

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

Added to the National Registry: 2011

Essay by Cary O’Dell



Patsy Montana



Early label

Modern country music is usually considered to have three queens, each easily identifiable by just one name: Loretta, Tammy and Dolly. But as impressive as this trinity is, one has to wonder where that leaves some other notable musical ladies of the open plains such as Patsy Cline, Kitty Wells, and Emmylou Harris.

Similarly, certainly, the great Patsy Montana is no pretender to any throne.

Too often dismissed as a “one hit wonder,” due to her most famous tune, the self-penned “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart,” Patsy Montana actually contributed numerous songs to the country and western lexicon: “My Song of the West,” “Back on Montana Plains,” “Rodeo Sweetheart,” “When the Flowers of Montana Were Blooming,” “I Love My Daddy Too,” “That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine,” and “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Dream,” among others.

But it is her “Cowboy’s Sweetheart” for which she’s most renowned. It is believed to be country music’s first million-selling single by a female artist.

A product of Hot Springs, Arkansas, the only girl of 11 children, Patsy Montana (nee Ruby Rebecca Blevins; b. 1912) started singing early and often. She also early on mastered the violin, organ and guitar. Near college age, she left Arkansas for California where enrolled in the University of the West (later renamed UCLA). Quickly though, her musical gifts began to pay dividends—she won an area talent contest and it quickly lead to regular radio appearances singing as part of an ad-hoc girl trio, the Montana Cowgirls. At that time, so that she, Ruby, wouldn’t be confused with a fellow Cowgirl, Ruthie, she adopted the first name “Pasty” and took the group’s state-related name as her new surname.

The newly christened Patsy Montana recorded her first sides in November of 1932 when she sang, yodeled and played fiddle alongside Jimmie Davis at a recording session for Victor at their Camden, New Jersey studios. Also, over the Victor label, Montana released her first solo records including “When the Flower of Montana Were Blooming” and “I Love My Daddy Too” that same year.

Montana (circa 1933) was next off to Chicago, then a surprising hotbed of country music popularity and innovation mostly thanks to radio station WLS and its weekly program the “National Barn Dance,” radio’s only significant competitor to WSM’s legendary “Grand Ole

Opry.” In the Windy City, Montana made the acquaintance of the group The Prairie Ramblers, a four-man group of Western-attired musicians then on the lookout for a “girl” singer. Montana, apple-faced and usually decked out in cowgirl gear, certainly fit the bill.

The Prairie Ramblers (often billed as the Prairie Ramblers with Patsy Montana) soon became a popular part of “Barn Dance” broadcasts and other WLS programs. Along with their radio appearances, the group also toured and did some recording.

Montana came to compose her famous signature tune in 1935 in order to have something more upbeat to play and sing when appearing on stage. Drawing inspiration from songs like “Montana Plains” and “Texas Plains,” Montana fashioned “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart,” a song that not only lent itself to a quick two-step but required a woman to perform. Montana made it further her own by incorporating her yodeling gifts within its performance and recording.

As mentioned above, the “Cowboy’s Sweetheart” was released in 1935 on a 78rpm for the American Record Company (ARC) label. “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart” is said to have sold a million copies, a phenomenon which did not happen easily or quickly; record stores did not exist on every corner and fast, easy digital downloads were nearly a century away.

“Cowboy’s Sweetheart” lasting appeal—it still sounds stunning modern—is a testament to Montana’s writing and her gutsy, powerful singing.

And, intentional or not, there is something subtly feminist about the song. Though Montana states she wants a mate (to be a “sweetheart”), she also conveys other things she wants to do:

*I wanna learn to rope and ride
I wanna ride through the plains and the desert*

The life she describes is hardly one one would consider suitable for such a “little lady”:

*I wanna feel the wind in my face
A thousand miles away from all
Movin' in the cowman's pace
I wanna lay my head
Beneath the open sky
As the sun sets in the west*

Buoyed by her “Sweetheart” success or not, Montana split from the Prairie Ramblers in 1940. She began to perform and record as a solo artist. (Just before, she also appeared in the movies; she was featured alongside Gene Autry in his 1939 film “Colorado Sunset.”)

From 1946 to 1947, Montana helmed her own radio show, “Wake Up and Smile,” and in 1948 began to appear on radio’s “Louisiana Hayride.”

Montana married Paul Rose, a WSL employee, in 1934. The couple had two daughters. After the birth of her children, Montana scaled back her career to some degree to concentrate on being a wife and mother. After her children were grown, and bowing to ongoing public interest--some borne from traditional country fans, some borne from the ‘60s burgeoning folk music scene-- Montana returned to performing. And recording. Her latter output included a live album and some gospel-themed endeavors.

Throughout the remainder of her career “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart” would serve as Patsy Montana’s theme song. “Sweetheart’s” appeal has been so widespread, so enduring, it has nearly rendered the rest of Montana’s output before and after it as minor in comparison. Though

Montana would never have another hit to rival “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart,” that matter is moot. “Sweetheart” has gone on to be featured in John Sayles’s 1996 film “Lone Star” and revived innumerable times by the likes of the Dixie Chicks, Suzy Bogguss, Lynn Anderson, LeAnn Rimes and even Cyndi Lauper.

Montana, who passed away in 1996, has been inducted into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame and the Country Music Hall of Fame.

It is hard to overemphasize what Patsy Montana (and “I Want to Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart”) did for the generation of female country artists who would come along after her. Thanks to Patsy, it was shown that women could write their own songs—and have major hits with them. Women could headline a show—not just be the “girl singer” in an all-male band. Women could also proudly play instruments on stage, even something as “unfeminine” as the guitar. And Patsy’s identity of the powerful, confident cowgirl would also influence future female artists—Dottie West and Emmylou Harris continued that persona. Even the smooth and sophisticated Patsy Cline would be willing to don Western gear from time to time.

If Patsy Montana, today, does not often have her name bandied about as a “queen” of the genre, it is only because she so predates the modern usage of the term; she *made* the monarchy.

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).