

“I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart”--Patsy Montana (1935)

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Essay by Stephanie Vander Wel (guest post)*



Patsy Montana



Early label

Patsy Montana (Ruby Blevins, *b.* Beaudry, AR 30 Oct 1908; *d.* San Jacinto, CA 3 May 1996) emerged as one of the most commercially successful singing cowgirls on 1930s radio and recording. In the late 1920s, she developed her cowgirl persona in California when Stuart Hamblen invited her to join the trio the Montana Cowgirls (which also included Ruth DeMondrum and Lorraine McIntire) and suggested the performance name Patsy Montana. Hamblen was also a songwriter and performer of cowboy songs, with his best-known hit being “Texas Plains.” In addition to appearing on Hamblen’s radio program on Inglewood’s KMIC, the Montana Cowgirls performed in live shows with champion rodeo roper Montie Montana, in rodeos, film shorts, and on radio stations up and down the West Coast. After the trio disbanded in 1933, Montana secured a position as a solo vocalist with the Prairie Ramblers (which included Shelby “Tex” Atchison, fiddle; Floyd “Salty” Holmes, guitar; Charles “Chick” Hurt, mandolin; and Jack Taylor, string bass) on Chicago’s WLS. The radio station broadcast a range of programs, including the Saturday evening “National Barn Dance,” and cultivated leading western acts, such as Gene Autry, Girls of the Golden West, and Louise Massey and the Westerners. Montana with the Prairie Ramblers joined Autry’s live touring ensemble, the “WLS Roundup Show,” as the grand finale performing Hamblen’s “Texas Plains.” For her first guest performance on the NBC broadcast of WLS’s “National Barn Dance,” Montana performed “Montana Plains,” a derivative of “Texas Plains.” Because of the lack of song material for singing cowgirls and wanting to expand her repertory, Montana composed “I Want to be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart.”

Joe Frank, Gene Autry’s manager at the time, gave Montana the idea to write a song about a cowboy’s sweetheart, which Montana developed lyrically into a narrative that balanced the independent cowgirl image (derived from nineteenth century dime store novels and Wild West shows) with the depiction of the cowgirl as a romantic companion to the cowboy. Framing the heroine’s desires for autonomy by means of heterosexual gender norms, the opening verse begins

with the declaration “I want to be a cowboy’s sweetheart” and ends with the same statement followed by “that’s the life that I love best.” Yet within the opening verse, Montana does not elaborate upon the tropes of adult love. Instead, she paints a vivid picture of the cowgirl’s uninhibited pursuits of roaming the frontier and further elaborates upon the cowgirl’s wishes for the social freedoms associated with the ideals of Manifest Destiny in the middle verse, where she omits the title phrase and sings about riding “Old Paint” at a run with the “wind in [her] face” and spending the evenings strumming her guitar and yodeling next to the sleeping herd of cows.

Montana set the lyrical narrative that offered a vision of female agency to a range of musical idioms, including country music and Tin Pan Alley, packaged in a dance music arrangement. The song follows a 32-bar pattern of ABA’C, typical of Tin Pan Alley. With “Texas Plains” establishing her performance style, Montana partly modeled “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart” after Hamblen’s cowboy song. The first two phrases of Montana’s song resemble those of “Texas Plains” in relation to the melodic contour, harmonic chord progression, and phrase structure. Moreover, Montana included the polka dance beat of “Texas Plains” in her song to meet the musical tastes of WLS’s heterogenous radio audience of German, Polish, Czech, and Irish immigrants. Typical of the performance practices of the era, the Prairie Ramblers recorded the song in the predominant western swing style. The opening fiddle part, for example, swings the main melody of the song while the rest of the instruments provide the harmonic structure, polka beat, and rhythmic drive.

Montana likely turned to an additional source to shape her musical narrative: the 1933 song “You Gotta Be a Football Hero (to Get Along with the Beautiful Girls),” written by Tin Pan Alley songwriters Al Sherman, Buddy Fields, and Al Lewis. “You Gotta Be a Football Hero” became one of the most frequently heard football anthems at college games. The song was also used in a 1935 “Popeye” cartoon, in which Olive Oyl, dressed as a cheerleader, sang the last two phrases of the chorus, cheering on Popeye’s efforts as the star football player. The title phrase of “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart” leads with the same hook as the chorus of “You Gotta Be a Football Hero” and the last two phrases of Montana’s song follows both the melodic contour and the harmonic pattern of the very phrases that Olive Oyl sings in the “Popeye” cartoon. Perhaps Montana was inspired by the feisty nature and performance of the cartoon heroine. Both songs follow an ABA’C song form, include the return of the opening hook in the beginning of the penultimate A’ phrase, and a circle-of-fifths movement (common in Tin Pan Alley songs) in the conclusion.

In addition to her songwriting talents, Montana’s vocal performance featured her yodeling virtuosity, evoking the Swiss-Alpine tradition, and a mellifluous singing style that her radio fans found appealing. In the song’s opening, she swings a fast-paced major-mode yodel melody that shows off her ability to switch back and forth quickly between the head and chest registers while highlighting the bright timbre of her upper register. In effect, Montana’s yodels translated the vocalizations that represented the geographical grandeur of the Alps into a sonority that evoked the US landscapes of the western range, where a singing cowgirl like Montana could freely roam. She continues by singing the lyrics in a style that featured rounded tones, effortless transition between vocal registers, and well-developed chest and head registers.

Montana and the Prairie Ramblers introduced “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart” on the various broadcasts of Chicago’s WLS, particularly the daily early morning program “Smile-A-While” and the regional weekly broadcast of “National Barn Dance.” In 1935, they accompanied the WLS announcer Hal’O Hallorhan on WOR’s New York City broadcast of “Smile-A-While.” While listening to Montana’s performance of “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart” on WOR, Bob Miller, the song publisher, believed the song would be a hit, published it in 1935, and convinced Art Satherley of American Record Company to record the song the same year. Though Satherley did not think a song recorded by a female soloist could sell, ironically it was he who would later inform Montana that her recording made history when it became the first song written and recorded by a woman in country music to sell a million copies.

Montana’s vocal performance of yodeling virtuosity combined with vocal techniques of mainstream popular music in a song about the cowgirl’s desires for independence offered a performance model for the singing cowgirls of the 1940s and 1950s, such as Carolina Cotton and Rosalie Allen. In addition, a number of country and popular artists, including Patti Page, Rosalie Allen, Bonnie Owens, Suzy Bogguss, Judy Lynn, Marcia Ball, LeAnn Rimes, and an early incarnation of the Dixie Chicks, have covered “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart.”

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.