Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 197-198.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 199.

Extremely significant changes in the ways rock musicians used western themes occurred in the late sixties as the popularity of folk rock, the hybrid voice of social protest, influenced a new generation of singer-songwriters concerned with writing more serious, introspective, and contemplative works that often questioned myths or used them to ascribe other meanings to the past and more present West. Influenced by musical artists such as Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, and Joan Baez, many of these performers both embraced and questioned much of the western myth in their new music, and developed a whole new rock genre now referred to as “country rock.” In 1968, the prototypical country rock album by the Byrds, “Sweetheart of the Rodeo,” paved the way for other musicians throughout the next decade to both embrace aspects of western myth and to challenge and question them. While most of the album exuded a heavy traditional feeling both instrumentally and lyrically celebrating folk and cowboy mythic images, such as their renditions of Woody Guthrie’s “Pretty Boy Floyd” or Gene Autry’s “Blue Canadian Rockies,” it also hinted at disenchantment with the western myth of progress., as in “One Hundred Years from Now,” wherein the singer questions the whole idea of guaranteed progress.⁷

This transformations of the sixties helped set off a whole new genre of country-rock music groups who would both clasp some popular western myths while also challenging many of them. Enter stage west: the Flying Burrito Brothers, the Eagles, Poco, New Riders of the Purple Sage, America, and many more. Many of these newer rock groups embraced western mythic symbolism while simultaneously challenging much of it. Alienated and disillusioned by the failures and tragedies of the sixties and early seventies, many Americans still saw the West as the perfect place to come home to – if only in their minds. The Flying Burrito Brothers, an eclectic country rock band formed by former Byrds members Gram Parsons and Chris Hillman, used such ideas in much of their music, as in their song, “Colorado.” “Hey Colorado is it too late to

⁷ The Byrds, “Sweetheart of the Rodeo,” 1968.

change my mind / I've done some thinking and I'm trying hard to find / The way to come back home."⁸

After the tumultuous sixties, which most historians concur stretched into the first years of the seventies, many singer-songwriters in rock increasingly used western themes to call attention to social and environmental problems. In 1972, a music group calling themselves America produced their first record, featuring a picture of them on the front cover against a backdrop of images of Indians. In their hit song, "A Horse with No Name," they sing about escaping to the freedom of the desert: "In the desert you can remember your name, . ." but then they go on to lament man's alienation from the environment, singing of an empty river bed: "the story it told of a river that flowed made me sad to think it was dead, . . . Under the cities lies a heart made of ground but the humans will give no love."⁹

Other rock bands such as Poco and New Riders of the Purple Sage also extensively used images of the West to bash myths of the West, pointing to the loss of individualism, overdevelopment and environmental degradation. Poco's 1974 song, "Western Waterloo" provides a good example of this, as it bemoans the desecration of the West, largely by the hands of the government: "He's come to change all the wilderness / Change the course of the rivers too/ He's not about to stop for any rest / But somebody, please say we're through."¹⁰ The psychedelic country group from San Francisco, New Riders of the Purple Sage, used Western imagery in lamenting the destruction of the land and man's alienation from the wilderness in his conquering of the West in songs such as "Last Lonely Eagle," and "Cement, Clay and Glass." In the former song, the singers mourn environmental havoc wrought by ideas of progress: "Shed a

⁸ The Flying Burrito Brothers, *The Flying Burrito Brothers*, 1971.

⁹ America, "A Horse With No Name," *America*, 1972.

¹⁰ Poco, "Western Waterloo," *Cantamos*, 1974.

tear for the fate / of the last lonely eagle / for you know that he never will land.”¹¹ Other even more popular rockers quickly embraced these themes using westward expansion as a framework through which to criticize American society and comment on a confusing heritage.

