

# “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” by The Sons of the Pioneers (1934)

Added to the National Registry: 2010

Essay by Nolen W. Berry\* (guest post)



*The Original Sons of the Pioneers*



*Original label*



*Bob Nolan*

First written by Bob Nolan during his teenage years in Tucson, Arizona, “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” was originally a poem titled “Tumbling Leaves” with no reference to tumbleweeds. The poem was one of many written by Nolan and taken to Los Angeles when he moved there in 1929. In his younger years, Nolan roamed from the forests of Canada to the deserts of Arizona, experiences which inspired him to write songs throughout his life dealing with the wind on the plains, the mummer of a stream, the cowboy lifestyle and the Western out-of-doors. He wrote virtually thousands of songs including such favorites as “Way Out There,” “One More Ride,” and the classic “Cool Water.”

Early in 1934, Nolan, Leonard Slye (later far more famously known as Roy Rogers) and Tim Spencer formed a western singing group which became known as the Sons of the Pioneers. Hugh Farr soon joined the group on fiddle. Over months of relentless practice, the group developed a distinctive sound for their western music arrangements borrowing from both big band and jazz.

Looking for new western material for the group, Nolan changed “leaves” in his poem to “tumbleweeds” and set the poem’s words to his own musical composition. The song’s vocal harmonies developed by Nolan, Slye and Spencer were first recorded by Sons of the Pioneers and released by Decca Records in Los Angeles on August 8, 1934. Later, new group member Lloyd Perryman’s talents enhanced the song’s harmony once again which set the harmony pattern for many more Sons recordings and became an identifiable harmony known worldwide as “the Pioneer sound.”

The Decca recording as well as the use of the song on the Sons popular 1930’s radio shows produced a national hit and suddenly everyone was using it. Gene Autry used “Tumbling

Tumbleweeds” as a 1935 movie title. The Sons of the Pioneers performed the song in Republic Pictures’ “Silver Spurs” (1945), Republic Pictures’ “Don’t Fence Me In” (1945) and Warner Bros.’s “Hollywood Canteen” (1944). “Tumbleweeds” was still being used in the movies as late as 1998 when it provided the musical opening for “The Big Lebowski” (1998).

From the likes of Bing Crosby, Slim Whitman, Harry James, and Frankie Lane to later artists such as The Supremes, Marty Robbins, The Boston Pops and Riders in the Sky, “Tumbleweeds” has been recorded on literally hundreds of albums as a classic evergreen tune and remains today as a “standard” for all those who perform Western music. “Billboard” magazine once said “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” was one of the top revenue-earning songs of the last century.

In 1937, “Tumbleweeds” was re-recorded by Decca with the original four members plus Karl Farr on lead guitar. The song appears on the following Sons of the Pioneer record albums: “Cowboy Classics” (RCA, 1952); “Favorite Cowboy Songs” (RCA, 1955); “Cool Water” (RCA, 1959); “The Best of the Sons of the Pioneers” (RCA, 1966); “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” (RCA, 1969); “Western Country” (Granite, 1976); “Empty Saddles” (MCA, 1983); “Celebration” (Silver Spur Records, 1983); “Our Best to You” (Pickaway, 1999); and “The Sons of the Pioneers Greatest Hits” (Sony/BMG, 2008).

“Tumbling Tumbleweeds” has become the Son’s signature song which they have performed at every concert for the past 85 years. Certainly, the persona of both the song and Sons of the Pioneers have become inseparable.

Continuing popularity over the decades forever entwined “Tumbleweeds” into the lore of the American West and earned it a place in both the Grammy Hall of Fame (2002) and National Recording Registry (2010). Many say it is “the anthem of the West.”

*\*Nolen W. Berry has served as business manager for Sons of the Pioneers for a period of ten years during which time he has become well acquainted with both current and past members of the group. Part of his job involved maintaining the group’s archival materials and dealing with its copyright licenses. He has written several national magazine articles about the group and their history.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.