

***GUNFIGHTER BALLADS AND TRAIL SONGS: MARTY ROBBINS'S QUEST INTO
THE LP RECORD FRONTIER***

by

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ABSTRACT

Marty Robbins's 1959 album *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* has been critically acclaimed as a pioneering work as a concept album, one of the first of its kind in the country and western genre. This paper explores Robbins's use of the cowboy image, tracing its origins in American popular culture to its adoption by country music artists, to emphasize the image's historical significance and influence. Robbins's career in Nashville's country music industry in the 1950s is examined, illustrating his versatility as a musician as well his frustrations with the business. *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* is evidence of a country artist experimenting with a new format, the long-playing record (LP), and large-scale narratives in a musical era that was dominated by the two-and-a-half minute single. Robbins's use of the cowboy image and his western musical brand combine to create Robbins's concept of the Old West on *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*.

Chapter One: Introduction

Recently added to the Library of Congress's National Recording Registry, Marty Robbins's *Gunfighter Ballads and Trails Songs* has been heralded as a 'must-listen' by both critics and fans alike. The album is included in Robert Dimery's *1001 Albums You Must Hear Before You Die*, keeping steady company with other phenomenal albums from 1959 including *The Genius of Ray Charles*, *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Gershwin Song Book*, Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*, and *Time Out* from the Dave Brubeck Quartet. The western-themed album peaked at #6 on the pop charts in 1960, and the first single, "El Paso," was awarded a Grammy for best Country & Western Recording in 1961, the first ever Grammy award for a country song.

While popular music critics, journalists and fans have been singing the album's praises for decades, a lengthy, in-depth scholarly discussion of *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* is long overdue. This thesis project explores Marty Robbins's use of the long-playing record (LP) during a singles-driven age, when large-scale narratives and experimentation in the studio were not possible. *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*, can arguably be considered an early example of a concept album when placed in context with other full-length albums released in the formative years of the LP. Robbins's use of the cowboy image, western imagery, and eclectic blend of traditional and newly composed cowboy songs come together on *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* as Marty Robbins's vision of the Old West.

Cowboy songs are a key component of this album, as is the cowboy image, and both act as guiding lines throughout this project. The first chapter of this project explores the cowboy image and its relation to country music. The chapter begins with the first use of the term 'cowboy' in America, dating back to the mid-19th century, followed by the cowboy figure's early

appearances in American popular culture. Although the song of the cowboy is crucial to the history of American folksong collecting, it is sometimes overlooked and often debated. John A. Lomax's 1910 collection *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* and Richard Dorson's theory of folklore/fakelore illustrate the value of both traditional cowboy songs and those that are newly composed. Both types of songs are important to this early period of song collecting, publishing, and recorded music, and both traditional and newly composed cowboy songs are featured equally on *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*. The cowboy image in country music is explored in this first chapter, with focus on Jimmie Rodgers's influential blue yodel. Rodgers's yodel had a profound impact on cowboy and western singers, including the Sons of the Pioneers, who would take the vocal trick to new heights with their signature triple yodel. The Sons of the Pioneers' classic song "Cool Water" is discussed in this chapter, in relation to Richard Dorson's fakelore. Marty Robbins chose to record "Cool Water" on *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*.

Chapter two of this paper traces Marty Robbins's musical life prior to the recording of *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* in 1959. Robbins's childhood in Arizona was highly influential on his music, as was his maternal grandfather, a former Texas Ranger that told tall tales of the West. But as Robbins has said himself, singing cowboy Gene Autry was his number one musical influence. After Robbins moved to Nashville to further his career, the longing for his home state and the West, coupled with his outsider status in Music City, U.S.A., led him back to cowboy and western music. Close examination of Robbins's recordings and discographies from 1951 to 1959 illustrate his experiments with different styles in this era as he searches for his voice in an oversaturated market. I emphasize Robbins's frustrations with Columbia here, as his chances of

crossing over to the pop charts were thwarted twice by Columbia marketing decisions regarding label mate Guy Mitchell. Robbins's absence from the Country Music Association (CMA) and firing from the Opry are employed as examples of his dislike for the country music business in Nashville. Through a series of false starts and frustrations, Robbins carved out his niche in Nashville with western music.

The long-playing record (LP) is the central focus of the third and final chapter of this thesis. The chapter begins with a brief history of the LP, citing shortcomings of the 78-rpm record and the 'Battle of the Speeds.' Full-length albums released during the formative years of the LP record are discussed in this chapter, including examples of country music LPs of the 1950s, to argue their inclusion into the scholarly discussion of concept albums. Robbins's album-length recordings for Columbia are highlighted in this section, as they are evidence of Robbins's exploration of the LP format prior to the release of *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*. Robbins's cover of the Sons of the Pioneers classic, "Cool Water," is employed as another instance of Richard Dorson's theory of fakelore, and how little his theory matters to the longevity, credibility, and beauty of a song. "El Paso," the first single released from *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*, is analyzed in this chapter. The analysis illustrates Robbins's unique use of the standard AABA form, as well as strong ties to the traditional Mexican ballad form called the 'corrido.' The third chapter concludes with a discussion of Marty Robbins's 'musical branding' that he employed with his western sound.

This paper aims to illustrate Marty Robbins's impact on country music, as an innovator and a torchbearer for traditional music. His use of an experimental format while incorporating traditional cowboy songs and the cowboy image is crucial to the development of his western

musical brand, which challenges the notion that the Nashville sound was one, homogenous sound. Early examples of artists' use of the LP record, including country music artists, points to artists employing larger narratives during a time when the industry relied heavily on the two-and-a-half minute single. This challenges previous ideas of both 1950s country music and concept albums, and this paper will argue these albums' inclusion into the concept album discussion. Lastly, and most importantly, this paper will emphasize to the readership the influence and longevity of the cowboy and his song on country music, epitomized by Marty Robbins's *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*.

Chapter Two: Way Out West: The Cowboy Image & Western Music

The cowboy is an iconic figure in America, as American as cheddar cheese slices and Coca Cola. The cowboy's mythical home, the Wild West, has captured the hearts and imaginations of North Americans since the late 19th century and continued long after Frederick Jackson Turner declared the West closed in 1893.¹ Beginning with Wild West shows, then followed in short succession by dime novels, western literature, silent movies, horse operas, western music, western films, and country stars' adoption of the cowboy image, the figure of the cowboy has been an integral part of American popular culture. However, a subgenre of western lore, the singing cowboy movies, have largely been ignored by scholars and dismissed as pulp fiction for the working-class masses. Recent scholarship exploring the role of the singing cowboy figure has shed light on the importance of the singing cowboy, not just the films' massive popularity, but what the singing cowboy figure meant to Depression-era audiences, changing gender roles, and later the emergence of the suburban middle-class.² This chapter will explore the figure of the cowboy in American popular culture, its adoption into country music, cowboy and western music, and the almighty singing cowboy. My discussion of the cowboy image here will provide the foundation for the second chapter on Marty Robbins's career prior to the release of

¹ Peter Stanfield, *Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 9.

² Recent scholarship on singing cowboys includes, in addition to Stanfield's monograph, Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), and Stephanie Van Der Wel, "The Lavender Cowboy and the 'She Buckaroo': Gene Autry, Patsy Montana, and Depression-Era Gender Roles," *Musical Quarterly* 95 (2012): 207-251.

Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs (1959) and my exploration of that album in the third and final chapter of this thesis. Giddy up saddle pals, and let's head way out West!

A Brief History of the Cowboy Image

The term "cowboy" originated in the 18th century, during the American Revolution (1765-1783). Folklorist Archie Green suggests that the early use of the term "cowboy" had negative connotations during the Revolutionary War, referring to Tory guerrillas who beguiled patriotic Americans into the brush by tinkling cowbells.³ In between the military lines the false cowboys, loyal to King George, ambushed and killed George Washington's men. This evil connotation surfaced again in the Rio Grande Valley after the Texas Revolution (1836) when Anglo cowboys rustled Mexican longhorns. A vaquero was a mounted ranch hand who tended cattle, affirms Green; but an early Texas cowboy was still a criminal, a bandit, an outlaw. After the Civil War the word was gradually rid of its negative connotations, when longhorns were driven north in great numbers to be sold. The cowboy's image took a positive turn when a growing industrial and urban nation established the social setting in which the word "cowboy" was re-shaped positively to fit a special class of working people, included in the broad category of food handlers.

Two of the earliest known portrayals of the cowboy image date back to 1874, published in Joseph G. McCoy's *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest*. According to Green, the sketch titled "Drunken Cowboy on the War-Path" is the earliest visual portrait

³ Archie Green, "Commercial Music Graphics #34: Midnight and Other Cowboys," *JEMF Quarterly* 11.3 (Autumn 1975): 137-52, 138.

available of “the shoot-em-up, hell raising cowboy – the ancestor figure for Waylon Jennings and his fellow country/outlaw singers of the present decade.”⁴ The second drawing is titled “Dance-House,” which pictures a crowded barroom dance floor complete with a string band entertaining the crowd. Green notes that there are very few available pictorial depictions of Anglo-American string bands before the rise of photography, and asserts that “Dance-House” is the earliest graphic of a rural white string band. Green quotes McCoy regarding the dance floor cowboy pictured in “Dance-House”:

A more odd, not to say comical sight, is not often seen than the dancing cowboy; with the front of his sombrero lifted at an angle of fully forty-five degrees; his huge spurs jingling at every step or motion; his revolvers flapping up and down like a retreating sheep's tail; his eyes lit up with excitement, liquor and lust; he plunges in and "hoes it down" at a terrible rate, in the most approved yet awkward country style; after swinging "his partner" clear off of the floor for an entire circle, "then balance all" with an occasional demoniacal yell, near akin to the war whoop of the savage Indian.⁵

Green highlights the cowboy’s prominence in literature, including autobiographies, histories, critical essays, picture books, and fiction, and notes that these portrayals make it clear that the cowboy did not remain entirely a working figure in the closing decades of the last century. The cowboy also became a legendary figure, affirms Green, a figure who was “courageous and formidable, who could ride even under the weight of heavy rhetorical comparisons such as Pegasus of the Plains.”⁶

The cowboy figure first appeared in popular representations in the 1880s in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show and in dime novels that fictionalized some of the show’s stars, such as Buck

⁴ A. Green, 138.

⁵ Ibid., 138.

⁶ Ibid., 143.

Taylor. Cowboys had appeared in earlier dime novels, but, according to historian Daryl Jones, Buck Taylor was the first widely popular literary cowboy, first published in 1887.⁷ Dime novels were cheap sensational fictions that sold by the thousands to an avid readership of working-class men and women. A great divide between this pulp fiction and the more “serious” western literature emerged with authors such as Frederic Remington, Owen Wister, and Theodore Roosevelt forming what has come to be known as the eastern establishment.⁸ Despite the dominance of these authors in the history of the fictional cowboy, western film historian Peter Stanfield argues that the fiction created for the working and immigrant classes challenged the eastern establishment’s peculiar notion of the cowboy figure.⁹

The eastern establishment “elevated” the cowboy figure out of mass culture, taking him from the “plebs” to, according to some historians of the genre, serious literature. The problem with this line of thinking is that dime novels, silent westerns, and later, the singing cowboys, are devalued as cheap entertainment for the masses or mere children’s entertainment. Stanfield argues that the singing cowboy, far from being of interest largely to children, made a powerful appeal to segments of the film audience that mainstream Hollywood did not address, or did not address directly. Furthermore, the view of the singing cowboy as little more than a Saturday matinee distraction for kids, a nostalgic figure for more innocent times, or, more recently, a prime example of American camp has effaced his real history. The singing cowboy films dramatized social and political questions and, Stanfield suggests, did so largely from the point

⁷ Stanfield, 10.

⁸ See G. Edward White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience: The West of Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Owen Wister* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1989).

⁹ Stanfield, 10.

of view of those whom the depression had deprived. These movies used artistic strategies that did not accord with established aesthetic principles of middle-class taste, and, in the process, the singing cowboy apparently broke with the tradition of the western that Hollywood had inherited from literary culture. Stanfield argues that it is possible to trace a different line of development, one that sees the cowboy as open for a more radical interpretation, and one that leads more directly to the singing cowboy than does the received notion of the cowboy's origin. Rather than uphold the common view that Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) first and most successfully essayed the archetype of the twentieth-century western, Stanfield considers the novel to have represented an embourgeoisement of the western – a middle-class appropriation of the cowboy, who had previously entertained the masses in such déclassé forms as the dime novel. He argues that the series western reclaimed the cowboy for the mob – that mass of working-class men and women that members of America's elite, including Owen Wister, so vocally damned and feared. For Stanfield, it was not *The Virginian*, but dime novels and magazine fiction aimed at a newly emerging professional middle class that provided the antecedent of the singing cowboy.¹⁰ In short, the history and image of the cowboy and its musical representative, the singing cowboy, have been complex and contested from the outset, and both would have a significant impact on the career and identity of Marty Robbins.

Cowboy Songs and American Folklore

The music of the cowboy piqued the interest of American folklorists early in the 20th century. Folklorist and renowned song collector John A. Lomax is an important figure in the

¹⁰ Stanfield, 4.

collection of cowboy songs, having published his findings in *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* in 1910. Lomax's collection was far from being a publishing sensation, but the collection would act as *the* primer for all subsequent anthologies of cowboy songs and was responsible for the broad dissemination of songs that now constitute a common recognition of the form: "Jesse James," "The Old Chisholm Trail," "Whoopie Ti Yi Yo, Git Along, Little Doggies," and "Home on the Range." This was the start of Lomax's career as a "ballad hunter," placing him as the foremost U.S. authority on folk song in the first half of the twentieth century. *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* earned the songs of the cowboy national recognition as authentic American folk song.¹¹ The themes of cowboy songs generally consist of life on the range, herding cattle, unruly or loyal horses, western beauty, and longing for home/the West.

John A. Lomax began his folklore studies at Harvard in 1904 and studied under Barrett Wendell and George Lyman Kittredge, a founding member of the American Folklore Society. Kittredge and Rendell's goal was to seek cultural significance in American folk art, similar to Francis James Child's collection, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-96). Child's collection, according to Peter Stanfield, was an original work in the academic establishment of an "essential" British folk culture. This narrow-minded scope would shape the methods of academics and folklorists in song collecting for many years, furthered by Cecil Sharp's influential work on American folksong (1916-1918). Lomax's work on cowboy songs had its origin within the rarefied academic setting of the Child ballad method, but it was never intended solely for academic consumption. Lomax later commented on his collection, writing, "Frankly, the volume

¹¹ Stanfield, 47.

is meant to be popular.”¹² Rather than a scrupulous piece resulting exclusively from field research, Lomax’s collection features songs gathered through requests to newspaper readers and, despite his claim to the contrary, from previously published collections, including nineteen songs “collected” from Jack Thorp’s privately published book, *Songs of the Cowboys*, published in 1908. Regardless of its elusive origins, Lomax’s book was, as biographer Nolan Porterfield argues, “if not in fact, then certainly in substance and in effect – simply the first important collection of American folk song.”¹³

The origins of American folklore and folksong, cowboy songs included, have been scrutinized by scholars for the greater part of the twentieth century. A central figure in this discussion is American folklorist Richard Dorson, who is responsible for the controversial notion of fakelore. According to Dorson, actual folklore requires oral vitality; fakelore is folklore that has been tampered with or misrepresented.¹⁴ Dorson was not interested in popular culture or folk culture that had been “despoiled” by outside influences, only isolated cultures participating in oral traditions. For obvious reasons, John Lomax’s collection that was “meant to be popular” jarred with Dorson’s opinions of what constitutes folklore. A fine example of Dorson’s holier-than-thou attitude is drawn from his collection of essays, *Folklore and Fakelore: Essays Toward a Discipline of Folk Studies*, wherein he comments on Gene Bluestein’s book *The Voice of the Folk: Folklore and American Literary Theory*. It is worth quoting Dorson’s full rant to showcase his scathing critique of Bluestein, John Lomax, and Lomax’s son Alan.

¹² John A. Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (New York: Sturgis & Walton Company, 1911), xxiii.

¹³ Quoted in Stanfield, 47-48.

¹⁴ Simon J. Bronner, *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1998), 369.

