

Crooners to Cowboys

(Music playing)

Narrator: Perhaps no icon of Texas music is as loved or as lasting as the singing cowboy.

N: Hollywood's western movies glorified the Texas cowboy and permanently attached the guitar to his saddlebags.

(Music playing)

N: On screen the brave knight of the plains was equally at home chasing bad guys, roping steer, or strummin' his guitar and singing about the splendor and beauty of the Wild West, especially Texas.

N: Two of the most popular of the singing cowboys were Gene Autry and Tex Ritter.

N: Autry and Ritter were both Texans, both singers, but were they both cowboys? The answer might surprise you.

N: Gene Autry, the most enduring and iconic of all screen cowboys, grew up in Tioga, Texas.

N: Like most children in the area, he picked cotton and attended school, and in 1924 he became a railroad operator.

N: He played guitar and sang and, despite the regional popularity of cowboy musicians such as Jewel Verne Allen and Carl T. Sprague, Autry preferred to accompany himself on ballads made popular by crooners such as Al Jolson.

(Music playing)

N: Autry started his professional music career by emulating his idol Jimmie Rodgers, known as "The Father of Country Music."

(Music playing)

N: Before Hollywood popularized the singing cowboy, most early country simply performed in their nicest clothes.

N: Jimmie Rodgers began experimenting with different professional images, from singing railroad brakeman to urban sophisticate.

N: Although later in his career he would occasionally adopt a western costume, at the height of his fame, when Autry was most influenced by him, Rodgers primarily dressed as himself.

(Music playing)

N: When Autry went to New York in the late 1920s, he recorded cover versions of Jimmie Rodgers's hits and himself had an enormous hit with the sentimental pop ballad, "That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine."

(Music playing)

N: Recognizing that this would be a pivotal time for Autry, his manager, Uncle Art Satherley, urged Autry to adopt a completely western persona, insisting that dressing in western style clothing and performing western-themed songs was crucial to Autry's success.

N: Autry moved to Chicago, took publicity photos in his new western finery, and by 1932 had settled into his new image, and a recurring program on radio station WLS.

N: His announcer, Ian Williams, created a romantic but false biography claiming he was "Born into the saddle, a hard-riding, straight-shootin', carefree cowboy, singing the songs as he had learned them on the range around the campfire."

(Music playing)

N: Autry later recalled, "I sang cowboy songs not because I felt the listeners like them better but because Art Satherley insisted upon it. Ian began to talk of sagebrush and tumbleweeds. That sort of stuff didn't sound very glamorous to me as my recollections of ranch life included aching muscles."

N: Nevertheless, he went along with the charade and became a very popular radio performer.

(Music playing)

N: Like Autry, Woodward Maurice "Tex" Ritter began his life in a small farming community in Texas where he was raised on church music.

N: Attending high school in the relatively large city of Nederland, Ritter finished high school as senior class president with two years of involvement in his school's literary society, basketball, football, baseball and debate teams, drama productions, Spanish club, and glee club.

(Music playing)

N: In 1922 he entered the University of Texas at Austin, where he eventually became president of the glee club.

N: The director of the glee club introduced him to noted western folklorist John Lomax and J. Frank Dobie, who encouraged the young man to combine his interest in music and folklore.

N: Unlike Autry, Ritter developed a keen, scholarly interest in western songs and began researching and collecting cowboy music, including what become his signature song, "Rye Whiskey."

(Music playing)

N: In 1925 he assembled a program of western songs for the university glee club and developed an academic lecture with musical accompaniment entitled, "The American Cowboy and his Songs."

N: It's doubtful that the young scholar donned western costumes in these academic settings.

N: When Ritter went to New York in 1928 however, he encountered the same cowboy fever that Art Satherley had tapped into.

N: In early 1930 he was cast in "Green Grow the Lilacs," a play featuring cowboy songs which became the basis for the enormously successful musical, "Oklahoma!"

N: When the play closed he was cast in another western production and he soon began a successful run as one of the top western radio personalities in New York.

(Music playing)

N: The savvy Art Satherley took Ritter into the studio in 1932 where Ritter accompanying himself on the guitar made his first recording.

N: Many more recordings would follow, most with a western theme, and throughout the early 1930s he gained fame and success as a western performer.

(Music playing)

N: Even before sound came to the movies, screen cowboys such as Tom Mix had created well-defined Texas personas.

N: The Texas identity was very marketable and as sound and music came to western films, Gene Autry and Tex Ritter were a natural fit.

N: The path from crooner to cowboy may not have been as direct as the Chisholm Trail for the Texas icons, but Autry and Ritter embraced their western persona, both on and off screen for the rest of their lives.

N: They'll be remembered as the good guys, brave heroes of the silver screen, singing cowboys.

(Music playing)