The Eagles, certainly the most well-known rock group of the 1970s to use western images to challenge popular myths of the West, struck a deep chord with many Americans with their smooth country-tinged harmonies and laid back southwest image. One of the very basic appeals they garnered from many fans lay not only with their musical style but their overall western image. They could include banjo and pedal steel guitar in some of their arrangements without appearing as hillbillies. As Olivia Mather suggested in a recent article about the group, Americans’ love affair with western icons, especially the cowboy, provided more receptivity to the country rock bands like the Eagles than bands coming from the South who were more often linked to the racial problems of that region. “Cowboys enjoyed widespread popularity and cultural legibility, . . . country rock musicians could play country music and present themselves visually as westerners . . . tapping into cultural icons accepted almost universally by the baby-boom generation.”¹² As Mather points out, much of their audience grew up during the heyday of western movies, television shows, and western commercialism in general, making the merge of counterculture into mainstream culture possible.¹³

The Eagles’ second album, *Desperado*, a concept record featuring songs about western outlaws such as the Dalton Gang, both celebrates and challenges western myth. While songs such as “Saturday Night” or “Twenty One” evoke a special, fun nostalgia for the mythic western past, other songs like “Certain Kind of Fool,” and “Bitter Creek” show a darker side. Lines in

¹¹ New Riders of the Purple Sage, “Last Lonely Eagle,” *New Riders of the Purple Sage*, 1971.

¹² Olivia Carter Mather, “Taking It Easy in the Sunbelt: The Eagles and Country Rock’s Regionalism,” in *American Music*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Spring 2013, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

one of the theme songs, “Doolin’ Dalton,” suggests both a romanticized view of the violence of the Old West as well as stripped-down look at the region of little opportunity: “Well the towns led off across the dusty plains, like graveyards filled with tombstones waiting for the names, . . . but some just went stir crazy Lord ‘cause nothing ever changed.”¹⁴ While many Americans related more to the rowdy rock songs celebrating “Life in the Fast Lane,” or young lovers sharing the night together in the desert, much of the Eagles’ lyrics harshly criticized the myth of the land of opportunity and righteous conquest.

On their *Hotel California* album, the title track reveals obvious disillusionment with the American dream, more specifically with the old myth of California being the Garden of Eden. “We are all just prisoners here of our own device,” and later the lyrics show utter alienation; “You can check out anytime, but you can never leave.”¹⁵ The final track on the record, titled “The Last Resort,” presents a scathing indictment of American western conquest and bashes the religious righteousness of the conquerors along with Manifest Destiny. Don Henley and Glen Frey quite eloquently thrash these western myths, writing, “Cause there is no more new frontier / we have got to make it here / We satisfy our endless needs / and justify our bloody deeds, / in the name of destiny and in the name of God.” The final coup de grace comes at the end: “They call it paradise / I don’t know why / You call someplace paradise / kiss it goodbye”¹⁶ So much for rugged individualism in the land of milk and honey.

Many of the visions portrayed in the rock lyrics of the seventies previously discussed provide great examples of how popular culture – and more specifically, popular music – in many ways reflects social changes in our society. As Richard Aquila has astutely pointed out, many singer-songwriters in rock music preceded the “new Western historians” by several years in

¹⁴ Eagles, *Desperado*, 1973.

¹⁵ Eagles, “Hotel California,” *Hotel California*, 1976.

¹⁶ Eagles, “The Last Resort,” *Hotel California*, 1976.

dispelling commonly held myths of the American West. The same social forces, primarily the upheavals of the sixties, drove both groups.¹⁷

Although the Western myth-bashing and mythic celebration of seventies rockers perhaps provide the best examples of the dynamics of social history and popular music, a host of other musicians during the next two decades would continue challenging and embracing western myths in their lyrics. In the title track of his album, *Nebraska*, Bruce Springsteen conveys the harshness and desolation of the plains and the sense of isolation and alienation, while recounting the tragic murder spree of Charles Starkweather during the winter of 1957. “From the town of Lincoln Nebraska with a .410 on my lap / through to the badlands of Wyoming I killed everything in my path.” In the end, facing death on the electric chair and questioned why he’d done it, he answers, “Well sir I guess there’s just a meanness in this world.”¹⁸ When listening to Springsteen’s deadpan delivery of this last line, one cannot help but feel that this meanness is more abundant out on the desolate plains.