. . . overall he [Bluestein] romanticizes the Lomaxes as much as they romanticize the cowboy, hobo, and sharecropper. Except for one uneasy footnote, he makes no distinction between rightwing, unspeculative John Lomax and his leftwing, idea-happy son Alan; he neglects Alan's intellectual shifts from Marxist to Freudian to hard social science commitments; and he fails to note the Lomaxes' scholarly inadequacies in publishing composite texts, musical arrangements, and commercially attractive all-American omnibuses. (I once heard John Lomax say that the chief reason for the success of *American Ballads and Folk Songs* was the American in its title.) Bluestein excuses the Lomaxes' inattention to ethnic folksong through the concept of "hybridization" of imported traditions, a concept as inaccurate as that of the melting pot.¹⁵

What is striking about this quote is Dorson's condescendence towards the "commercially attractive." While Dorson's commentary was written approximately sixty years after John Lomax's *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, he has the hindsight to be able to dismiss not only Lomax, but his son Alan as well, and their entire careers. Dorson's narrow-mindedness about what constitutes folklore caused him to dismiss the work of the Lomaxes, the father and son partnership whose folksong collecting has added such great depth to American vernacular music.

Richard Dorson's theory of fakelore is problematic, especially in regard to popular music, as I will illustrate with a discussion of two cowboy songs included in *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*. "Whoopie Ti Yi Yo, Git Along, Little Dogies" is a standard cowboy tune which meets the credentials of Dorson's folklore, as it has been passed down through oral tradition without outside contamination. It is a simple song harmonically, sticking to the major chords of the key, and tells the story of a cowpuncher herding his dogies to their destination. On the other hand, and also included in Lomax's collection, is "Home on the Range," a nostalgic

¹⁵ Richard M. Dorson, *Fakelore and Folklore: Essays Toward A Discipline of Folk Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 95.

tune depicting range life, wildlife and western beauty. Unfortunately, “Home on the Range” would be deemed fakelore by Dorson, as its origins are murky at best. Lomax claimed to have obtained “Home on the Range” from a black salon keeper in San Antonio two years before the publication of *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* in 1910. The song was considered public domain and was fair game for any publisher to profit from the song’s increasing popularity, furthered by radio play and recordings. However, the publishing spree came to an abrupt halt in 1934 when William and Mary Goodwin filed suit in federal court in New York. The Goodwins claimed that “Home on the Range” was a version of their song “An Arizona Home,” copyrighted in 1905. They named twenty-nine copyright infringers and sought \$500,000 in compensation. Notified of the Goodwins’ intent to file suit, the defendants hired a lawyer to track down earlier versions of the song and prove the song belonged in the public domain. Before the formal filing of the Goodwin claim, the lawyer for the defendants authenticated a version written in 1885 through a 1914 newspaper clipping but was unable to trace the original lyrics that the article claimed had first appeared in 1873. The lawyer had collected enough evidence to convince the Goodwins to drop their suit. In 1945 a researcher uncovered a version of the song published in an 1876 edition of a Kansas newspaper, and this appeared to be the end of the trail. Lomax argued the song had no “ultimate origin,” in one of the last of his published collections of folk songs before his death in 1947.¹⁶ As the tangled history of “Home on the Range” illustrates, the line between folkore and fakelore is not clear and Dorson’s dubious distinction should not be used to determine what is included in the cowboy music canon. Furthermore, as Stanfield argues, an additional problem that folk song collectors

¹⁶ Stanfield, 49.

encountered in their search for “unadulterated” examples of cowboy songs, was that the cowboy had become inseparable from the image created by mass popular culture.¹⁷ Gene Bluestein echoes this sentiment in his critical evaluation of U.S. folklorists, saying: “Very little of what developed in American folklore took place without the influence of strong popular and commercial sources.... In American tradition, many different forms of folk style exist, all ‘contaminated’ by levels of culture beyond the pale of what scholars have defined as authentically traditional.”¹⁸ Basing scholarship on American folk tradition on methods used to capture British folklore, akin to the Child ballads, is precarious. The influence of popular culture cannot be erased from cowboy lore, and, as the example of Marty Robbins (and many others) demonstrates, it does not necessarily detract from the credibility, craft, beauty, or longevity of a given song.

Cowboy Music on Record

Cowboy songs were first etched in shellac in the early 1920s, about the same time as hillbilly recordings were taking shape. The first recordings of cowboy songs were often cut by artists who dabbled in other genres. Popular light opera singer Vernon Dalhart was one such singer and holds the honor of having the first cowboy recording released as a rural-oriented record.¹⁹ Dalhart is best known for his 78 release “Wreck of the Old 97” b/w “The Prisoner’s Song” (1924), which became country music’s first million-selling record. He also cut some

¹⁷ Stanfield, 49-50.

¹⁸ Quoted in Stanfield, 50.

¹⁹ Douglas B. Green, *Singing in the Saddle: The History of the Singing Cowboy* (Nashville: The Country Music Foundation Press & Vanderbilt University Press, 2002): 29-30.

cowboy sides in 1924, but they did not make a lasting impression like his disaster songs had. The following year, in 1925, a Texan named Carl T. Sprague with a cowboy background recorded the first cowboy hit record, "When the Work's All Done This Fall." Sprague had a short career, only recording seventeen songs, as the Depression had severe effects on the recording industry. The invention of electrical recording in 1925 allowed for and popularized softer, more intimate singing approaches, while Sprague's style of singing, a piercing tenor more suited to gramophone technology, sounded dated on electrical recordings. Carson J. Robison is another noteworthy name from the early cowboy recording era. Robison was Vernon Dalhart's singing partner, a guitarist and a whistler to boot. Robison cut an original tune in the cowboy style, "The Little Green Valley," in 1925, an upbeat trail song that also appears on Marty Robbins's *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*. Robison, like Sprague, had to adapt to new microphone technology, but fared much better, going on to record many cowboy favorites such as "Red River Valley," "The Strawberry Roan," (which also appears on Robbins's *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*), and "When the Work's All Done This Fall," and he was one of the first to popularize "Home on the Range."

Country music's first singing star, Jimmie Rodgers, had a profound impact on western music as well. Although Rodgers is remembered for his series of blue yodels, he did record a number of western-themed songs and sported cowboy gear for at least two press shoots and a number of live performances. As cowboy scholar Douglas B. Green notes, "virtually every rural home with a record player – and a great many in the city – had several Jimmie Rodgers records," and his widespread popularity was central in defining the cowboy-musician image in the popular

imagination.²⁰ But more influential than his occasional western attire was Rodgers's yodel. Falsetto and yodeling were not unknown to cowboy singers, but Jimmie Rodgers gave it a shape and a form that caught on with western singers like a wild prairie fire.²¹ Rodgers's simple yodel, rarely straying from an interval of a sixth, is heard on his series of blue yodels, including his breakout release "Blue Yodel No. 1 (T for Texas)," which became a smash hit upon its release in 1928, selling a record-breaking half-million copies. Rodgers recorded a few cowboy themed songs, including, "Yodeling Cowboy," "When the Cactus Is in Bloom," and "Cowhand's Last Ride," which featured more varied versions of his famous blue yodel. Rodgers's life was cut short by tuberculosis in 1933, but his influence was long-lasting and wide-reaching: Rodgers's influence can be heard in country singers as far-ranged as Hank Snow in Nova Scotia, all the way down to the Lone Star state of Texas in the vocal stylings of Ernest Tubb.²² Although Marty Robbins did employ a yodel on his 1956 hit "Singing the Blues," he dropped the technique on *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* in favor of a more modern, pop-friendly style of singing.

The cowboy image proved to be more marketable than country music's previous image, the hillbilly, a rube dressed in overalls or a gingham gown who lacked the respectability and supposed intellect of the cowboy. Radio stations dependent on advertising sponsorship found the figure of the cowboy to be an effective endorsement of products targeted at rural and small town markets.²³ As country music historian Bill Malone explains, the singing cowboy was "a reassuring symbol of independence and mastery, a collection of traits that the nation had once

²⁰ D. Green, 37-38.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

²² The western treatment of the yodel will be discussed shortly, in the form of Sons of the Pioneers "triple yodel," wherein the yodel is harmonized in three parts.

²³ D. Green, 5.

possessed and might once again assert.”²⁴ The singing cowboy was symbolic in other ways as well, by providing a new and marketable image for the country music industry.²⁵ The image of the backwoods hillbilly was shed in favor of a sensitive hero. Western film historian Peter Stanfield concludes that by the 1930s the singing cowboy had become the most significant figure used on radio to attract audiences and consumers from the rural regions.²⁶ Furthermore, says Stanfield, the singing cowboy acted as a synergistic agent that linked various arms of the media industries, including recording, radio, publishing, live performance, and film.

Gene Autry would make the singing cowboy the primary fixture of American popular culture in the 1930s. From his beginnings as singer of mountain songs and Jimmie Rodgers blues songs, he went on to achieve a media profile unmatched by any contemporary cowboy singers or performers of rural American vernacular music.²⁷ Autry began his recording career in 1929 singing sentimental songs and blues yodels; his voice on these early recordings is clearly modeled on that of Jimmie Rodgers. In fact, Autry began his career as an imitator of his hero, Jimmie Rodgers, and, under the moniker “The Yodeling Cowboy,” recorded many of Rodgers’s blue yodels. Autry recorded a significant body of work between 1929 and 1933 and formed the basis for his definitive synthesis of Rodgers’s blue yodel and Autry’s own embodiment of the cowboy persona.²⁸ Autry’s modern, mellow, microphone-friendly voice proved to be more broadly appealing than previous cowboy and hillbilly singers’ high, open throated tenor voices.

²⁴ Bill Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers: Southern Cultures and the Roots of Country Music* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 91.

²⁵ D. Green, 208.

²⁶ Stanfield, 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

Marty Robbins's style of singing was heavily influenced by Autry's mellow, microphone friendly voice, one that would prove to be more suitable for crossing over to the pop charts as country music adopted a more modern sound in the late 1950s.

Autry was the first and the biggest cowboy star. At a time of profound strife and uncertainty, his soothing vocal style and wholesome singing cowboy persona earned him success on multiple media — in fact, *every* medium available during his lifetime — including live radio, recording, film, and television. He remains the only celebrity to be awarded all five stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, for film, radio, television, music, and live performance, bearing witness to the enduring significance of the singing cowboy to American popular consciousness since the 1930s. Gene Autry was Marty Robbins's number one musical influence and role model. In an interview with Alanna Nash, Robbins reflects on his hero, saying: "I first started praying to be a cowboy singer, you see. I wanted to be like Gene Autry. I wanted to ride off into the sunset. And then later on in life I found out that Gene *owns* the sunset, and I couldn't ride off into it unless I asked him. So I settled on being a country-and-western singer."²⁹ Robbins's dreams of becoming a singing cowboy came true, although in the form of a long-play record instead of on film, with the release of *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*.

The Cowboy on Film

Gene Autry debuted on the silver screen in 1934, and after the success of his first full-length feature film, *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* (1935), named after Autry's current record, he churned

²⁹ Alanna Nash, *Behind Closed Doors: Talking with the Legends of Country Music* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988), 466-467.

out films at a hectic pace, averaging over 7 films per year from 1936 through 1939. While these films included action, comedy, and western imagery, their titles, all of which were current Gene Autry records, made clear that the focus was on the music and the recording star. Autry's 1936 film, *The Singing Cowboy*, named the phenomenon that was becoming a film genre of its own. The statistics for singing western films is nothing short of astonishing. More than 700 westerns were released from 1938 to 1941, an average of three and a half per week. Of the 110 westerns released in 1938, 47 were singing-cowboy features, with another 12 featuring music significantly.³⁰

The singing cowboy films catered to working class Depression-era audiences that were often ignored by Hollywood's elite. The singing cowboy movies functioned much like dime novels of the late 19th century – affordable entertainment for the masses – not an embourgeoisement of the cowboy figure like Wister's *Virginian*. During the Great Depression, gender roles were called in to question as twenty-five percent of American men became unemployed. As many men were robbed of their breadwinning role, women began to seek work in the service industry as clerks, waitresses, or maids to compensate for their husbands' unemployment, precipitating a crisis in masculinity. As Cowgirl scholar Stephanie Vander Wel explains, "Gene Autry and [singing cowgirl] Patsy Montana emerged as prominent figures whose music simultaneously voiced and soothed the gender concerns that characterized the era."³¹

³⁰ D. Green., 203.

³¹ Stephanie Vander Wel, "The Lavender Cowboy and 'The She Buckaroo': Gene Autry, Patsy Montana, and Depression-Era Gender Roles," *The Musical Quarterly* 95.2–3 (December 2012): 243.

Western Music and The Sons of the Pioneers

Cowboy music reached its zenith of influence with the Sons of the Pioneers, whose signature sound and success left the western music genre forever changed. Formed in Los Angeles in the early 1930s by Tim Spencer, Len Slye, and Bob Nolan, the Sons honed their harmony singing skills while sharing a room in a boarding house, where they would develop their signature triple yodel vocal harmonies. The group's success is due largely to the songwriting talents of Bob Nolan and Tim Spencer, coupled with the group's refined performance of cowboy songs, both traditional and newly composed. Stanfield contrasts the Sons of the Pioneers' polished vocal style with that of earlier cowboy singer Dick Devall:

Just four years (1929-1933) separate the recording of Dick Devall's two performances and the Sons of the Pioneers' early forays on wax, but it may as well be a thousand. I can think of no other shift within a popular music form that is as strongly marked. Beyond the subject matter of dying cowboys, little links Devall and the Pioneers. Devall's course and untutored vocals sound as if his larynx was pickled in raw alcohol and tobacco juice; in contrast the Pioneers' vocals are genteel and refined – no sound is sweeter.³²

"Cool Water" is the Sons of the Pioneers' best-known song and arguably the most renowned western song of all time. It was voted the best-known song of the American West in a 1951 national survey and also appears on Marty Robbins's 1959 album, *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*.³³ The song was written by Bob Nolan and first recorded in 1941. The Pioneers finally sang it on film in Roy Rogers's *Hands Across the Border*, filmed in 1943 and released in 1944. Bob Nolan sings the lead on the recorded version from 1941, which tells a desperate tale

³² Stanfield, 74.

³³ Kenneth J. Bindas, "Western Mystic: Bob Nolan and His Songs," *Western Historical Quarterly* 17 (1986): 439.

of a prospector, his horse Dan, and their search for water in the desert. A taunting mirage plays an important role in “Cool Water,” both lyrically and musically. The lyrics are as follows:

“Cool Water” – written by Bob Nolan

Verse: All day I’ve faced the barren waste
Without the taste of water, cool water
Old Dan and I with throats burned dry
And souls that cry for water, cool, clear, water

Chorus: Keep a-movin’, Dan, don’t you listen to him, Dan
He’s a devil not a man
And he spreads the burning sand with water
Dan can you see that big green tree
Where the water’s runnin’ free
And it’s waiting there for me and you

Verse: The nights are cool and I’m a fool
Each star’s a pool of water, cool water
But with the dawn I’ll wake and yawn
And carry on to water, cool, clear, water

Repeat Chorus

Verse: The shadows sway and seem to say
Tonight we pray for water, cool water
And way up there he’ll hear our prayer
And show us where, there’s water, cool, clear, water

Repeat Chorus

Verse: Dan’s feet are sore he’s yearning for
Just one more thing than water, cool water
Like me I guess he’d like to rest
Where there’s no quest for water, cool, clear, water

As the lyrics narrate, water is scarce on the protagonist’s travels, and dehydration and the scorching heat are playing mental tricks on the prospector in the form of the cruellest desert ghost of all – the mirage. Supplementing Nolan’s beautifully descriptive lyrics, the echo of the

word “water” hauntingly sung by high tenor Lloyd Perryman (a later addition to the group) provides a musical representation of the mirage. The song itself would be echoed by Marty Robbins with his version of “Cool Water” on *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*. Robbins dropped the fiddle from his live band and recording sessions during the late ‘50s to create a more modern sound, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Robbins did, however, employ the fiddle on the intro to his version of “Cool Water,” perhaps as a respectful nod to tradition and the Sons of the Pioneers, a group whose music and songwriting he so admired.

