

## Cowboy Myths and Music

Throughout human history music has been a pastime of many groups and individuals. Music can tell us the emotions, thoughts, and historical realities going through the minds of the musician at the time of writing. During the days of the Old West, music was constantly being played and songs sung while the cowboys were on the trail, in town, and at home to help pass the time and as an active part of social gatherings. The music that was being played during this time also represents the various cultural origins of the individuals who lived in Texas throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as how these cultures would mix and share their heritage to create something new on the frontier.

One final facet that music can convey is how myths and legends come to be inscribed within the popular culture as the music that tells these tales is sung by many. Join us as we share some of the music that was popular on the frontier during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and see how myths come to be constructed and communicated. Once the camper has a firm grasp of the types of music played during this time, learn one of the most popular instruments on the frontier, the spoons.

### Texas: A melting pot of cultures

While there were no iTunes, CD's, records, or even radio available during the time of the Chisholm Trail, a long history existed of popular music being played and enjoyed throughout the state. Music could be played by a single person, but was often most enjoyed when groups came together and was a fixture of many meetings and celebrations. But what was the music that a cowboy in the 1870's would listen to? Most of us would guess that they listened to country music, but this genre did not exist at the time. Just like we listen to the popular music of today, a cowboy would have enjoyed the music that was most popular at the time, shared through the forms of sheet music and travelling bands and shows. This sharing of music also allowed different groups to share their styles of music with one another, and as it continued to be passed along it would be adapted by other groups and mixed with their musical styles. This "acculturation" of music (the blending of two cultures together to form a new cultural style) was something that occurred constantly on the frontier, and let's explore some of these styles now.

- Native American Music:
  - The original music of the Americas would have been the music of the different native tribes. While there is no one style of Native American music, there are certain elements of how the music is played that is shared by many groups. Heavily focused on the use of drums and call and response chanting, music is an important part of many ceremonies and help groups pass down their history and stories from one generation to another.
- Spanish Music:
  - The first group to bring a new style of music to Texas were the first colonizers, the Spanish. The music of Spain is varied across the different groups that call the Iberian Peninsula home such as Basque and Catalan. One of the main instruments that was brought over was the classical guitar which origins lie in Spain and rapidly became of a

figure in the landscape of the Americas. As the Spanish settlers adapted to their new environment and created a culture of their own, so too did the music change and adapt.

- Tejano Music:
  - When the Spanish came to the Americas and began interacting with the Native American groups already living there, members of the groups eventually married one another and created the mestizo culture (someone who is born of both Spanish and Native American parents and the culture of these individuals). These groups continued to adapt and change in the province of Spanish Texas, resulting in the creation of the identity of Tejano culture (Texans of Hispanic descent). This musical genre combines various instruments from the groups of Texas including the classical guitar. One instrument though that is a part of Tejano music is the accordion, which isn't found in the music of Spain. To find out how this instrument came to be a part of Tejano music, we have the Germans to thank.
- German Music:
  - While there had been immigrants from Germany arriving in Texas since the time of Spanish rule, large numbers began to arrive in 1848 after revolutions began in their home states (Germany as one nation did not exist at this time, but was instead many smaller states that would unify in 1871). These German immigrants settled throughout Texas and established communities (including Cuero) that helped the traditions from Germany live on in this new land. The music of Germany traditionally uses the accordion and horns, which were brought with the immigrants and became a mainstay of Texas music to today.
- African American Music:
  - The first individuals of African descent brought to Texas were slaves imported from the various locations in a multitude of modern African nations. Even under the brutal and harsh conditions of slavery, these individuals were able to create a unique culture that flourished and continued to adapt with the end of slavery in the US in 1865 at the end of the Civil War. One of the hallmarks of African American music is the singing taking the form of call and response and the influence of gospel style singing from church services. These elements would continue to be utilized in the new genres that came out of these communities such as Jazz and the Blues. These styles would go on to influence the development of Rock and Roll in the 1950's and the modern rock that we see today.

Instruments were not the only representations of their culture that the various immigrants to Texas brought with them. They also brought the songs they sang in their homelands, which over time would adapt to take on elements of their new homes and reflect the realities of Texas and the West. One example of this we see is in the two songs "The Unfortunate Rake" and "The Streets of Laredo". "The Unfortunate Rake" is a traditional English ballad that tells the story of a sailor who is dying and telling his story to another sailor. When the song made its way to the US, the tune was kept the same but the lyrics changed. "The Streets of Laredo" instead of telling the story of a sailor dying, it is instead a cowboy who has met his end. See some of the similarities in the lyrics below.

