

Jules Verne Allen

Jules Verne Allen was one of the early radio ‘singing cowboys,’ who could claim to have actually worked as a horse wrangler and ranch hand. Although his recording career was brief, his radio performances and 1933 book entitled *Cowboy Lore* made him one of the most influential artists in the genre of western music.

Born on April 1, 1883 in Waxahachie, Texas, Allen began working as a cattle handler at the age of ten. In the waning days of the open-range ranching era, he drove cattle throughout the west, herding them hundreds of miles to the major railroad stockyards. While working as a professional cowboy, he began to play guitar and sing the songs learned in the cow camps on the trail. Although his career would first lead him to work as a sheriff and a Texas Ranger, the folklore of cowboy music had a lasting influence. After a stint in the military during World War I, he decided to make music his profession.

In the 1920s, as the population of America was experiencing a wave of fascination with all things western, Allen took to the radio airwaves performing the songs of his youth. Billing himself as “the Original Singing Cowboy,” he sang of the tough and rugged existence of a working cattle hand with the voice of experience. Gaining popularity, he began to broadcast from Texas stations including WOAI and KTSA in San Antonio, and WFAA in Dallas. He ventured further west to Los Angeles, California, the home of a burgeoning cowboy music scene increasingly focused on a romanticized, fictionalized western aesthetic. Sometimes under the names ‘Shiftless’ or ‘Longhorn Luke,’ Allen played up his authentic experience in the Wild West, gaining a measure of success and fame.

In April of 1928, in El Paso, Texas, he had the first of his few recording sessions for the Victor recording label, cutting three songs, “Little Joe the Wrangler,” “Jack O’Diamonds,” and “Po’ Mourner.” Throughout the rest of 1928 and into 1929, he went back into the studio both in Texas and in California, creating a total of twenty-four traditional western and cowboy recordings. He continued to make radio appearances throughout the Southwest, despite a growing interest in more contemporary, romanticized western-themed music. The decline in the popularity of songs that were true depictions of the hard life of a cowboy coincided with the advent of the Great Depression. Allen’s record sales slipped, and his brief recording career came to an end.

In 1933, the Naylor Company published a book by Allen, entitled *Cowboy Lore*, in which he provides a first-person account of the daily life of a working cowboy, a dictionary of ‘cowboy terms and sayings,’ a history and glossary of cattle brands, and a collection of “Songs of the Range.” Regarding the music of the working cowboy, Allen noted that ‘authentic themes’ were always melancholy and centered around a sad event such as the death of a colleague or pining for

the stability of home. Despite Allen's literary attempt to reignite interest in true cowboy folklore, the singing cowboy as Depression-era hero left behind the attempt to portray the West realistically. A thematic shift in song lyrics to an idealized, fantasy west dominated western music. "Wild West" shows had given way to rodeos, and as Allen noted, "There is little in the exhibition rodeo to suggest the actual roundup." As Hollywood western films became more and more fantastic, Allen complained, "It's rather remarkable that the cowboy of fiction and movie fame does everything except caring for cattle." Allen continued to perform on the radio and at events into the 1940s. He died in 1945.

Despite his relatively brief career in entertainment, and although he never became a household name, Jules Verne Allen remains one of the iconic pioneers of a uniquely American genre of music.