The Sons of the Pioneers’ chief songwriter was Canadian-born Bob Nolan. The use of western imagery in Nolan’s songwriting employs devices akin to those of romantic poets. Similarly, the father of bluegrass Bill Monroe’s compositions employ, according to Richard Cantrell, “a narrative frame, and archaic language, a wild or picturesque setting, mysterious of magical events, and a careful exclusion of particularizing or historicizing detail in favor of the general and universal.”³⁴ This quotation applies as well to Bob Nolan’s writing of the west. “Cool Water” is a narrative tale of desert travels, using archaic language, set in the west, with a mysterious event (the mirage), and omits any particular or historical details. According to Stanfield, in the context of old-time music, the West becomes a part of this archaic universe: familiar names, events, and places help locate the songs in a recognizable historical (and firmly American) past, but the performances obscure their particularity, shrouding it in mystery – suggesting a lost world peopled by phantoms.³⁵ According to Richard Dorson’s criteria discussed above, Nolan’s newly-composed “Cool Water” should be considered fakelore, and

³⁴ Quoted in Stanfield, 55.

³⁵ Stanfield, 55.

scholars have long ignored the musical content of the singing cowboy movies due to Dorson's derisive label.³⁶ Kenneth J. Bindas cites folk music scholars Austin and Alta Fife, who labeled post-1930s popular cowboy songs as "decadent" and asserted that the cowboy genre degenerated by "going Hollywood" and becoming absorbed into the mass media.³⁷ Other scholars, including Richard Etulain and Michael Marsden, argue for the significance of the popular Western genre and have repeatedly called for more investigation into its many cultural aspects.³⁸ They argue the importance of the horse opera in terms of its moral symbolism and popularity, a sentiment echoed in recent works including Peter Stanfield's *Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy* (2002), Peter LaChapelle's *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (2007), and Stephanie Vander Wel's article "The Lavender Cowboy and 'The She Buckaroo': Gene Autry, Patsy Montana, and Depression-Era Gender Roles" (2012). Bindas suggests that with the commercialization of the western myth, the simple morality of the story reached almost everyone, but it was the addition of music, argues Will Wright in *Six Guns and Society*, that made the myth "clearer and [more] immediately felt."³⁹ He also cites the simplicity represented in these films regarding good and evil as a primary reason for their popularity. The use of the white hat/black hat as symbols for good guys and bad guys was a technique that most Western

³⁶ Bindas, 439.

³⁷ Ibid., 439-440.

³⁸ See the editors' introduction to Richard W. Etulain and Michael T. Marsden, eds., *The Popular Western: Essays toward a Definition* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Press, 1974).

³⁹ Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 12.

films used until the late 1960s.⁴⁰ Importantly, Marty Robbins is pictured in a black hat and black outlaw outfit on the cover of *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*, while Gene Autry and Roy Rogers don white cowboy hats in their films and publicity shots. I would argue that Robbins's black outfit allows him to play the role of outlaw in certain songs on *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*, including "They're Hanging Me Tonight" and "The Master's Call."

According to Bindas, few people contributed more to forming this popular image of the West than Bob Nolan, and Nolan's life and the symbolism in his songs were central to a modern conception of the West within which Robbins and others worked. Unlike the more traditional folk songs that "came to the West . . . from far distant sources," Bindas suggests that the Sons of the Pioneers created and popularized their work *in* the West.⁴¹ The group's style, which stressed smooth three-part harmony, exact breathing and timing, and well-matched vocal coordination, was very different from songs of the traditional cowpuncher, who usually sang alone and rarely possessed a good singing voice. The music Nolan helped to create differed from its antecedents, states Bindas, as his music was never intended to reproduce the actual range music of the late 19th century.⁴² Bob Nolan exemplified the western themes he described in his songs, as he moved from place to place, avoided close relationships, and sought the insulation of the American Desert. Nolan's aloofness led others to label him as a "loner," or, as Roy Rogers described him, "a guy who did a lot of tall thinking."⁴³ His reliance on a union with nature, as well as the traditional cowboy traits, speaks to a particular time in American history,

⁴⁰ Bindas, 449.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 440.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 440.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 441.

with the country in the throes of the Great Depression. Nolan's symbols, when compared to other cowboy singers of the era, are quite different. His peers — Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, and Tim Spencer — painted an overly romantic image of the West in their songs. As Bindas puts it, their "Happy Trails" made the West appear more fantasy than reality.⁴⁴ Nolan's West also differs to Woodie Guthrie's portrayal of it. Guthrie examined the West in a more socially conscious way, often painting an ugly social picture dealing with human injustice, while Nolan's West was individualistic, isolated, and mystic.⁴⁵

Country music stars were eager to head West and partake in Hollywood's western film boom, as the 1940s saw many country singers appear in singing westerns. The King of Western Swing, Bob Wills, made his first western film in 1940, providing musical support for Tex Ritter in *Take Me Back to Oklahoma*. The Texas Troubadour Ernest Tubb appeared in the 1943 film, the *Fighting Buckaroo*. Future Governor of Louisiana, Jimmie Davis, was already a major record seller when he made his film debut in *Frontier Fury* in 1943. Merle Travis also had a brief stint in the movies; he and his Bronco Busters were featured in two *Durango Kid* releases in 1946. Even the Grande Ole Opry's own cowboy, Zeke Clements, ventured west to appear in the 1946 film, *Two Fisted Stranger*. Cowboy apparel remained prominent into the late 1940s but western song themes were becoming diluted with other country music traditions, especially those from Nashville.⁴⁶ Gene Autry and Roy Rogers were arguably the most successful westernizers of the local subculture in Hollywood and Los Angeles. While western identities appeared on television, worries over Nashville's emergence as the country music industry's center increased. As the

⁴⁴ Bindas, 455.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 455.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 134.

major labels consolidated most of their country music in Nashville, an effort to preserve the western elements grew in Los Angeles, and the Hollywood-based Academy of Country and Western Music was founded in 1964 as a populist alternative to Nashville's Country Music Association.⁴⁷

The Singing Cowboy's Changing Politics

The singing cowboy portrayed a left-leaning Democrat in Depression-era horse operas. The heroic film star pitted honest laborers and farmers against corrupt capitalist villains, storylines that were written with working-class audiences' concerns (and pocketbooks) in mind. Gene Autry's "Cowboy Code," an oath aimed at *Melody Ranch's* young listeners, stated that the cowboy "must not advocate or possess racially or religiously intolerant ideas."⁴⁸ In an autobiography, Autry later reflected, "While my solutions were a little less complex than those offered by FDR, and my methods a bit more direct, I played a kind of New Deal Cowboy who never hesitated to tackle many of the same problems: the dust bowl, unemployment, or the harnessing of power," crediting his Depression-era popularity to the political values of his onscreen persona.⁴⁹

The horse-riding songster reemerged in in the 1950s and 1960s as a symbol of a new, white, suburban form of Americanism, hostile to Communism, liberalism, and secularism. The singing cowboy's political shift aligned with the "southernization" of Southern California, a

⁴⁷ LaChapelle, 135-36.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

theory which suggests that Okies brought conservative southern values with them when they migrated from the Dust Bowl. Historian Peter LaChapelle suggests a different approach:

The right-wing tilt of the 1950s and 1960s can be explained not so much as the “southernization” of the Southern California political culture, but as the “Southern California-ization” of the region’s transplanted southerners – a process in which working-class Oklahomans, Arkansans, and Texans threw off the ways of the southern plains for the political and social mannerisms of the coastal Sunbelt’s middle class.⁵⁰

Working-class migrants’ strive to assimilate into California’s idealized and respectable white suburban middle class created a strong base of support for conservative politics, especially when coupled with the emerging anticommunist rhetoric of the Republican party.

By the mid-1950s, the once left-leaning singing cowboys began shifting their politics to mirror the conservative values of the growing white suburban middle class. The horse opera stars employed the same language of their earlier Depression-era endorsements to support the new conservative populism that, as LaChapelle states, “embraced the everyman patriotism of the New Deal but vilified liberalism and the Left as alien or elite ideologies and movements.”⁵¹ The cowboy figure offered 1950s middle-class suburban audiences a “poignant counterpoint to the ‘other directedness’ or white-collar ‘yes man’ herd mentality.”⁵² The cowboy image also served a cathartic function, selling patriotism, reassurance, and clear-cut victories amid an era of containment, détente, and mutually assured nuclear annihilation to suburban audiences.⁵³ Singing cowboys Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Tex Ritter and Stuart Hamblen changed their tune

⁵⁰ LaChapelle, 139.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 138.

and became avid supporters of conservative causes and candidates, evident from their public appearance at political events.

The change in politics is apparent on the Sons of the Pioneers' *Lucky U Ranch* radio show, which aired from 1951 to 1953. Musicologist Travis D. Stimeling argues that on these broadcasts the Sons of the Pioneers "consciously or unconsciously responded to growing anticommunist sentiments and anxieties about the sanctity of 'traditional' American values by promoting the cowboy's moral code as a weapon in the defense of American values and by invoking nostalgic images of the mythic 'Old West' and Depression-era popular culture that stood in stark contrast to the increasingly global visions of postwar America."⁵⁴ The cowboy figure was reinvented as a national and foreign symbol of America's strength during the early years of the Cold War.

As the singing cowboys' politics shifted, so did their medium. In the early 1950s, singing cowboys began singing in their saddles on smaller screens in homes across America. LaChapelle notes the increase in home entertainment, saying that, "One place this inward turn was most evident was at the box office. Across the nation, attendance at movies, professional sporting events, and live musical performances declined markedly during the early 1950s as audiences turned toward home-centered entertainment."⁵⁵ In combination with local efforts to maintain the "western" in country and western, Gene Autry and Roy Rogers revitalized their careers with children's television shows in the 1950s. Gene Autry became the first singing cowboy to star on the small screen with his television series, CBS's *The Gene Autry Show*, in 1950. Although

⁵⁴ Travis D. Stimeling, "The Sons of the Pioneers' *Lucky 'U' Ranch* and the Singing Cowboy in Cold War America," *American Music* 28 (2010): 77.

⁵⁵ LaChapelle, 116.

television allowed less time than box office films for singing in the saddle, *The Gene Autry Show* did feature the theme song “Back in the Saddle.” After the demise of the original television series in 1956, Autry refashioned his *Melody Ranch Show* for television in the 1960s, turning it into a western-themed country music variety program. *The Roy Rogers Show* made its debut shortly after Autry’s, in 1951. A children’s show, costarring his wife Dale Evans, the show featured the theme song “Happy Trails.” During the 1950s, the singing cowboy movies competed with the hard-edged “new westerns,” and although the 1952 box office hit *High Noon* (starring Gary Cooper) was not a musical western, musical director Dmitri Tiomkin chose singing cowboy Tex Ritter to sing the theme song, “The Ballad of High Noon (Do Not Forsake Me).” The popularity of *High Noon* proved the cowboy image’s staying power in American popular culture, while the film’s music was awarded an Oscar for Best Original Song in 1952.

Marty Robbins first gained notoriety in western music by singing the theme song for another Gary Cooper western, *The Hanging Tree*, in 1959. Coupled with his previous hits for Columbia records, this most recent success put Robbins in a position to address his frustrations with the label, and he insisted that he be allowed to record an album that accorded with his childhood ambition to be a singing cowboy. Biographer Diane Diekman cites vocalist Bobby Sykes’s recollection of events leading up to the recording of *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*. Sykes overheard Robbins tell producer Don Law, pleading his case, “Don, this album won’t sell five hundred records, but it’s something I’ve always wanted to do and I think Columbia Records owes it to me.”⁵⁶ Robbins’s career until 1959 will be explored in the following chapter, and his western album *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* will be discussed at length in the third and

⁵⁶ LaChapelle, 68.

final chapter. Robbins's use of the cowboy image and traditional music of the cowboy on *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*, however, can only be understood against this backdrop of singing cowboys, western music and the cowboy image in country music.

Chapter Three: Marty Robbins: From Arizona to Music Row

Over a short period during the late 1940s and early 1950s Marty Robbins rose from a radio singer in Phoenix, Arizona, to Grand Ole Opry member in Nashville, Tennessee. The Opry star's desert upbringing certainly had an effect on his affinity for cowboy and western music and left him with a nostalgic longing for Arizona and the West when he moved his musical career and family to Music City, U.S.A. This chapter focuses on the life and career of Marty Robbins leading up to the recording of his 1959 album *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*. My goal is to frame a picture of Robbins in 1950s Nashville, the hub of the country music industry, during an era when country music was experiencing everlasting changes, not only in sound and image, but in business practises as well. I do not wish to claim Robbins's experiences in 1950s Nashville as exceptional or any better or worse than his peers' trials and tribulations in the country music industry. Nor do I aim to document every detail of his professional career. Rather, my aim here is to connect Robbins's successes, failures, and frustrations within the main arteries of the country music industry (the CMA, the Grand Ole Opry, and Music Row) to his versatility as a musician, his career choices, and his entrepreneurial approach to handling his business affairs. I will trace Robbins's move to Nashville, discuss his early pop-inflected hits, and consider his attitude towards the country music industry in the years prior to the recording of *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*.

Robbins's Childhood in Arizona

Martin David Robinson was born on September 26, 1925, in Glendale Arizona, a town situated just a few miles northwest of Phoenix. By all accounts the family was poor. The

Robinsons moved often, sometimes sheltered by only a tent or tarpaper shack. Robbins's father, Jack Robinson, was an alcoholic and was known to police in the Glendale area. Robinson senior fled Michigan as Jack Maczinski to avoid the World War I draft, changing his name upon arriving in Arizona.⁵⁷ Earning a steady income and providing for his family were difficult for Jack, as his drinking habits made maintaining a job nearly impossible, and his run-ins with the law caused the family to move often, sometimes at a moment's notice. In an interview with Alanna Nash, Robbins recalls his father's financial challenges, explaining that "my father did a lot of things, but he really didn't make too much money. I remember once he owned a hog ranch and was doing pretty well. Next thing I knew we were living twenty miles across the desert in a tarpaper shack."⁵⁸ Robbins's twin sister, Mamie, recalls much about their childhood in Arizona in her memoirs, *Some Memories: Growing Up With Marty Robbins*. Remembering her father, Mamie provides insight into his demeanor:

A terrible man? Yes, I supposed he was. There aren't any excuses I can make for him and these actions, except to try and remember the few moments of joy that he did provide. We have no way of knowing what private sorrows drove him to behave this way. As children, we certainly were not privy to our father's inner thoughts. Early letters to my mother from him showed a very caring and loving side to his nature. The fact remains too that he did not abandon his large family – although it would have been the kindest thing he could have done.⁵⁹

Mother Emma Heckle was the nurturer and also a strong woman, as Mamie described her:

Looking back, it is hard to believe that my mother put up with so much from him. She was a strong person. But, in her defense, she was also a victim of her own upbringing. She was raised in remote mountain country, much the way she raised

⁵⁷ Diane Diekman, *Twentieth Century Drifter: The Life Of Marty Robbins*, (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 6.

⁵⁸ Alanna Nash, *Behind Closed Doors: Talking with the Legends of Country Music* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988), 461.

⁵⁹ Mamie Robinson Minotto and Andrew Means, *Some Memories: Growing up with Marty Robbins* (n.p.: Booklocker, 2007), 19.

her own brood. The male in the family was always right and it was her place to stand by him, though I am sure she must have known he was wrong so much of the time. It didn't mean that she never wanted any better or that she didn't love her children. It was just that this was the life women expected in those days. She did the best she could under the worst of circumstances.⁶⁰

Robbins's mother would not tolerate her abusive husband's behaviour much longer.

Although Robbins's childhood was harsh and peppered with bouts of family turmoil, music was ever present. Robbins would sing in the church as a youngster, and he took up the harmonica at just four years old. Mother Emma had an old wind-up Victrola player and enjoyed listening to records while she fixed dinner. One of her favourites was Jimmie Rodgers's "All Around the Water Tank (Waiting for a Train)," which little Martin sang along to.⁶¹ Robbins's maternal grandfather, Texas Bob Heckle, was a former Texas Ranger and a wonderful storyteller. In her interviews conducted with Robbins between 1975 and 1981, Alanna Nash asks Robbins about his early musical influences:

Nash: Aside from the fact that you're from Arizona, and grew up hearing about the great western lore, doesn't part of your fascination with gunfighters stem from the tales of your grandfather, Texas Bob Heckle, used to tell?

Robbins: Oh, he could tell the tales! He was a good storyteller, yes, but I was a baby then. Later in life, I kind of felt that he had been putting me on a little bit with his stories, even though he was what he said he was. He was a Texas Ranger at one time, and he had two little books of poems that he sold on a medicine show. He'd sell the medicine, and then he'd sell the little books of poems. He wasn't educated, except by life, but he was pretty wise. And I could tell by the words that he used that he was a pretty intelligent man. But the stories that he would tell me were cowboy stories that he heard around the campfire. That's how the stories were related back in the early days of the American West, just like in England, you know. Stories were told by different people. News went around by word of mouth, and that's the way the early American cowboy songs were done. Actually, as far as news was concerned, I guess one rider would take it from one cowboy camp to another.