"The Unfortunate Rake"

As I was a walking down by  
the "Lock",  
As I was walking one morning  
of late,  
Who did I spy but my own  
dear comrade,  
Wrapp'd in flannel, so hard is  
his fate.

*Chorus.*

Had she but told me when  
she disordered me,  
Had she but told me of it at  
the time,

I might have got salts and  
pills of white mercury,  
But now I'm cut down in the  
height of my prime.

I boldly stepped up to him  
and kindly did ask him,  
Why he was wrapp'd in  
flannel so white?

My body is injured and sadly  
disordered,

All by a young woman, my  
own heart's delight.

My father oft told me, and  
of[ten] times chided me,  
And said my wicked ways  
would never do,

But I never minded him, nor  
ever heeded him,

[I] always kept up in my  
wicked ways.

Get six jolly fellows to carry  
my coffin,

And six pretty maidens to  
bear up my pall,

And give to each of them  
bunches of roses,

That they may not smell me  
as they go along.

[Over my coffin put handful  
of lavender,

Handful of lavender on  
every side,

Bunches of roses all over my  
coffin,

Saying there goes a young  
man cut down in his prime.]

Muffle your drums, play your  
pipes merrily,

Play the death [dead] march  
as you go along.

And fire your guns right over  
my coffin,

There goes an unfortunate  
lad to his home.

"The Streets of Laredo"

As I walked out in the streets of Laredo  
As I walked out in Laredo one day,  
I spied a poor cowboy, all wrapped in white  
linen  
All wrapped in white linen and cold as the clay.

"I see by your outfit, that you are a cowboy."  
These words he did say as I slowly passed by.  
"Come sit down beside me and hear my sad  
story,  
For I'm shot in the chest, and today I must  
die."

"Oh once in the saddle I used to go dashing,  
'Oh once in the saddle I used to go gay.  
First down to Rosie's, and then to the card-  
house,  
Got shot through the body, and now here I  
lay."

"Oh, beat the drum slowly and play the fife  
lowly,  
And play the dead march as you carry me  
along;  
Take me to the green valley, there lay the sod  
o'er me,  
For I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done  
wrong."

"Get six jolly cowboys to carry my coffin,  
Get six pretty maidens to bear up my pall.  
Put bunches of roses all over my coffin,  
Roses to deaden the clods as they fall."

"Then swing your rope slowly and rattle your  
spurs lowly,  
And give a wild whoop as you carry me along;  
And in the grave throw me and roll the sod o'er  
me.  
For I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done  
wrong."

"Go bring me a cup, a cup of cold water.  
To cool my parched lips", the cowboy then  
said.

Before I returned, his spirit had departed,  
And gone to the round up – the cowboy was  
dead.

We beat the drum slowly and played the fife  
lowly,  
And bitterly wept as we bore him along.  
For we loved our comrade, so brave, young  
and handsome,  
We all loved our comrade, although he'd done  
wrong.

## Learning the Spoons

Now that you have learned some of the history of the music the cowboys would listen to, it's time to learn how to play a popular instrument of the trail...the spoons. Spoons are easily carried and have been a part of many musical styles throughout history. All you need to play are two metal spoons and you'll be playing on the trail!

### Instructions:

- I. To start playing the spoons, take one of your two spoons and place it between your thumb and first finger with the bowl facing down. Make sure the middle of the spoon handle is where your first knuckle is.
- II. Now take your second spoon and place it between your first and second fingers with the bowl end facing up and is upside down to the other spoon.
- III. Next, make a fist and grip the handles of both spoons tightly. (Be sure to leave about half an inch between the two stirrers' bowls. That way, the convex sides will click together whenever you bang them against a surface ... while your tight palm grip will act as a spring to pull the cups apart again afterward.) Try striking your leg with the spoons. Did you hear a clicking noise? Good. Try it again.
- IV. You're now ready to put your free hand above the spoons and hit the gripped implements down on your leg ... up against your hand ... down on your leg ... and up on your hand again. Try this procedure slowly at first and work at getting a nice, steady, clicking rhythm.

Remember to keep a firm grip on the spoon ends so that their bowls always bounce back after impact to a distance of one-quarter to one-half inch apart. Keep practicing the leg-and-hand rhythm for a while until you begin to feel comfortable with it.