Many rockers throughout the eighties heartily celebrated western myths of tough, tragic cowboys, outlaws, and western movie heroes. The rock group Van Halen used loads of western images on their 1982 record, *Diver Down*. Their song “Hang ‘Em High” tells the story of a tragic, lonely bandit barely escaping the noose and constantly on the run. They close the album with the little Dale Evans tune, “Happy Trails,” showing that the days of the singing cowboys are not entirely over.¹⁹ In the late 1980s, Jon Bon Jovi again embraced the western myth of the lonely, independent cowboy in his big hit, “Wanted Dead or Alive,” in which he uses the metaphor of the hard, lonely life of a cowboy to describe the allegedly hard life of a travelling

¹⁷ Aquila, *Wanted Dead or Alive*, 209.

¹⁸ Bruce Springsteen, “Nebraska,” *Nebraska*, 1982.

¹⁹ Van Halen, “Hang ‘Em High,” *Diver Down*, 1982.

rock star. Instead of a gun, he travels with his “loaded six-string on [his] back,” and rides a “steel horse.”²⁰ The commercialization of Western myth thrived during the

Even as groups like Van Halen and Bon Jovi thrilled fans using western mythic images, other musicians of the eighties and nineties bashed western myths about brave white Indian fighters and the West as a land of opportunity. Bruce Cockburn’s 1991 song “Kit Carson” describes the famous explorer and Indian fighter in very harsh, negative terms. Considered a hero by many Americans, Cockburn shows him as a cruel murderer who epitomized the cultural devastation incurred in the name of Western conquest and alleged progress: “Kit Carson knew he had a job to do / Like other jobs he had before / He’d made the grade / He learned to trade in famine, pestilence, and war.”²¹ Sheryl Crow took down the myth of the West as the Garden of Eden in her song “Leaving Las Vegas,” in which she tells a story of a cocktail waitress’s unsuccessful and alienating life in the glitzy gambling mecca. Far from being a land of easy money and endless opportunity, she shows the harsh reality that life for many out West – especially for women -- is filled with false hopes and broken dreams.

The list goes on and on. In his article, “Rock Music and the New West,” Todd Kirtstetter has shown that even from those transformative decades up to the present, a wide range of rock musicians continued using symbols and myths of the American West to explain, celebrate, or criticize society. For instance, the Dead Kennedys, a West Coast punk band, fashioned their version of the iconic Western song “Rawhide,” into a vehicle for social rebellion, to harshly criticize corporate capitalism along with political oppression.²² Kirtstetter compares various converging and diverging musical trends to a map that “shows the enduring strength in the

²⁰ Bon Jovi, “Wanted Dead or Alive,” *Slippery When Wet*, 1986.

²¹ Bruce Cockburn, “Kit Carson,” *Nothing But a Burning Light*, 1991

²² Todd Kirtstetter, “Rock Music and the New West, 1980-2010,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No 1, 55-56.

American mind of the mythical West and the mythical cowboy, not only on their own terms but as important foils to illustrate both aspirations and dreams not achieved.”²³ The so-called Wild West lives on in the music of America for better or worse. Indeed, a study of the ambivalent use of Western myth in popular American music reveals the tensions of reconciling the pride and celebration of Western heritage with the acknowledgement that many things have gone quite badly in the American West. Throughout most of the twentieth century, most musicians have embraced and celebrated common Western myths and symbols of a conveniently misremembered past as a way of justifying a positive American identity, yet as this essay has shown, the social and cultural forces of the 1960s onward have prompted many musicians, especially rock musicians, to take a closer look at how things really were in the Old West and how they actually are in the New West. Often these songs show some of the icky unpleasantness of our past, and that is much needed. Sometimes there are no clear lines, no black or white, just gray areas. What remains clear, however, is the continuing power of the mythic West on the American psyche, and how that power is reflected in the popular culture of music. The West, of course, long ago expanded beyond geographic borders, and popular culture proved a powerful force in that expansion. Richard Aquila articulates it well: “It is nowhere to be found, yet it is everywhere, for the West lives on in the thoughts, dreams, and songs of the American people.”²⁴

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²³ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁴ Richard Aquila, “Images of the West in Rock Music,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No.4,

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