⁶⁰ Minotto and Means, 19.

⁶¹ Diekman, 8-9.

Nash: Was your grandfather the inspiration for your career?

Robbins: No, Gene Autry was really the inspiration for almost everything. But the talent that I do have came from my grandfather, because he was able to write. I had a brother — he's passed away now — who wrote on the same lines as my grandfather, but he could not write melodies, you see. I saw a lot of my grandfather's writing in my brother's writing. But my grandfather only inspired me to be a cowboy, I guess. That's what I wanted to be. Because I thought a lot of him, and he was a cowboy, you know. Of course, he died when I was six years old, so I don't remember seeing him a lot. I remember visits to his house. About once every three or four months, we'd go to see them. They lived in town, and we lived way up out in the desert, so we wouldn't get in too often. But when we did, I'd sing for him and he would tell me stories.⁶²

Robbins's fascination with Gene Autry began when he saw *Yodelin' Kid from Pine Ridge* in the summer of 1937. Robbins later recalled watching his hero on the big screen: "I was down there sitting in front. I would sit so close to the screen that I would get powder burns when them guns would go off. I tell you, I'd get sand kicked in my face; tumbleweeds rolled across me."⁶³ Robbins would walk the ten miles home in the dark after the theater had closed at ten o' clock, all by himself. Autry's movies instilled a sense of bravery in the youngster, as Robbins remembers, ". . . I wasn't afraid because I had just seen Gene Autry, and I was Gene Autry that night. The desert's full of rattlesnakes, centipedes, scorpions, sidewinders but it didn't bother me. I was Gene Autry. They didn't dare come out of the bushes after me."⁶⁴

In January 1937 Robbins's mother moved the children, without Jack, to a house in Glendale that belonged to her deceased mother. Robbins later described the house as "a little two-room shack down by the railroad tracks," in an area that Glendale residents called "the barrio." The area was divided by Glendale Avenue, with most Anglos to the north and Mexicans

⁶² Nash, 472.

⁶³ Diekman, 15.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

and poor whites — like the Robinsons — living on the south side. The Robinsons’ new neighbourhood left quite an impression on young Robbins, particularly the Mexican songs he would hear late at night near the railroad tracks. “They’d get drunk on Saturday nights,” he reminisced, “and you could just hear them singing – three, four, five, six of them at a time. It was real beautiful, and I could just lay there and listen to it all night long. I really learned to love Mexican music. So it’s easy for me to write that kind of a tune.”⁶⁵ According to twin sister Mamie, it was shortly after the family’s move to Glendale that Robbins picked up the guitar. As Mamie recalls, “It was in Glendale that I first remember Martin picking up a guitar. Our eldest sister Ann had one that she wasn’t making much headway on. Martin was soon picking out tunes on it of course. I think Ann showed him a couple of chords, but mostly he just sat and did it. Before long we were singing ‘You Are My Sunshine’.”⁶⁶ It was also during his school age days in Glendale that Robbins encountered Fidelina Martinez, a classmate whose name became the inspiration for Feleena in “El Paso.”⁶⁷

It was during their time in Glendale that the Robinson children realized just how poor they were. As Robbins recalled, “I know what it is like to be laughed at because your shoe doesn’t have a sole in it and because your pants have a hole in them. Not only by other kids but I know what it’s like to be ridiculed by a teacher. I never really cared too much for school . . . We were poor. We never had nice clothes. Even then, as young as I was, I could still be

⁶⁵ Diekman, 17.

⁶⁶ Minotto and Means, 97.

⁶⁷ Diekman, 17.

embarrassed by having torn clothes.”⁶⁸ Perhaps his tumultuous childhood caused a mischievous side in Robbins during his teenage years. As he tells Alanna Nash:

Robbins: Oh, I was a bad boy, *bad* boy! When I was older, I just about turned into a Johnny Cash or a Merle Haggard! Of course, now they’re straightened up, so I can say that. But they were bad boys, see. And I almost turned into one. Stopped just short of it. Things changed when I realized that I was not going to get what I wanted in life by living the life I was living.

Nash: Were you a juvenile delinquent?

Robbins: Yes, absolutely. Because, you see, at one time in the little town of Glendale, Arizona, the word was out that they were going to get up a petition and have all the people in the town sign it and send three of us boys to the reform school because we were unwanted citizens. We were really bad. This was like when I was fourteen and fifteen years old. And I did pull some good ones, boy. I couldn’t tell you the things I did, because they could still be after me. I’m not going to confess now. That’s too late in life.⁶⁹

Robbins’s childhood friend Ralph Ramsey recalled the Robinson brothers’ escapades in young Robbins’s first car, an Overland that cost him \$12. The brothers, and Ramsey, would frequently make night raids on neighbouring farm land and take the vegetables home to Mrs. Robinson to cook. Along with the produce, they’d also steal gasoline from storage tanks used to refuel tractors. According to friend Ralph, the brothers were caught on one occasion and spent time in jail, but Ralph and Marty were not involved in that incident.⁷⁰

Robbins was not keen on work *or* school, according to many sources. Sister Mamie remembers that “Uncle Mart took him up to the mountains to work, but it didn’t last long. Martin didn’t like to work.”⁷¹ Robbins was in school the day Gene Autry came to Glendale High

⁶⁸ Diekman, 12.

⁶⁹ Nash, 472.

⁷⁰ Minotto and Means, 104-5.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

School to give a free performance in late 1942. Autry had joined the Army Air Corps and was assigned to Luke Field. “I’ll never forget that,” Marty stated. “I didn’t get to meet him, but I got to see him.”⁷² Not long after Autry’s school visit, and against his mother’s wishes, Robbins dropped out of school and enlisted in the U.S. Navy in May of 1943. He spent three years serving on an LCM (landing craft mechanized) in the Pacific. A shipmate remembered that he was “easy-going and liked music. He had a guitar and he’d sit around and play that thing almost every night. I thought he was great.”⁷³ Robbins was discharged from the Navy in 1945 and returned to Glendale, where he worked as a truck driver and electrician’s helper. At night, Robbins — using the pseudonym “Jack Robinson” because his mother disapproved of his new profession — performed as a sideman playing guitar in a supper-club band.⁷⁴ He tried a few jobs without showing a preference for any particular line of work. When he eventually started to make headway as an entertainer, he told at least one acquaintance that he initially pursued music as a preferred alternative to holding down a day job.⁷⁵

Robbins’s Musical Career in Arizona

During this early stage of Robbins’s musical career a fellow Arizona singer, Frankie Starr, played an important role in aiding the aspiring star, and claimed he had given Robbins “his first job in music.”⁷⁶ Starr was performing in local night clubs with his band when Robbins came back from the Navy, and Robbins tracked down Frankie at a local club after hearing him sing on his

⁷² Diekman, 19.

⁷³ Ibid., 23.

⁷⁴ Nash, 460.

⁷⁵ Minotto and Means, 110.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 112.

radio show on Phoenix's KPHO. Starr's first impression from this 1947 meeting was that Robbins was "dirt poor."⁷⁷ Robbins told Starr he was driving a truck but wanted to quit and get into the music business. According to Starr, "He was making very little money, driving a truck working 10 or 11 hours a day hauling brick. He worked all hours. Jobs weren't too easy to get back then."⁷⁸ While Starr was performing at a club in downtown Phoenix, he invited Robbins on stage one night, and Robbins sang an Eddy Arnold song, "Many Tears Ago." Robbins's performance must have made a good impression on Starr because he swiftly took the young singer under his wing, buying him new clothes and musical equipment. According to Starr, Robbins, "had an old guitar with a bent neck. There was a piece of car inner tube wrapped around it to hold the pickup on the box. It was an acoustic guitar with a homemade pickup."⁷⁹ Starr took Robbins to the local instrument show, Otto Stein Music Company in Phoenix, and bought Robbins a guitar and amplifier. The guitar was "a little Epiphone that had a hollow body but it was strictly electric," according to Starr.⁸⁰ The next step was to get Robbins membership in the appropriate union, the American Federation of Musicians. There was an attempt to give Robbins a stage name, with Starr suggesting Marty Martin, but that didn't stick.⁸¹

Compared to Robbins's singing style on his later recordings, Starr said that Robbins "sang altogether different" when he started out as a stage performer.⁸² His guitar style too left room for improvement, consisting of a few basic strummed chords at the rudimentary level.

⁷⁷ Minotto and Means, 112.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 113.

Before Starr admitted Marty to his band he got him a solo gig at a Phoenix nightclub, the Gallup Inn. According to Starr, on the night of Robbins's first performance they made plans to meet after they'd both finished their gigs. Apparently nerves cut Robbins's show quite short. Only twenty minutes in, Robbins, with "his guitar under one arm and his little amplifier," Starr recollected, "walks straight across the dance floor and said, 'Pops, they don't want to hear me sing.'"⁸³ Starr sympathized and replied, "Well if you can hang in there, Marty, with your job, when we get more business I'll hire you."⁸⁴ Starr kept his word and eventually hired Robbins. The young singer went from making about \$27 a week driving a truck to a union rate of \$60 plus about \$30 in tips. According to Starr, "His eyes lit up" on realizing his pay as a musician, and "he couldn't believe it."⁸⁵ When Starr decided to move on from the club, Robbins replaced him as the featured performer. He grew a fan base in Phoenix and must have been well-liked by his employer, as club owner Fred Kare drove Robbins to Nashville when he was invited to perform at the Grand Ole Opry for the first time on June 30th, 1951.

While working as a musician in Phoenix during the late 1940s, Robbins heard a singer on the local radio station with mediocre talent. He went to the station, KYTL in Mesa, Arizona, and asked to speak to management, after which he was awarded an audition.⁸⁶ According to Richard Kienzle, Robbins auditioned with "The Strawberry Roan," a traditional cowboy song that would later appear on *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*.⁸⁷ Robbins replaced the amateur

⁸³ Minotto and Means, 113.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 113.

⁸⁵ Diekman, 37.

⁸⁶ Guy Logsdon, liner notes to Marty Robbins, *Under Western Skies* (Germany: Bear Family Records, 1995), 4.

⁸⁷ Richard Kienzle, liner notes to *The Essential Marty Robbins: 1951-1982*, (Columbia Records, 1991), 5.

singer, was signed on as a singer-guitarist, and formed his own group, the K-Bar Cowboys.⁸⁸

Shortly thereafter he moved to KPHO, Phoenix (run by former Grand Ole Opry announcer Harry Stone), where he took a disc jockey position, hosting the show *Chuck Wagon Time*.⁸⁹ According to multiple biographical sources, Robbins was forced into his first television appearance.⁹⁰

Phoenix's KPHO, where Robbins maintained a radio slot, debuted the first television station in the city. The station stipulated that Robbins would perform on television or he would lose his radio show. Robbins consented to the TV appearances but often became ill before the show started. Robbins's guest appearances were popular, and he soon had a TV show of his own called *Country Caravan*.⁹¹

Marty Robbins caught his big break in 1951. While in Phoenix promoting his tour, Opry regular Little Jimmy Dickens stopped by KPHO and made an appearance on Robbins's TV show. Dickens stayed to watch Robbins and his group perform, then recommended Robbins to Art Satherley, Columbia's western head of country A&R. Robbins's friend and steel player at the time, Jim Farmer, recalls the events that led to Robbins's signing with Columbia:

Jimmy Dickens, Cowboy Copas and a bunch of others come through town on an Opry tour. They were playing at the Madison Square Garden [a sports arena in Phoenix]. When a group of that size come to town, they'd try to arrange some publicity. I'm sure Jimmy Dickens and Cowboy Copas got on KPHO because they knew Harry Stone. They come on Marty's TV show, and I don't believe they sang anything, just plugged their date. Then they stayed around and listen to us, and Jimmy Dickens told Art Satherley in Los Angeles that he needed to sign us up.⁹²

⁸⁸ Minotto and Means, 121.

⁸⁹ Logsdon, 4, and Nash, 461.

⁹⁰ Logsdon, 4; Minotto and Means, 121; Escott, 6; Kienzle, 5.

⁹¹ Logsdon, 4.

⁹² Escott, 6.

Dickens convinced Art Satherly of Columbia Records to travel to Phoenix to hear Robbins, and Satherly signed Robbins to Columbia on May 25th, 1951.⁹³

Harry Stone of KPHO in Phoenix used his connections in Nashville to arrange Robbins's Grant Ole Opry debut on June 30th, 1951. Robbins appeared on the Prince Albert segment, a half-hour show broadcast over the NBC network and hosted by Red Foley. Robbins dedicated his performance to "all the people back in Arizona" and performed an original tune called "Ain't You Ashamed?"⁹⁴ Phoenix club owner Fred Kare drove Robbins to his Opry debut and many of his other engagements around the South and West, including his first recording session in Los Angeles on November 14, 1951.⁹⁵ Six months after signing with Columbia, Robbins, along with Kare and bandmates Floyd Lanning (lead guitar) and Jim Farmer (steel guitar), left for Los Angeles at 1:30 AM (following a club gig) in a two-car convoy across the desert. According to Colin Escott, the reason for the delay in recording was that Robbins failed to appreciate what recordings could do for his career. Robbins later told Bob Allen in an interview, "It didn't mean anything to me to record. I was making \$750 a month in Phoenix between the radio and television shows and the club dates, and I seriously thought, 'How in the world can it get better than this?'"⁹⁶ Robbins was keen to record his own material from his very first recording sessions. "They'd sent me about twenty songs so I could pick out four," Robbins told Allen. "But I wrote songs, and I said to myself, 'My songs are better than these.' At the session I told the man I had four of my own songs, and he didn't like that. Right before the session started, he

⁹³ Logsdon, 4.

⁹⁴ Diekman, 37.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁹⁶ Colin Escott, liner notes to Marty Robbins, *Country 1951-1958* (Bear Family Records, 1991), 7.

called me to one side and said, 'You've got to give up half the songs, put my name on there as a cowriter.' I said I couldn't do that, and he said that was the only way he could record me. I had three guys in from Phoenix with me, and I said, 'OK guys, get your things, we're going home.' It really didn't mean a thing for me to record. Then the guy said, 'Oh uh wait a minute. It's alright.'"⁹⁷ Robbins recorded "Love Me or Leave Me Alone," "Tomorrow You'll Be Gone," "I Wish Somebody Loved Me," and "Crying 'Cause I Love You." The first two songs were released on March 24, 1952, followed by the latter two in June of that year. No songs from these first recordings charted but they did get radio play.

In 1952, while his successes in Phoenix were accruing, Robbins's musical efforts were recognized by the premier western group, the Sons of the Pioneers, on their radio show "The Lucky 'U' Ranch." The "Gold Deed Award" segment was a feature on the show in which the Sons of the Pioneers would offer a "gold deed to an acre of Lucky 'U' land" to someone who stood as a paragon of charity and civic responsibility.⁹⁸ Robbins was nominated by his fans at a Phoenix nursing home where he had performed a free concert, making time in between his grueling six-day-a-week radio show responsibilities for KPHO. Over sixty senior citizens in Phoenix signed the nomination letter, and Marty Robbins, then just a local cowboy singer, was awarded the "Gold Deed Award" on May 13, 1952. According to Travis D. Stimeling, Robbins's good deed was held as an example of how western musicians, including the Sons of the Pioneers, could be agents of change in their respective communities.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Escott, 7.

⁹⁸ Travis D. Stimeling, "The Sons of the Pioneers' *Lucky 'U' Ranch* and the Singing Cowboy in Cold War America," *American Music* 28 (2010): 83.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

On June 3rd, 1952 Robbins's second session took place, this time in Jim Beck's studio in Dallas, Texas. Don Law replaced Art Satherley as Robbins's producer, perhaps aiming to develop a more modern sound. The first session, described as having "a distinctive old-timey flavor," had not matched the character of other Columbia recordings of the period.¹⁰⁰ Robbins's original, "I'll Go Alone," was the first song recorded in Dallas. Released on October 10, 1952, and backed with another of his songs from the session, "You're Breaking My Heart (While You're Holding My Hand)," it hit the *Billboard* Country Single Chart on December 20 and stayed eighteen weeks, including two weeks at number one. "I'll Go Alone" earned recognition in Nashville, as just eight weeks after Robbins's version was released Nashville honky-tonker Webb Pierce (who already had three number one hits to his credit) hurried into the studio to record his take on it. Robbins beat out the established star, and his original peaked at number one for a week in January 1953. Robbins's recording of "I'll Go Alone" also had some stiff competition from country music's recently deceased star, Hank Williams, as Robbins's single shared the number one spot with Williams's eerily-timed swan song "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive" for a week.¹⁰¹ Webb Pierce employs a piercing, nasally vocal tone on his version of "I'll Go on Alone." Fiddle and steel guitar alternate providing fills in between vocals lines. By contrast, Marty Robbins's vocals contain more vibrato, and he is singing from his chest, opposed to Pierce's head voice technique, to produce a refined, polished vocal sound. Robbins's version is slightly faster than Pierce's. A piano provides fills in between vocal lines, giving the song a more contemporary, "classier" sound, which, coupled with Robbins's pop-

¹⁰⁰ Diekman, 38.

¹⁰¹ Escott, 8.

influenced vocals, substantially distance his version of “I’ll Go on Alone” from the hillbilly sound of Pierce’s version.

Don Law scheduled Robbins’s third session, again in Dallas, on November 26th of 1952. In addition to the usual heartbreak songs, Robbins recorded Texas songwriter Cindy Walker’s Hawaiian-themed love song, “Lorelei.” According to biographer Diane Diekman, of twenty-nine songs in Robbins’s first seven Columbia sessions, twenty-two were about heartbreak. Robbins wrote all of them, as well as three of seven Hawaiian and gospel songs. Robbins also recorded “I Couldn’t Keep From Crying,” during his second session in Dallas. It became Robbins’s second *Billboard* chart song, debuting in March 1953 and reaching a peak of number five. More than a year would pass before another of Robbins’s songs charted.¹⁰²

Relocating to Nashville

Near the end of 1952 Robbins received an offer he could not refuse — to become an official member of the Grand Ole Opry — which was made official on January 24th, 1953. Robbins had played some guest spots on the show and had obviously made an impression, becoming an official member with only one hit to his name.¹⁰³ During this same time Harry Stone had contacted Fred Rose of Acuff-Rose Music Publishing in Nashville. The partnership between Rose, an established songwriter (“Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain”), and country music legend Roy Acuff was a major catalyst for Nashville becoming the center of the country music industry, and Rose aided in Hank Williams’s rise to fame. Harry Stone convinced Fred Rose of

¹⁰² Diekman, 39, 42.

¹⁰³ Escott, 8.

Robbins's songwriting talents, and Rose was soon on a plane to Phoenix to meet the up-and-coming songwriter from Arizona. Remembering the unusual occurrence Robbins later said, "Him being the writer that he was, I always felt that was the greatest compliment I've ever had, y'know, since I've been in the business, is to have him fly out there to sign me up as a writer."¹⁰⁴ Shortly after earning Opry membership and signing with Acuff-Rose, Robbins and his family moved to Nashville, buying a little house on Loney Drive. Martha White Flour gave him a daily show on WSM from 5:45 until 6:00 am, WSM-TV put him on television occasionally, and the Opry's Artist Service Bureau placed him on their package show. Those gigs combined to give him just enough money to encourage him to stay.¹⁰⁵

Relocating to Nashville was hard on Robbins and his wife Marizona, as she later recalled, saying, "We moved to Nashville, and I'm telling you, it was hard on me. I loved Phoenix."¹⁰⁶ Robbins longed for the endless western skies and dry heat of Arizona. He later recalled his first impressions of the South: "You couldn't see a mile down the road. [Roads] were crooked, trees everywhere. I felt trapped down here. I almost went back to Arizona. I couldn't handle the cold weather down here; I couldn't take the humidity."¹⁰⁷ Robbins also felt like he didn't belong in Nashville, and was overwhelmed with the celebrities in Music City. Robbins later recalled that it took him years to get over his tendency to become star struck and tongue tied.¹⁰⁸ There were also frustrations with getting a band together and touring. Robbins's wanted his friend and steel player, Jim Farmer, to relocate from Arizona and join his touring band. The musician's

¹⁰⁴ Diekman, 39.

¹⁰⁵ Escott, 8.

¹⁰⁶ Diekman, 39.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 41.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 42.

union in Nashville refused to admit out-of-town steel players, so Farmer was denied membership. In 1954, after a session with Farmer in Dallas, Robbins told the president of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) that he would play solo on the Opry if he could not bring his own band. The AFM eventually succumbed to Robbins's pressure and Jim Farmer moved to Nashville in June of 1954.¹⁰⁹

Robbins toured the Martha White bluegrass circuit in his early days in Nashville. The circuit, sponsored by Martha White Flour, was a tried and true touring circuit for musicians based in Nashville but was "strictly a bluegrass circuit" according to guitarist Ray Edenton, and Robbins's show was not crowd pleasing.¹¹⁰ Perhaps Robbins's lukewarm response from southern audiences was due to the lack of regionality in his singing style. Robbins's smooth and mellow vibrato-laden vocal style was certainly a deviation from the higher-register, nasal tone of bluegrass and hillbilly singers that the Martha White circuit fans were accustomed to. Shortly after he relocated, Robbins recalled a show store clerk telling him that he'd never make it in Nashville because he wasn't country enough.¹¹¹ The move to Nashville had an impact upon Robbins in later years, according to Colin Escott, as it enabled him to place the western experience in context, and to appreciate it far more.¹¹² *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* can be perceived as Robbins's nostalgic ode to Arizona and the West.

On December 7, 1954, Don Law brought Robbins back into the studio in Nashville. Robbins had prepared "That's All Right Mama" for the session, a 1947 R&B number by Arthur

¹⁰⁹ Escott, 9.

¹¹⁰ Diekman, 42.

¹¹¹ Escott, 9.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

“Big Boy” Crudup. Elvis Presley had just released his version of the song in July 1954 and had a follow-up single (“Good Rockin’ Tonight” b/w “I Don’t Care If the Sun Don’t Shine”), which was not faring too well by the time Robbins’s recorded his version of “That’s All Right Mama.” Presley had not yet tapped into the country audience, having appeared on the Opry in October 1954 to an underwhelming reception. Robbins must have recognized an opportunity in “That’s All Right Mama” and thought the song might still have some mileage if it appeared on a major label. Don Law agreed, and it was released just twenty days after the session, on December 27, 1954. The song launched Robbins back into the charts for eleven weeks, peaking at number seven. Robbins was so happy that he decorated the new Jaguar he had just bought by painting “That’s All Right Mama” over the back end. According to Colin Escott, Robbins’ version of “That’s All Right” was the first record to earn him the somewhat ill-deserved affection of rockabilly fans overseas. Escott argues, “It really wasn’t a rockabilly record; it didn’t have the twitchy energy of rockabilly, and was simply an R&B record re-cast as an up-tempo country song. Other songs on the session like ‘Pray For Me Mother of Mine’ and ‘Daddy Loves You’ showed how little Robbins appreciated the ferment brewing two hundred miles down the road in Memphis.”¹¹³ Regardless of his interest in the Memphis music scene, Robbins’s version of “That’s All Right Mama” attracted a rock ‘n’ roll fan base that would follow him throughout his career.¹¹⁴

In between his singles “That’s All Right Mama” and “Singing the Blues” Robbins hit somewhat of a dry spell in his career. He recorded a duet session with Ray Edenton, under the

¹¹³ Escott, 10.

¹¹⁴ Logsdon, 4.

title *Ray and Roy*, on May 23, 1954. Don Law was the producer on this session, and these were the first of Robbins's recordings to be deemed unworthy of release. As Colin Escott concludes, the choice of recordings for this session "veered between odd and weak."¹¹⁵

Frustrations with Columbia

Robbins's frustrations with Columbia accrued as he saw two chances to crossover into the pop market pass him by in fellow Columbia artist Guy Mitchell. Robbins recorded the Melvin Endsley-written song "Singing the Blues" on November 3, 1955 at Bradley Studios in Nashville, also with Don Law as producer. After hearing Endsley's demo, Robbins was not convinced he should record the song and was almost at the point of passing on it before steel guitar player Jim Farmer suggested that Robbins add his own vocal embellishments to the song. As Farmer recalls:

"The first I remember of 'Singing the Blues,'" said Farmer, "was when we were travelling across Texas with a package show and he was rehearsing it. We had a session coming up, and he was having a problem with that line 'cry-y-ing over you...' On the demo, Melvin Endsley didn't have the little yodel; Melvin done it the way that Guy Mitchell done it — a descending vocal line — but Marty didn't like that, and we were trying to figure what to do about it. Something clicked with me. I had 'Lovesick Blues' going through my mind, and I said he should try and work a little yodel into the word 'crying' like Hank did on the word 'blues' in 'Lovesick Blues.' Marty said, 'That's it!'"¹¹⁶

Robbins didn't yodel much after "Singing the Blues," in fact yodeling is completely absent from *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*, a western album on which the yodel would seem

¹¹⁵ Escott, 10.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

fitting. Perhaps Robbins's abandonment of the yodel was the result of the "Singing the Blues" incident, to be discussed shortly.

Unfortunately, Columbia delayed the release of "Singing the Blues," waiting nine months after it was recorded. Escott suggests that label executives or producer Don Law considered the single was too country.¹¹⁷ Columbia finally released "Singing the Blues" on August 6th, 1956, and by November it had beaten out "Hound Dog" for the number one spot on the country charts, where it remained until February of 1957. Robbins was awarded the *Billboard Magazine* Triple Crown for "Singing the Blues," which consisted of three *Billboard* Country Hit Parade charts – jukebox play, store sales, and radio play. The competition for that year was tough; the other top contenders were Ray Price's "Crazy Arms," Elvis Presley's "Don't Be Cruel," and Johnny Cash's "I Walk the Line."¹¹⁸ "Singing the Blues" spent thirteen weeks at number one and stayed on *Billboard's* country charts for seven months, and it became Robbins's first single to cross over to the pop charts, where it stayed for four months, peaking at number seventeen.

Despite Robbins's success with "Singing the Blues," Mitch Miller, the New York-based head of A&R for Columbia, decided someone else was going to cover the song for the pop market, and he chose Guy Mitchell, a Columbia artist whose career needed a boost. When Mitchell's version entered the pop charts it soon outpaced Robbins's version, capturing most of the popular airplay and selling approximately two million copies to Robbins's half a million. Columbia's efforts to rejuvenate Mitchell's career limited the crossover success of Robbins's

¹¹⁷ Escott, 12.

¹¹⁸ Diekman, 53.

version of "Singing the Blues."¹¹⁹ Robbins cut another Melvin Endsley song, "Knee Deep in the Blues," on September 4th, 1956, at Music City Recording in Nashville, also produced by Don Law. This put Robbins back on the charts, but Columbia undermined his success a second time with the same artist. Guy Mitchell's version of "Knee Deep in the Blues" entered the pop charts in January of 1957, before Robbins's version had a chance to cross over. Colin Escott suggests that there may have been a confrontation after this double dupe by Columbia, but that those involved, and still alive, deny it.¹²⁰ Surely, Robbins would have been frustrated. His voice was not distinctly "country," only his instrumentation. He was pegged as a country singer while his peers Sonny James, Ferlin Husky, Elvis Presley, and of course Guy Mitchell, achieved pop chart success when given the chance. After the second Guy Mitchell incident, Robbins spoke with Miller and arranged a recording session at Columbia studio in New York City.

Robbins went into the New York recording session (which took place on January 26 and 27, 1957) armed with a future hit, an original song called "A White Sport Coat (And a Pink Carnation)." The song had come to him one night while driving across Ohio, sitting in the back seat and thinking about a song he'd written, "A Ring and a Promise." Columbia refused to let Robbins record it because Sonny James had a current hit with the similar-sounding "Young Love," a crossover number one hit on both country and pop charts. Robbins later recalled, "I was so *mad* because I thought somebody had heard my song and stolen my idea and melody."¹²¹ Robbins considered "A White Sport Coat (And a Pink Carnation)" to be a forerunner of the Nashville Sound, which was beginning to take shape in the late '50s. He described the

¹¹⁹ Diekman, 55.

¹²⁰ Escott, 12.

¹²¹ Diekman, 56.

guitar work on the recording as the “same type that was used in Nashville later on. I think that has a lot to do with the Nashville Sound with the guitar.”¹²²

There is absolutely nothing about “A White Sport Coat (And A Pink Carnation)” that signifies it is a country song. Absent are the fiddle and steel guitar, which both played prominent roles on Robbins’s earlier country recordings. It is not a rockabilly song either, like his version of “Maybelline,” but straightforward pop. “A White Sport Coat” begins with an electric guitar playing an arpeggio pattern, a far cry from the clichéd fiddle and steel intros of his early country recordings. Omitting the fiddle and steel was becoming a common trend in country music in the late 1950s, as part of what would become known as the Nashville Sound. Also common in this emerging new sound was the addition of background vocals, which play a prominent role in “A White Sport Coat.” In fact, this was Robbins’s first record with backing vocals, and he was convinced by the result to hire vocalists in his live touring band. The addition of backing vocals to Robbins’s band occurred two years prior to the recording of *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* in 1959, and certainly became a defining quality on that album. Robbins’s backing vocalists quite literally came knocking on his door, his dressing room door, at a show in Grand Island, Nebraska during the summer of 1957. Louis Glaser, father of Tom, Chuck, and Jim Glaser (ages, 23, 21, 19), came knocking on Robbins’s door after the show was through and asked, “Will you listen to my boys sing?” Louis Glaser had brought his three youngest sons, decked out in their matching aqua-blue shirts for a performance at the drive-in theater later that evening, to see their idol, Marty Robbins, in concert. Robbins granted father Louis’s request, as Jim Glaser recalled:

¹²² Diekman, 58.

Dad came out front with a big smile on his face and the three of us followed him backstage. I don't remember which three or four songs we sang for Marty in his dressing room; I do remember he was obviously impressed with what he heard and promised if we'd come to Nashville in a few weeks, he would take us into a recording studio and make a record with us.¹²³

Robbins and the Glaser brothers formed a close working relationship, and were fond and supportive of each other's songwriting and musicianship (discussed further in the following chapter).

The Country Music Association

The emerging Nashville Sound was closely aligned with the Country Music Association (CMA), a trade group that was formed in Nashville in 1958 and organized the various sectors of the country music industry in support of a unified marketing strategy. The CMA's efforts to polish the image of country music went hand-in-hand with the "un-twanging" of country music happening as part of the Nashville Sound. While the commercial success of honky-tonk and rockabilly had created what Diane Pecknold describes as "a fully formed and relatively autonomous music production center" in Nashville, the country music industry was met with new challenges in the media, including the advent of television and the development of Top 40 radio programming.¹²⁴ The late 1950s have commonly been identified in the collective memory of the country business as a period in which the budding Nashville establishment was seriously threatened. That threat has generally been blamed on the popularity of rock 'n' roll, but, the

¹²³ Diekman, 59.

¹²⁴ Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 134.

causes of the industry's instability, according to Pecknold, stemmed from more endemic changes in the entertainment business, the reconfiguration of mass media, the centralization of the country business itself, and the social changes associated with the migration of rural Southerners and Midwesterners to urban industrial centers.¹²⁵

The CMA's strategy emphasized to potential advertisers that country fans were no longer rural hillbillies; instead the modern country music fan was an urban consumer, and, thus, advertising on a new country station would be profitable. The CMA resented negative connotations concerning the intelligence, taste, and even hygiene of country musicians and their fans. As Jeremy Hill suggests, the CMA believed that as country stars moved closer to pop music, these outdated ideas about hillbilly music still influenced national journalists, station managers, and, importantly, advertising agencies.¹²⁶ The CMA circulated mailings to radio stations, held press releases, attended agency meetings, and corresponded with disc jockeys in their efforts to persuade networks and advertisers to overcome their misguided assumptions about the income, intelligence, and geographic location of country music's fans and to make the genre a "truly national phenomenon."¹²⁷ While the development of format country radio helped to define a historical canon for the genre, unfortunately regional variations were eliminated in that process in order to achieve a more unified sound.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Pecknold, 134.

¹²⁶ Jeremy Hill, *Country Comes to Town: The Music Industry and the Transformation of Nashville* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 39.

¹²⁷ Hill, 39.

¹²⁸ Pecknold, 10.

The CMA's efforts to create a modern image of country music came at the expense of, to use Nadine Hubbs's term, Jed-facing country music's past.¹²⁹ Hill relays an example of the CMA distancing itself from country music's past:

The CMA's 1960 mailing to advertising agencies in fact carried an implicit endorsement of the stylistic changes associated with the emerging Nashville Sound and explicitly connected the new sound to reaching new urban audiences: "No longer the toe-tappin', fiddle-twanging music of the backwoods, country music has emerged from the darkness to become a highly commercial format for local radio. This modern 'folk' music can be programmed to a vast consuming audience in any metropolitan city." For the CMA, it was not just that the audience for the traditional music had expanded, bringing the music of the backwoods to the city; rather, the music itself had been transformed. This transformation was underscored as well by the modifier "modern." The CMA acknowledged the historic prejudice against backwoods hillbilly music while at the same time quite clearly geographically distancing contemporary country music from the hillbilly music of the past.¹³⁰

This sentiment can be heard since the initial formation of the CMA in November of 1958. In his keynote address, Jack Stapp initially argued that executives in New York and Los Angeles and radio programmers around the country were woefully ignorant of the country field and viewed the country artist as "an uncouth, unintelligent, no talent, no appeal individual."¹³¹ According to Stapp, the chief goal of the CMA would be to "educate the people behind the closed doors" of the television networks and radio stations, to help them understand what country music could do for their ratings and for their sponsors.¹³² Furthermore, Stapp suggested that this

¹²⁹ Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 25.

¹³⁰ Hill, 39.

¹³¹ Pecknold, 13.

¹³² Stapp quoted in Pecknold, 13.

educational campaign would need to be extended to the public, or else the country business would be “relying to a dangerous extent on the tastes of [its] loyal followers.”¹³³

Because of industry politics Marty Robbins eschewed membership to the CMA until 1980. Diane Diekman argues that Robbins lack of support for his industry’s major association emphasized his outsider status in Nashville, and the fact that he never received a CMA award may have been the cause or effect of his attitude.¹³⁴ “I have nothing against the CMA, the people,” he said, “it’s just that I do not agree with them. So if I don’t agree with them, I think I would be a hypocrite if I would take part in it.”¹³⁵ He told an interviewer, “They think, ‘What can we do to help CMA?’ not the industry.”¹³⁶ Referring to his two number one hits and number one album in 1976, he implied his lack of membership resulted in his lack of award nominations: “I don’t belong to the CMA. I don’t think you should have to. I don’t think that should matter.”¹³⁷ During the 14th Annual Music City News Awards show at the Opry House on June of 1980, he won the Songwriter and Male Artist of the Year awards. During his acceptance speech he told the audience, “Larry Gatlin and I were talking about these awards backstage and he said he though I must have bought that Songwriter of the Year award. I said he had this mixed up with one of those other shows.”¹³⁸ He continued his dig at the CMA backstage, saying, “This is the only award in the world that means anything to me because I know it’s from the

¹³³ Stapp quoted in Pecknold, 13.

¹³⁴ Diekman, 195.

¹³⁵ Robbins quoted in Diekman, 195.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 195.

people who go out and buy my records, come to my shows. It didn't come from some big-shot organization and from some board of directors."¹³⁹

According to Jo Walker-Meador, former executive director of the CMA, Robbins was angry with the CMA because he had never been elected Entertainer of the Year. She explained to him that it was not the CMA board or CMA staff who selected award winners, but rather CMA members (who numbered in the hundreds by the 1980s) that selected award nominees.¹⁴⁰ Walker-Meador considered Marty one of the best entertainers she had ever seen, so she could understand his frustration that his talents as an entertainer were not being recognized by the organization.¹⁴¹ Robbins eventually changed his mind and joined the CMA in 1980, after Barbara Mandrell was named Entertainer of the Year and George Jones won the Male Vocalist award. Robbins later recalled his feelings towards the CMA, saying, "Some of the things I don't agree with them, but I think, y'know, they did something right."¹⁴² Shortly after joining Robbins was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame, the highest honor in country music.

Although Robbins publicly denounced the CMA and avoided joining until late in his career, he was a very proud member of the Grand Ole Opry. While the title "Grand Ole Opry star" garnered higher performance rates on the road and better bookings, the actual Opry gig paid peanuts and was a huge commitment. Opry members were required to perform twenty-six nights every year, at a rate of \$30 per performance – considerably less than playing to packed auditoriums across the nation, and they had to arrange tour schedules to be in Nashville on

¹³⁹ Robbins quoted in Diekman, 195.

¹⁴⁰ Email correspondence with John Rumble, Senior Historian, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, June 16, 2017.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Diekman, 214.

Saturday nights. Biographer Diane Diekman concludes that Robbins enjoyed being an Opry member and was willing to make that sacrifice.¹⁴³

Robbins's chart success did not keep him from being fired from the Grand Ole Opry on March 1, 1958. Earlier that day Robbins got into an argument with WSM's general manager Robert Cooper. Robbins urged the radio station to establish a staff country music orchestra as it had already done with pop musicians. Robbins later explained the conversation, "I said during the discussion that if Jim Denny were still here, he'd have the Opry fully sponsored and would have a network television show."¹⁴⁴ Denny had been fired eighteen months earlier for conflict of interest, adding poignancy to Robbins's comments. Robbins was scheduled to host his regular Prince Albert portion of the Grand Ole Opry that night and sang his current hit, "The Story of My Life." According to W.D. Kirkpatrick, who replaced Denny as Opry manager, Robbins was called into a conference after the show and was told that the Opry no longer needed him. Kirkpatrick stated in an interview that Robbins "indicated ... that he no longer needed the Grand Ole Opry. We simply cannot deal with prima donnas on this show. Robbins has displayed insubordination recently, which just could not be tolerated any longer."¹⁴⁵ Robbins remembered the events a little differently, simply saying, "I said the right thing to the wrong person."¹⁴⁶ WSM executives met with Robbins the following Thursday and decided they had made a mistake. The station issued a statement saying, "it was clearly conceded that Marty Robbins had not at any time said or indicated that he 'did not need the Grand Ole Opry.'"¹⁴⁷ A

¹⁴³ Diekman, 61.

¹⁴⁴ Robbins quoted in Diekman, 61.

¹⁴⁵ Kirkpatrick quoted in Diekman, 61.

¹⁴⁶ Robbins quoted in Diekman, 61.

¹⁴⁷ Diekman, 61.

newspaper article described Robbins as representing “the younger element of the Opry. In contrast to the gaudy western costumes worn by some of the current stars and by most of the oldsters, he wore ‘conservative’ sports jackets and ties onstage. He also used vocal backgrounds in a lot of his stage presentation, a strictly modern touch.”¹⁴⁸

Marty Robbins enjoyed many successes in the first few years of his career in Nashville, but not without some major frustrations and setbacks from the country music industry itself. This chapter has explored Robbins’s career from his childhood musical influences, his musical career in Phoenix, and his trials and tribulations in Nashville prior to the recording of *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* in 1959. In this chapter I have provided an overview of Robbins’s career prior to 1959, and placed him in context with the Nashville music industry in the 1950s. Robbins’s outsider status in Nashville has been illustrated with the inclusion of interview quotes from Robbins, his friends, peers, and press snippets. This chapter, and the previous cowboy-focused chapter, have provided the groundwork to allow for an in-depth discussion of the album, *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*.

¹⁴⁸ Diekman, 61.

Chapter Four: “With a Big Iron On His Hip”: Marty Robbins’s Long-Playing Western Record

Marty Robbins’s 1959 full-length album, *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*, is a remarkable anomaly. The long-playing (LP) record was not commonplace in 1950s music, a market that was driven by singles in the emerging Top 40 radio format. *Gunfighter Ballads and Trails Songs* is a modern take on western music. The album is a carefully constructed mix of traditional cowboy songs, western favourites, and original compositions which illustrate just how steeped Robbins was in the genre of cowboy and western music. This chapter will explore the development of the LP record, a format that was still uncharted territory for artists and audiences in 1959. An overview of other artists’ use of the LP format is included in this chapter as well. I will illustrate how these albums, as well as *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*, fit within the category of the concept album and stand out as early examples of artists experimenting with large-scale works with connective themes in popular music. Finally, Marty Robbins’s western masterpiece will be discussed in detail, with particular attention to Robbins’s narrative strategies, musical arrangements, and choice of repertoire, to reach conclusions about Robbins’s use of the cowboy image on this full-length LP released ahead of its time in 1959. It will be necessary to first consider the well-loved, often collected, and sometimes scratched, treasured disk of vinyl – the LP record.

Development of the Long-Playing Record

In 1877 Thomas Edison invented the phonograph, intended for dictation, recording the last words of dying people, and phonographic books for the blind, but these would be nothing

more than one-off recordings on cylinders. It took about ten years for the idea of mass producing recordings to take flight with an inventor named Émile Berliner, who pioneered the flat disc and the gramophone, with its revolving — and revolutionary — turntable. Country music historian Colin Escott suggests that Thomas Edison was the father of recording and Émile Berliner was the father of the record business.¹⁴⁹ Before the first World War, phonographs were not readily available to those living in rural areas or folks with even a modest income. For example, Victor Talking Machine Company's Victrola debuted in 1906 and retailed at the hefty sum of two hundred dollars. Phonographs decreased in price over the next few years and sales increased from 550,000 in 1914 to 2 million in 1919. In 1921, record production topped 100 million units, but it fell shortly thereafter with the growing popularity of radio stations. According to Escott, the wider availability of record players, combined with the need to seek out new niche markets in the face of declining sales, sent record companies in search of blues and country musicians and performers of other ethnic musics in rural areas. By the 1920s record players had made their way to customers in these areas, fueling the market for rural folk music, or what we now call country music.¹⁵⁰

The record's technology changed drastically following the Second World War. The standard 78-rpm disk was comprised of various materials, including cellulose, with a shellac resin surface. The 78's audio quality was poor because of surface noise on the disk. The other downside to the 78-rpm disk was that it could only hold four minutes of recording per side. Longer classical

¹⁴⁹ Colin Escott, "The Talking Machine: How Records Shaped Country Music" in Paul Kingsbury, Michael McCall, and John W. Rumble, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 465.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 465.

works required a change of disk, causing a break that was unrelated to the score or performance. 45-rpm and 33-rpm records were manufactured from vinyl, a dense petroleum-based plastic that could support a stronger and narrower groove, allowing improved playing quality. Vinyl disks were potentially cheaper to produce and were flexible enough for a larger unbreakable disk. RCA commissioned the first vinyl records in 1930, but wartime rationing of plastics interrupted its development until RCA introduced the vinyl record to the market in 1946 with a bright red 'vinylite' Red Seal 12' 45-rpm record of Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche*, sold at a premium price of \$3.50. The vinyl record attracted little attention, most likely because of its high price. Even when dropped to \$2.50, the new technology failed to impress the buying public, although reviews noted the sonic superiority of the RCA vinylite disk when compared to standard shellac.¹⁵¹

Peter Goldmark, Hungarian émigré and classical music enthusiast, is largely responsible for developing the 33-rpm vinyl record, or the long-playing record. Goldmark's development was borne from frustrations with the 78's shortcomings – poor sound quality and frequent musical interruptions. He partnered with Columbia, and together they would wage — and win — the so-called "Battle of the Speeds."¹⁵² In June 1948, Columbia hosted a music industry reception in New York City to showcase the long-playing record. At the demonstration a Columbia executive stood between a stack of vinyl LPs and a tower of conventional 78s, each representing a total of 325 tracks or selections. The stack of LPs measured 15" in height, while the shellac 78s formed an 8' tower. The executive played an orchestral recording from a 78, which had to be

¹⁵¹ Montgomery, 93-94.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 95.

interrupted after four minutes in order to flip the disk. He then played the same recording from the new Columbia LP format, which played to completion without a pause and change of disk. Although the first LPs were sometimes poor in quality, the advantages of the long-playing record were, according to Roland Gellat writing in 1955, fourfold: “LP records offered listeners the cherishable satisfaction of hearing recorded performances without breaks in continuity; they minimized the twin woes of surface scratch and record wear; they alleviated the problem of storage; they provided more music per dollar than had ever been offered before.”¹⁵³

RCA-Victor countered Columbia by introducing its 7” 45-rpm format. The RCA disk contained all of the limitations Goldmark had overcome with the LP, but, it did have one advantage — the changer system. The RCA changer system enabled the user to play as many as twelve 45-rpm selections with only a split second in between each, as the changer would quickly, and automatically (re: without getting out of one’s seat), move onto the next disk when the previous selection finished played. From the very beginning RCA pitched the 45 to the popular market, while the Columbia LP was considered a classical and middlebrow format. The Battle of the Speeds left as its legacy a clear delineation between pop and classical formats. As sales of 78s diminished, the notion of a classical single, which the 78 had largely created, fell by the wayside. Popular music, Broadway hits, and race records were more suitable to the RCA disk, and sold in far greater numbers, and, as Goldmark has hoped, serious music gradually became the sole domain of the LP.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Roland Gellat, *The Fabulous Phonograph*. Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1955, 293.

¹⁵⁴ Montgomery, 101-102

The Concept Album

A few popular artists, including Woody Guthrie, Pete Johnson, Frank Sinatra, and Marty Robbins, experimented with the long-playing record before it became a standard format. These LPs might be considered “concept albums” depending on how one defines this contested, value-laden term. Although the early LPs discussed in this chapter do not contain the explicit musical and narrative linkages of, say, the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) or Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973), they stand as early examples of artists conceiving of the multi-song LP record as a distinct and coherent work. Whether or not they constitute “concept albums,” these albums illustrate how leading artists would respond to the possibilities and challenges of the new, expanded long-playing format.

Woody Guthrie’s *Dustbowl Ballads*, released in 1940, is often identified as the first concept album, as all of its songs revolve around the life of an Okie after the disastrous dust storms that drove many Depression-era mid-Western families westward. The songs on *Dustbowl Ballads* are connected lyrically by the common theme of an Okie’s hardships and musically by its folksy instrumentation of vocals, acoustic guitar, and harmonica. Guthrie’s conception of an extended album of thematically related songs actually predates the rise of the 33-rpm LP format that enabled the “concept album,” and *Dustbowl Ballads* had to be released on two three-disc collections of 78-rpm records to accommodate Guthrie’s musical conception, which had expanded beyond the restrictions of the short-playing 78-rpm disk.

In 1946 Kansas City boogie-woogie pianist Pete Johnson recorded a swinging jazz album called *House Rent Party*, conceived as a musical enactment of a rent party, an event familiar to residents of low-income urban districts. The album begins with a solo piano tune by Johnson, “Pete’s Lonesome Blues,” suggesting that no guests have arrived yet. Track-by-track the band grows as guests, including some of Kansas City’s finest musicians, arrive. Each is introduced to the party by playing a solo accompanied by Johnson on the piano. The peak of the album and house party is a full band jam on “Pete’s Housewarming,” an upbeat boogie-woogie number signaling the party is in full swing. With *House Rent Party* Johnson constructed a concept album around party music and released it on LP, earning him notoriety as an innovator.

Guthrie and Johnson may have pioneered the concept album, but it was a New York-based crooner who took it to new heights in the following decade. Frank Sinatra released his first album, *The Voice of Frank Sinatra* in 1946, but his 1955 release *In the Wee Small Hours* is considered a landmark in the history of the concept album. The album’s songs are unified by the ruminations of a recently heartbroken man who finds himself alone with his thoughts in “the wee small hours of the morning,” also the title of a track on the album. The instrumentation on the album is sparse throughout, featuring only bass, drums, guitar, and celesta (at times supplemented with subdued string arrangements), effectively evoking the lonely atmosphere within which the album’s protagonist dwells.

A year after Sinatra’s seminal release, country music received its first taste of the concept album. Jean Shepard released her album *Songs of a Love Affair*, considered country music’s first concept album and the first concept album in music history by a female artist, in

1956.¹⁵⁵ Shepard was a true blue pioneer for women in country music, pushing the gender boundaries in male-dominated honkytonk country. Her boundary pushing extended to the very way that country music was recorded, released, sold, and purchased. She, like Robbins would do in 1959, released an LP album during a time when singles were common practice in the country music business. The individual tracks on *Songs of a Love Affair* revolve around a marriage broken apart by a love affair. Songs like “It’s Hard to Tell the Married From the Free,” “Tell Me What I Want to Hear,” and “A Passing Love Affair” describe life within an unhappy marriage from the female perspective. As with *In the Wee Small Hours*, the homogeneous musical style and arrangements lend Sheppard’s album and sense of coherence; the soundtrack is honkytonkin’, tear-in-your-beer country music — perfect for drowning your marriage woes.

Another rare example of a full-length country LP released in the 1950s is Hank Thompson’s *Songs for Rounders* (1959). Thompson had his first hit in 1952 with “The Wild Side of Life,” whose answer song, “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels,” quite literally made Kitty Wells’s career. Thompson brought Ken Nelson, Capitol’s head of country A&R at the time, a song that was featured in his live show, called “Cocaine Blues.” Citing Thompson’s risqué song, Peter LaChapelle explains how the new radio format with its focus on hits that would appeal to the broadest possible audience relegated certain songs to the LP format and led to Thompson’s thematically coherent album:

Songs with controversial themes also lost out as radio and television grew in stature as hit makers. Earlier reliance on jukebox play as a measure of a single’s potential had allowed honky-tonker Hank Thompson to hit big with singer-songwriter Jimmy Heap’s provocative 1952 cheating song “Wild Side of Life,” put out by Capitol Records. But such successes became increasingly difficult for Thompson as radio

¹⁵⁵ Daniel Cooper, “Jean Shepard” in Paul Kingsbury, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Country Music: The Ultimate Guide to the Music* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 481.

programming supplanted juke vending as the primary promotional vehicle for new singles. Though Thompson was getting tremendous live audience response locally when his band played Roy Hogsed's 1948 drug- and murder-themed song "Cocaine Blues," Capitol Records balked at recording it as a single, fearing that now-powerful radio programmers would object to its controversial themes. Thompson and his producer, Ken Nelson, eventually circumvented the industry's faintheartedness by pairing "Cocaine Blues" with other bawdy but less controversial drinking songs on the 1959 concept album *Songs for Rounders*. Radio stations predictably refused to play the song and, despite its overwhelming popularity with live audiences, the song was prevented from charting. Thompson recalled being baffled by the industry's skittishness saying decades later that the song taught an important moral by having its cocaine-using protagonist sentenced to life in San Quentin.¹⁵⁶

Hank Thompson's tale shows how a country music single's reliance on jukebox sales waned as format radio's power increased. "Cocaine Blues" might have been suitable for a barroom or honky-tonk, but not for airplay on a radio station whose profits relied on paid advertisements. Seemingly offensive material on the airwaves would not attract the type of customer base advertisers were hoping to reach. Along with television sets, these new media formats brought entertainment into the home, as LaChapelle notes, "while the size of venues for live music shrank, sales of television sets, phonograph players, and the new hi-fi stereos grew substantially."¹⁵⁷ Hank Thompson's *Songs for Rounders* (1959), along with Jean Shepard's *Songs of a Love Affair* (1956) and Marty Robbins's *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* (1959), are evidence of country music artists tapping into the home entertainment market, and the changing format illustrates the shift in the way audiences purchased and enjoyed music.

With the development of the long-playing record in the 1950s, some artists began to see the possibilities for expanding stories, themes, or ideas in related songs, although the actual

¹⁵⁶ LaChapelle, 122.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

unifying concept is sometimes vague. While the term “concept album” did not achieve widespread use until the 1970s with Willie Nelson’s conscious and successful exploitation of a “concept of a concept,” according to Robert W. Butts, country singers were beginning to group songs so that they would seem more than a simple collection of tunes.¹⁵⁸ Travis D. Stimeling notes that all the major country labels — RCA Victor, Columbia, Decca and Capitol — used the long-playing record (LP) to collect and distribute songs by a single artist by 1950, but albums were of secondary interest to Music Row because AM format radio demanded singles that clocked in at three minutes or less. He draws on a statement from RCA Victor president Steve Sholes in a 1956 issue of *Country Music Reporter*, who remarked that the LP was an unreliable but potentially lucrative way to repackage singles in a budget-friendly product. Stimeling cites Marty Robbins’s 1959 album *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* as indication that some Nashville producers explored the LP’s potential to collect thematically related songs, but he maintains that the unifying factor driving the majority of country albums released in the 1960s and 1970s was simply that all of the songs were recorded by the same artist.¹⁵⁹

As Stimeling explains, Music Row’s production practices made it difficult for country artists to experiment with narrative and musical unity on their albums. Decisions regarding repertoire, recording sessions, and the album’s track order were made by label executives, producers and A&R representatives, which limited the opportunities for musicians to shape large-scale narratives or musical structures over the course of an entire album. Music Row sessions seldom

¹⁵⁸ Robert W. Butts, “More Than a Collection of Songs: The Concept Album in Country Music.” *Mid-America Folklore* 16.2 (1988): 90.

¹⁵⁹ Travis D. Stimeling, “‘Phases and Stages, Circles and Cycles’: Willie Nelson and the Concept Album,” *Popular Music* 30 (2011): 389-408. On this point, Stimeling’s conclusions accord with those of Robert W. Butts (see footnote 10).

lasted more than three hours and were expected to yield four songs, so country artists had little opportunity to explore new recording practices or to compose in the recording studio.¹⁶⁰ The rushed studio practices at Columbia were likely the reason that a vocal mistake was released on Marty Robbins's *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*, specifically Robbins's vocal mistake on "The Master's Call," as well as a few backing vocal slip ups on "Big Iron." According to biographer Diane Diekman, "The Master's Call" might have been released as a single if not for Robbins's mistake in pronouncing "performed." Robbins erred and sang "a miracle *preformed* that night," and it ended up on the record, suggesting that timely release schedules trumped other considerations on Music Row.¹⁶¹

Robert Butts poses the pertinent question, "So what then constitutes an album as more than just a collection of songs?"¹⁶² He offers a few guidelines in response.¹⁶³ The first is that the album should be a recognizable work of a single person or group of persons. Butts acknowledges the fact that a record's success depends on the talents of several people including the producers, musicians, writers, arrangers and engineers, but that the work itself should still be the traceable ideas of one person. He argues that Marty Robbins's *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* can be seen as the work of Robbins himself, though the songs are composed by different writers and collected from different eras. The second of Butts's guidelines is that the album should be conceived with at least a fairly clear focus, which either relates songs in a genre with an express purpose of thematic presentation, or evolves in such a

¹⁶⁰ Stimeling, 390.

¹⁶¹ Diane Diekman, *Twentieth Century Drifter: The Life Of Marty Robbins*, (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 72.

¹⁶² Butts, 92-3.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 92-3.

way as to tell a story, even though some of the action and events must be filled in by the listener's imagination or with the aid of accompanying album notes. Butts considers the albums in Robbins's *Gunfighter* trilogy as examples of the genre concept album. He argues that Robbins consciously created albums that evoked the general image of the old West, both musically and lyrically, through a collection including some traditional songs ("Streets of Laredo") and some more recently composed ("Big Iron"). He summarizes the musical characteristics common among the songs on Robbins's *Gunfighter* albums, including minimal percussion, Spanish-style lead guitar, narratives that end with the hero's (or anti-hero's) death, and the use of vocal harmonies. Butts cites prolific music journalist John Morthland's assertion that "Robbins, who hailed from Arizona, didn't learn his western music second-hand, and this [*Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*, Vol. 1] ranks with Ritter's gems as the finest effort at cowboy music ever released by a Nashville artist. His warm, mellifluous voice is tailor-made for the likes of "Cool Water" and "Running Gun."¹⁶⁴

Marty Robbins recorded four full-length albums for Columbia prior to the release of *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* in 1959. He recorded twelve songs for a full-length album in September of 1956. The repertoire and instrumentation were reminiscent of his early radio shows in Phoenix, where, according to Diekman, Robbins sat with his guitar in front of the microphone and sang a dozen traditional folk songs from as far back as the 1800s.¹⁶⁵ Although these recordings were never released in his lifetime, the attempt is evidence that Robbins was experimenting with the LP format as early as 1956 and that he was recording traditional

¹⁶⁴ Morthland quoted in Butts, 92.

¹⁶⁵ Diekman, 54.

material. The album was released in 1983 by Bear Family Records, a year after Robbins's death. In January 1957, Robbins recorded a compilation of twelve songs made popular by other artists, including his heroes Gene Autry and Eddy Arnold. Released in April of 1957, *The Song of Robbins*, became his first official album. Robbins recorded a collection of Hawaiian material in October 1957 for a full-length album titled *Song of the Islands*, considered by some critics to be his first concept album.¹⁶⁶ In October of 1958, the LP *Marty Robbins* was released, which also marked the end of Robbins's songwriter contract with Acuff-Rose. The album was a mix of cover songs by some of Robbins's favourite artists, including Hank Williams, Eddy Arnold, Gene Autry, and Hank Snow, as well as a handful of Robbins's originals. According to Diekman, long-playing albums (LPs) weren't yet vehicles for choosing hit singles and no airplay was expected from them. After an artist had a large enough fan base the record company would order a full-length album. The album's purpose was to produce sales to existing fans, rather than showcase the artist's songs. Columbia had packaged and issued Marty's previously recorded songs twice in 1956 on its House Party series: *Carl, Lefty and Marty* held two songs apiece by the three artists (Carl Smith, Lefty Frizzell, Marty Robbins), and *Rock'n Roll'n Robbins* contained six of Robbins's rockabilly songs. Columbia issued four songs on an extended-play (EP) 45-rpm record, the *Letter Edged in Black*, and sales apparently were not high enough to follow with a full album.¹⁶⁷

As mentioned in the first chapter, Marty Robbins enjoyed his first big break in western music by singing the theme song for a Gary Cooper western, *The Hanging Tree*, in 1959.

¹⁶⁶ Escott, 28.

¹⁶⁷ Diekman, 55.

Robbins leveraged his previous hits for Columbia and the success of “The Hanging Tree” to convince producer Don Law to let him record an entire album of western material. Diekman cites vocalist Bobby Sykes’s recollection of events leading up to the recording of *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*. Sykes overheard Robbins tell producer Don Law, pleading his case, “Don, this album won’t sell five hundred records, but it’s something I’ve always wanted to do and I think Columbia Records owes it to me.”¹⁶⁸

Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs

Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs was recorded in an eight-hour session on April 7, 1959 in Bradley Film & Recording Studios in Nashville, Tennessee. This remarkable fact bears repetition: the whole album was recorded in eight hours. In an age before overdubs and computer edits, the recording was done live off the floor. The sessionography lists the following players:

Marty Robbins: vocals/guitar/leader
Thomas Grady Martin: guitar
Jack H. Pruett: guitar
Bob L. Moore: bass
Louis Dunn: drums
The Glaser Brothers: vocal chorus¹⁶⁹

Backing vocalist and touring band member Bobby Sykes is omitted from the session lineup, likely due to faulty record keeping, but he sang backing vocals on “El Paso” with Jim Glaser. Guitarist Grady Martin and bassist Bob Moore became part of the session crew that would later

¹⁶⁸ Diekman, 68.

¹⁶⁹ Guy Logsdon, liner notes to Marty Robbins, *Under Western Skies* (Germany: Bear Family Records, 1995), 40.

be dubbed the “Nashville A-Team,” a group of session musicians that played on numerous stellar Nashville recordings starting in the late 1950s, including recordings with artists such as Brenda Lee, Jim Reeves, and Patsy Cline.

The repertoire chosen for *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* is an eclectic mix of traditional cowboy and western songs, a Sons of the Pioneers classic, a song penned by the Glaser Brothers, and four of Robbins’s own compositions. Included in the cowboy repertoire are “The Little Green Valley,” written by one of the original cowboy singers, Carson Robison, discussed in the first chapter; “Utah Carol,” which was published in 1910 in John A. Lomax’s pioneering *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*; and “The Strawberry Roan,” a traditional song (listed as being in the public domain in the album sessionography) that Robbins had used for his first radio audition. Although “The Little Green Valley,” was composed in 1928, it still falls under Dorson’s category of fakelore, as it was not passed down in the oral tradition. Robbins chose to record two songs with outlaw narratives – “Running Gun” (fakelore) and “Billy the Kid” (folklore) – both of which tell a tale from the outlaw’s point of view. Perhaps the oddball track on the album is “They’re Hanging Me Tonight,” also categorized as fakelore. The song does not depict western imagery such as horses, herding cattle, or the desert but instead it is a first-person account of a remorseful man waiting for the gallows after murdering his ex-lover and her new beau. The Sons of the Pioneers song Robbins chose to record was the Bob Nolan classic, “Cool Water,” also discussed in the first chapter. It is evident from the pre-existing songs Robbins chose for the album that he was a knowledgeable enthusiast of traditional cowboy and western music. Robbins’s original compositions feature two saga songs (“Big Iron” and “El Paso”), a western love song (“In the Valley”), and a cowpoke’s redemption

tale (“The Master’s Call”). Robbins’s originals on *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* showcase his strong songwriting skills in the cowboy and western genre, and it is nearly impossible to tell the traditional cowboy songs from those that were newly composed for the LP. The following table illustrates the album’s songs in relation to Dorson’s theory of fakelore/folklore:

Song Title	Composer	Fakelore/Folklore
Big Iron	Marty Robbins	Fakelore
Cool Water	Bob Nolan	Fakelore
Billy the Kid	Traditional	Folklore
A Hundred and Sixty Acres	David Kapp	Fakelore
They’re Hanging Me Tonight	James Low & Art Wolpert	Fakelore
Strawberry Roan	Traditional	Folklore
El Paso	Marty Robbins	Fakelore
In the Valley	Marty Robbins	Fakelore
The Master’s Call	Marty Robbins	Fakelore
Running Gun	Tompall & Jim Glaser	Fakelore
Down in the Little Green Valley	Carson Robison	Fakelore
Utah Carol	Traditional	Folklore

Table 3.1 Songs from *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* and their relation to Richard Dorson’s fakelore/folklore.

Robbins’s choice to cover the Sons of the Pioneers classic “Cool Water” seems like a strategic move to give a respectful nod to his favourite songwriter Bob Nolan, while taking a stab at one of the best-known western songs of all time. Robbins’s version does not stray too

far from the herd but he does omit the last verse, for reasons unknown. Also absent from Robbins's version is the echoing "water" discussed in the first chapter. The emphasis on the mirage may be diminished in Robbins's version but the absence of the echo allows more breathing room for the vocal harmonies, which are stunning throughout the entire album, especially on this track. I would argue Robbins's choice to employ the fiddle on "Cool Water," an instrument he dropped years prior in his rockabilly and pop phase, is an instrumental salute to the Sons of the Pioneers, whose music featured fiddle prominently in the early years. The fiddle could also symbolize the dry, parched throats of the narrator and horse of "Cool Water," as the tone is just a touch scratchy and rough, perhaps "thirsting" for a little rosin on the dry fiddle strings. Though Robbins's cover of a fakelore song would be dismissed by Richard Dorson, "Cool Water" is a remarkable recording and remains a fan favourite from the album.

"El Paso"

The first single released from *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* was Robbins's original composition, "El Paso." The single debuted on the Top 40 charts on November 30th, 1959 and peaked at number one on the pop charts the weeks of January 9th and 16th in 1960. The song stayed in the Top 40 for a total of sixteen weeks. "El Paso" earned Robbins his first Grammy Award and became the first country song ever to be awarded the honour as well, winning the 1961 award for Best Country & Western Recording.

"El Paso" tells the story of a young cowboy who finds himself in "the West Texas town of El Paso," where he falls in love with a Mexican maiden named Feleena at the local nightspot called Rosa's Cantina. Lyrics and formal analysis below.

	“El Paso” – Marty Robbins
Form	Lyrics
A	Out in the West Texas town of El Paso I fell in love with a Mexican girl Nighttime would find me in Rosa's cantina Music would play and Feleena would whirl
A	Blacker than night were the eyes of Feleena Wicked and evil while casting a spell My love was deep for this Mexican maiden I was in love, but in vain I could tell
B	One night a wild young cowboy came in Wild as the West Texas wind Dashing and daring, a drink he was sharing With wicked Feleena, the girl that I loved
A	So in anger I challenged his right for the love of this maiden Down went his hand for the gun that he wore My challenge was answered in less than a heartbeat The handsome young stranger lay dead on the floor
A*	Just for a moment I stood there In silence Shocked by the foul evil deed I had done Many thoughts raced through my mind as I stood there I had but one chance and that was to run
B	Out through the back door of Rosa's I ran Out where the horses were tied I caught a good one, it looked like it could run Up on its back and away I did ride
A**	Just as fast as I could from the West Texas town of El Paso Out to the badlands of New Mexico
A	Back in El Paso my life would be worthless Everything's gone, in life nothing is left It's been so long since I've see the young maiden My love is stronger than my fear of death
B	I saddled up and away I did go Riding alone in the dark Maybe tomorrow a bullet may find me Tonight nothing's worse than this pain in my heart

A	And at last here I am on the hill overlooking El Paso I can see Rosa's Cantina below My love is strong and it pushes me onward Down off the hill to Feleena I go
A	Off to my right I see five mounted cowboys Off to my left ride a dozen or more Shouting and shooting, I can't let them catch me I have to make it to Rosa's back door
B	Something is dreadfully wrong, for I feel A deep burning pain in my side Though I am trying to stay in the saddle I'm getting weary, unable to ride
A	But my love for Feleena is strong and I rise where I've fallen Though I am weary, I can't stop to rest I see the white puff of smoke from the rifle I feel the bullet go deep in my chest
A	From out of nowhere Feleena has found me Kissing my cheek as she kneels by my side Cradled by two loving arms that I'll die for One little kiss, then Feleena good-bye

Table 3.2 Formal analysis of “El Paso.”

A*: This verse is omitted on some releases of “El Paso” to shorten the playing time.

A**: This section is actually half of the A section.

As shown in the table above, “El Paso” employs the AABA form, but Robbins took some liberties with this standard form of songwriting. In this case, the final A of the AABA section is elided to provide the initial section of the subsequent statement of the AABA form. As Jocelyn R. Neal explains, this has an important effect in “El Paso” as the formal elision propels the song forward through a very long story.¹⁷⁰

The influence of Mexican music on “El Paso” is undeniable. Studio guitar wizard Grady Martin provides Mexican-inspired guitar flourishes, which are one of the many highlights of “El

¹⁷⁰ Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music: A Cultural and Stylistic History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 210.

Paso,” if not the entire album. Apparently, these guitar parts were recorded in one take on a borrowed guitar. Legendary session musician Charlie McCoy recalls Grady Martin’s guitar work on “El Paso”:

A guy who was my hero, great guitar player, he was the original, like, led most of the sessions there, a guy named Grady Martin, and he actually, he played on what I think is the greatest piece of studio work in recorded history. He played the guitar on “El Paso” by Marty Robbins. Now, if you haven’t heard the record, you need to hear it. The guitar is just spectacular. Just think of the challenge: Here’s a song that’s over four minutes long; he had the intro and *all* the fills, and it’s guitar throughout. He never repeated himself, he never made a mistake, and everything he played was so tasty and interesting. And he did it on a borrowed guitar, second take, ‘cause back in that day we recorded everything live, and he did it second take.¹⁷¹

McCoy emphasizes the sheer mastery of Martin’s guitar work on “El Paso,” but his comments also point to the rushed nature of studio work on Music Row. “El Paso,” with its length and intricate parts, was recorded hastily, but the seasoned session musicians were able to make impeccable music in a short amount of time.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, “El Paso” is a story or saga song, an important tradition in country music. This type of song also has ties to Texan-Mexican border folklore and to a type of storytelling ballad called a “corrido.” George Lewis notes that this song type is well represented in American country music, as the form heavily influenced songwriters of the West, and considers “El Paso” the most popular corrido in American country music. In addition to the musical form, “El Paso” also features Spanish guitar work and the long, drawn out vocal

¹⁷¹ Charlie McCoy interviewed by David Barrett for bluesharmonica.com, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPaZenhUhGE&feature=share>. For more on Charlie McCoy’s life and career, see his recently published memoirs, co-authored with Travis D. Stimeling and titled *Fifty Cents and a Box Top: The Creative Life of Nashville Session Musician Charlie McCoy* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2017).

syllables ("West Texas wi-i-i-i-nd"), a distinctive trademark of the corrido.¹⁷² In this case, Robbins is backed by Bobby Sykes and Jim Glaser (of the Glaser Brothers), creating smooth, closely-voiced harmonies that create a haunting effect on the long syllables at the end of the second line of each B section in "El Paso."

Mexican influences came to America very early, in the 1800s, with the popularity of the corrido in the folk music of the southwest. The corrido is a long ballad form and can be either upbeat (usually in 2/4 time) or played in a slow 3/4 waltz time.¹⁷³ According to Américo Paredes, Mexicans call their narrative folk songs corridos, especially those with epic themes. The name stems from the verb *correr*, which means "to run" or "to flow;" the corrido tells a story simply and swiftly, without embellishments. The corrido narrative employs a story form, which is usually tragic in nature and documents in surprising detail an incident deemed important by the community. According to Lewis, Mexican-US border corridos were first documented in the 1830s to relay the news of the day, such as Indian raids, the secession of Texas, and the treatment of Mexicans in the United States.¹⁷⁴

The most famous corrido is "Gregorio Cortez," which tells the story of a young Texas ranch hand who, in 1901, shot a sheriff after being falsely accused of stealing a horse, then eluded several posses of Texas Rangers before finally being captured. Cortez became a Mexican folk hero who defended his right "with a pistol in his hand," and he is the subject of numerous stories, legends, and songs, including "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez." According to Paredes, "El

¹⁷² George Lewis, "Ghosts, Ragged but Beautiful: Influences of Mexican Music on American Country-Western & Rock 'n' Roll," *Popular Music and Society* 15.4 (1991): 90.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁷⁴ Américo Paredes, *"With His Pistol in His Hand": A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1958), xii, 86..

Corrido de Gregorio Cortez” comes from a region, half in Mexico and half in the United States, known as the Lower Rio Grande Border, the Lower Border, or simply the Border (with a capital B). “El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez” is a Border Mexican ballad, "Mexican" being understood in a cultural sense, without reference to citizenship or to "blood." Paredes stresses the importance of “Border” in corridos, because it is as a border that the Lower Rio Grande has made its mark: in legend, in song, and in those documented old men's tales called histories.¹⁷⁵

Outlaws against the Díaz regime (1876-1911) were the first corrido heroes of Greater Mexico. These outlaws symbolized a struggle between classes rather than cultural strife or civil war, and usually revolved around the theme of heroes that would rob the rich to feed the poor. The outlaw corridos that came from Greater Mexico were sung on the border as well, but the concept of the hero changed in the border version. To lift the robber up to hero status, and in order to conform to border corrido themes, the ballad writer would transform the robber into a border raider fighting against the outside group, the Americans. According to Paredes, the details are never the same, but the corrido’s general story is that the real man gets transformed into a hero. The hero is a peaceful man, he is provoked into violence by the rinches (Texas Rangers), and he kills a great number of his enemies. The hero’s defeat is assured, according to Paredes, as the best he can do is escape across the border, but is often killed or captured. The moral of the corrido is that the hero stood up for his right. As for Gregorio Cortez, following a misunderstanding over traded horses, Cortez stood up for his right with a pistol in his hand

¹⁷⁵ Paredes, xii, 86.

against Sheriff Brack Morris. What followed was one of the largest manhunts in American history, and Cortez came to symbolize the heroic border corrido.¹⁷⁶

An original composition by Robbins, “El Paso” takes place on the Border. Knowingly or not, Robbins, who was steeped in Mexican music from his days growing up in Arizona, has closely aligned his narrative song to the Texan-Mexican border ballad tradition. As in the conventional Border corrido, Robbins’s hero/protagonist is provoked, in this case by the wild cowboy, and in true corrido tradition, the protagonist meets his fatal end. As is clear from the lyrics, “El Paso” tells a story from start to end. It is unclear whether or not the protagonist is a “good guy,” but judging from his pistol wielding abilities, it is highly likely that the hero in “El Paso” is an outlaw. Another original Robbins composition on *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* and the second single released, “Big Iron,” demonstrates the influence of the corrido as well. “Big Iron” relays the story of a stranger (later revealed to be an Arizona Ranger) who comes to Agua Fria, Arizona, in search of an outlaw named Texas Red. In this case, Texas Red wears “a big iron on his hip,” but so too does the (st)ranger, who shoots the outlaw dead in the street. Robbins adapted the line “with a pistol in his hand” from Gregorio Cortez’s corrido and employed it in “Big Iron” as a tag line that is repeated at the end of each verse. “Big Iron” is an excellent story song from Robbins that not only showcases his songwriting abilities, but illustrates how well-versed he is in the tradition and history of cowboy and western music as well as the corrido.

Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs has a distinct sound, with its sparse instrumentation, Mexican-inspired guitar, and close-knit Sons of the Pioneers-style vocal harmonies. After the

¹⁷⁶ Paredes, 144-50.

success of the album, Robbins would employ this sound on two subsequent albums — *More Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* (1960) and *Return of the Gunfighter* (1963) — now known collectively as the *Gunfighter* Trilogy. Arguably, the sound employed on the *Gunfighter* albums can be categorized under the umbrella term the “Nashville sound,” a term commonly used to imply a singular, homogenous sound. The Nashville sound has become synonymous with the lush string arrangements and vocal chorus of Jim Reeves’s recordings in the late ‘50s and early ‘60, and Patsy Cline’s final recordings with producer Owen Bradley, including her version of “Sweet Dreams” (1963). According to Travis D. Stimeling, “such broad characterizations of the Nashville sound obscure important distinctions between the style created around individual recording artists.”¹⁷⁷ Artists strived to achieve their own sound, what musicologist Mark Samples has described as “musical branding,” to distinguish themselves from other artists while maintaining a consistent sound, their “brand,” in order to please established fans, while employing a degree of variety to attract potential record buyers.¹⁷⁸ Using Jim Reeves, Connie Smith, and Willie Nelson as case studies, Stimeling demonstrates how several artists have successfully developed distinct musical brands within the Nashville sound.

Robbins’s western musical brand heard on *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* employs sparse instrumentation – drums, upright bass, acoustic guitar and backing vocals. As mentioned earlier in this paper, unlike other western singing groups, such as the Sons of the Pioneers, Robbins does not yodel on this album. The effect is a modern, pop chart-friendly sound.

¹⁷⁷ Travis D. Stimeling, “The Nashville Sound(s): Musical Branding during Country Music’s Nashville Sound Era,” Conference Paper presented at the Society for American Music Annual Conference, Sacramento, California (2015).

¹⁷⁸ Mark Christopher Samples, “A Package Deal: Branding, Technology, and Advertising in Music of the 20th and 21st Centuries,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oregon, 2012, 10.

Robbins was probably hoping to cross over to the pop charts after being duped by Columbia twice in the mid '50s, and a yodel would squash that chance. The backing vocals on the album are refined, closely-voiced, and smooth as butter, as the singers' voices are indistinguishable from one another. Backing vocals became synonymous with the Nashville sound, but there are many variations which range from the pop-inflected backing chorus of Jim Reeve's "Four Walls," to what we hear on *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*. Acoustic guitar was common in the Nashville sound, as heard on Sonny James's "Young Love" (1957), although electric guitar with a clean, bright tone is usually associated with this era of country music. As fiddles and steel guitars were dropped in an effort to create a modern, pop-friendly sound, the guitar saddled up as the lead instrument in country ensembles. The acoustic guitar heard on *Gunfighter Ballads and Trails Songs* took the instrument to new heights and Grady Martin's Mexican-influenced flourishes on the acoustic guitar are a key component to Robbins's western musical brand. Robbins's song choices for this album are also a defining feature to his musical brand. His blend of traditional and newly composed songs create a vision of the Old West in the form of a long-playing record, as Robbins does a masterful job of playing different characters (outlaw, love-stricken cowboy, and cowpoke) in his narratives. The use of the outlaw image on the cover of *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* was a wise choice as well. The outlaw image enabled Robbins to wear many different hats on the album, not confined by the white hat/good guy image, as many of the songs on the album deal with guns, death, and betrayal. Marty Robbins's versatility, songwriting and musical talent, and most importantly his love and knowledge of the cowboy tradition enabled him to negotiate the tensions of the country music industry during a pivotal time in its history in order to create a cohesive, album-length work on an experimental

format, the LP, which proves that *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* is more than just a collection of songs.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This final chapter has discussed the development of the long-playing record, early examples of artists using the new format, and finally, Marty Robbins's exploration of the format with his 1959 album, *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*. Standing alone, this chapter has discussed an artist's use of a new medium that was still in its nascent stages. Through an exploration of the development of the long-playing record, I have illustrated the technology's effect on the music industry, and the industry's need for improved technology. The 78-rpm record's demise with the rise of the 45- and 33 1/3-rpm disks is proof of the changing market. The 45's creation of a market for pop music singles left the 78 classical sides in the dust, while the new long-playing 33 1/3-rpm record opened the door for popular artists to create large-scale works, free from the time constraints of 78- or 45-rpm record sides. The fact that the popular music album as we now know it developed during this time is fascinating.

Chapter one of this project explored the cowboy image, and the adoption of the image by country and western musicians. This chapter provided an overview of the history of the cowboy in American popular culture, cowboy songs in folklore, the first cowboy singers, singing cowboys on film, and western music – covering a lot of Western soil in a short amount pages. From this broad range of cowboy topics emerged the firm notion that the cowboy image is an important component of America's folklore, traditional music, and popular culture. That folklorists were interested in cowboy songs as early as the late 19th-century should attest to the cowboy figure's influence on American folklore. The mass appeal of the cowboy image and the West in country music has been illustrated through musical examples dating back to the very

beginning of recorded country music to the Sons of the Pioneers' influential branding of western music.

The second chapter examined Marty Robbins's musical career prior to the release of *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* in 1959. From a hardscrabble childhood in Arizona to a Nashville star, Marty Robbins's career prior to 1959 illustrates a versatile artist searching for his niche in a saturated market and tough industry. Robbins felt like an outsider in Nashville and confined by the 'country singer' label. His recordings and success prior to *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* are evidence that Robbins was comfortable, and good at, singing, writing, recording, and performing in many styles including Hawaiian music, country, rockabilly, and pop. Joined with numerous frustrations with the country music industry and his label, the reasons for Robbins's hands-on approach to his career are justified. Perhaps homesick for Arizona and the West, Robbins's outsider status in Nashville propelled his decision to record an album of traditional western material, but with a modern Nashville sound.

My thesis has illustrated Marty Robbins's use of the cowboy image to create an album of traditional material on a relatively new medium, the long-playing record. Marty Robbins, and other country artists such as Jean Shepard and Hank Thompson, were pioneers of the LP record during a time when the market was heavily driven by singles. Studio practices on Music Row limited creation in the studio, as sessions were expected to yield singles in the shortest amount of time. Unfortunately Robbins, Shepard, and Thompson were ahead of their time and could not enjoy the artistic freedoms of a studio space as a place for experimentation. Their pioneering works with the LP format within the constraints of the 1950s country music industry deserve inclusion into the concept album discussion, which I have accomplished in this project.

In my research for this project I have had the pleasure of examining the research, writing, data collection and other crucial work of scholars in country music and related fields. Amid the sea of often opposing ideas, theories, and opinions it has been crucial to have a critical stance regarding scholarship on the music I so deeply enjoy and admire. My project has added a critical element to the scholarship available on Marty Robbins. The biographical work available on Robbins, namely Diane Diekman's extensive book *Twentieth Century Drifter: The Life of Marty Robbins*, coupled with discography notes, including Colin Escott's liner notes for the Bear Family Set *Marty Robbins: Country 1951-1958*, have done an excellent job of providing the details of Robbins career and recordings. My research and work here in this thesis are based heavily on the information found in these sources, however, I've added a critical element to the discussion of Marty Robbins's career and music. By taking into consideration the enduring tradition of cowboy music and the cowboy image, and placing Robbins in context in 1950s Nashville, his career moves and experimental choices discussed in this paper have added a critical discussion to the existing scholarship on Marty Robbins.

Concept albums are a heavily debated topic in popular music scholarship. The term has been used to describe long-playing albums that employ large-scale narratives and musical cues to create a cohesive concept. The term is most often associated with art rock and progressive rock beginning in the late 1960s, with albums such as The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) and Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (1971). Country artist Willie Nelson began experimenting with the concept album in the early 1970s, beginning with *Phases and Stages* in 1974. Long-playing country records in the formative years of the LP format are largely absent from the concept album discussion, as they do not contain the musical connectors

associated with later art rock concept albums, or large-scale narratives contained on Willie Nelson's concept albums. This paper has included three examples of long-playing albums released in the 1950s by country artists which, arguably, can be included into the scholarship on the concept album. At the very least, these pioneering albums, including *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*, require more scholarly attention for their ground-breaking attempts at larger, cohesive works in a musical age and industry that was constricted by the two-and-a-half minute single.

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