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**From the Mountains to the Prairies and Beyond the Pale: American  
Yodeling on Early Recordings**

**Journal of American Folklore**

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This sound review surveys yodeling in North American popular music, beginning with some of the earliest recordings on which it is featured. The focus is on previously unobtainable historical recordings which are now accessible thanks to the public domain Internet Archive, the Cylinder Preservation and Digitization Project, various CD compilations, and some recent boxed sets. This new availability provides an excellent opportunity to revisit material that was for the most part unknown except to specialists only a few years ago. In order to better contextualize the recordings, I will also mention a few examples of sheet music with yodeling, items which are generally overlooked. My intention is to question why yodeling became attached to particular genres and how it functions in their construction. Indeed, two popular music genres—so-called hillbilly music and cowboy or western music—made yodeling an important, if not identifying, component.

The emphasis here is on yodeling's connotations and associations and how these established expressive relationships between the moods, personae, and images of the songs.

Yodeling denotes a break in vocal register from natural phonation to falsetto or vice versa. Some oscillation around this breaking point often occurs, but not always; and while yodeling is often performed on vocables (i.e., syllables without semantic content), it is not limited to that: one of the first things noticed when hearing recordings by performers specializing in yodeling is how frequently they will yodel the syllables of words, producing a single falsetto tone. This is also yodeling, although this technique differs from the florid interchange of normal and falsetto voice in a series of vocables typically heard in European styles.<sup>1</sup>

Yodeling on record often maintains a link between commercial popular music and folk traditions (or imagined ones). For example, the kind of yodeling that appeared first in popular song was borrowed from folk practices, and its earliest uses in the nineteenth century by professional musicians who were themselves unconnected with the pastoral society that had nurtured it were intended to evoke Alpine or more generalized landscapes and the shepherds or peasants who lived there. In its earliest manifestations in European and later American music, yodeling frequently served, therefore, as a metonym of a simpler, pre-industrialized society, and

occurrences of yodeling generally functioned to connote mountain settings and attendant pastoral ideas and associations.

Yodeling was wedded to popular music in the *Jodellieder*, which began to appear in Switzerland around the turn of the nineteenth century (Baumann 2001:790). Many pieces were written in folksong styles, such as *Ländler*, with written-out yodels. So great was the fascination with this folk music import that composers such as Beethoven, Hummel, and Rossini in one way or another incorporated yodeling into their own work. Beethoven's arrangement, for example, of "I bin a Tyroler Bua" has vocal passages that clearly afford opportunities for yodeling. From its earliest entry into European music of whatever type, the yodel tended to be associated with nature, instinct, wilderness, pre-industrial and pastoral civilization, or similar ideas. It continues to be associated with rural and folk musics or to connote those in other contexts.

Because of this original folk connection, yodeling remained associated with the outdoors, with rustic rather than sophisticated personae, and with particular emotional or psychological states or semantic fields. Swiss-influenced English-language pastoral songs of the early nineteenth century, with their stock hunters and shepherds, gave way over the nineteenth century to far more generalized images and locations. Nevertheless, a dichotomy contrasting wild vs. tame (or natural vs. artificial, rural vs. urban, or similar)

remained discernible in popular music with yodeling: the marking of this distinction became the yodel's *raison d'être*.

For the purpose of this review, yodeling in American popular music recordings is divided into four main categories: 1) turn-of-the-century acoustic recordings (that is, pre-electrical recordings made until about 1925, when the microphone became standard) documenting a number of song genres, including nineteenth-century balladry, German folksong, and comedy; 2) hillbilly (or southern rural, blues-influenced) music; 3) blackface yodeling in ragtime-jazz styles; and 4) western-themed music. Other categories of music have occasionally employed yodeling, such as blues, but not as a defining feature. Because it is impossible within the scope of this essay to mention all the performers who recorded songs with yodeling, only the most typical or significant will be discussed. Concentrating on yodeling in popular music contexts, this review, moreover, excludes folkloric productions of yodeling, which represent another important strand in the life of the yodel in American culture (see, for example, Leary [1991]).

#### *Early Traditions in Acoustic Recordings*

The earliest yodel recordings have up until recently been difficult to hear for the reason that they have been available only on cylinders or shellac and 78 rpm discs, and because the songs are so old-fashioned and unlikely to be in demand, they are rarely reissued on CD. Yet they make fascinating

listening. Fortunately for the scholar or curious listener, many of these recordings are now available via the Internet, and the titles mentioned here are accessible either on CD reissues or on the websites given in the audiography.

Looming large in these early cylinders and flat discs was the nineteenth-century actor, singer, and composer, J. K. Emmet (1841-91), who died shortly before the recording industry was firmly established. Singers such as George P. Watson, Frank Kamplain, Pete LaMar, and others recorded a number of songs that he had either written or popularized. Emmet (whose name is often spelled Emmett on the recordings) also helped to establish the tradition of comic German stereotypes, so-called "Dutch" characters, heard in recordings by Watson and Frank Wilson. Significantly, some of his yodel melodies entered the yodeling oral tradition and reappear in many songs of this and later periods.

Emmet's most popular songs, judging by the number of subsequent recordings, were the "Lullaby to Lena" (1878) and "The Cuckoo Song" (1879).<sup>2</sup> The latter's yodel melody was interpolated into many other songs by other composers and performers and remained popular well into the depression era. Emmet's "Sauerkraut is Bully" (c. 1872) was also recorded at least once by Watson (1905). Both Watson and LaMar made various recordings with Emmet's name in their titles, such as "Emmett's [sic] Favorite Yodel" (Watson

n.d.) or “Medley of Emmett’s Yodles [sic]” (LaMar 1903), so he was clearly a significant influence.

Some of George P. Watson’s other recordings were based on actual German folksong, played with a vigorous Teutonic oompah-pah, such as the mountain-themed *Wanderlied* “Hi-Le-Hi-Lo” (1910, 1913), which he recorded on several occasions. His 1910 recording combines that song with “Hush-a-bye Baby,” a song recorded later under various titles by early country music performers.<sup>3</sup> Watson also recorded “Doctor Eisenbart” (1904), an old German student song, and the folksong “Zu Lauterbach,” but he plays these for laughs. In the latter recording, simply titled “Lauterbach” (1905), he switches to comic stage accent after one verse of German to sing the English verses written for this tune by Septimus Winner in his “Der Deitcher’s Dog” (“Oh where, oh where ish mine little dog gone?”); Watson yodels the tune printed in Winner’s sheet music (1864), which according to Richard Jackson is an old Bavarian yodel (Jackson 1976:268). Thus, the “Dutch” characters of Watson and Wilson kept alive a sometimes comical “old country” association of yodeling, an association that eventually would be erased with the hillbilly blue yodel.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the same yodel tune Winner used shows up again much later in Patsy Montana’s 1936 recording of “She Buckaroo” (2001).

The popularity of “Roll On, Silver Moon” during this era is also plainly evident: George P. Watson (1906), May McDonald (1908), Frank Kamplain (1920), and Charles Anderson ([1924] 1997) recorded it, and it makes up the

first half of a recording titled “Jere Sanford’s Yodeling and Whistling Specialty” (1910). That “Roll On, Silver Moon” appears in LaMar’s 1903 recording called “Medley of Emmett’s Yodles [sic]” suggests that a yodeled version of this tune had been popularized by J. K. Emmet himself, although he was not the composer.<sup>5</sup> Matt Keefe, who was very influential, recorded it at least twice in the 1910s; his 1917 version—obviously the model for Slim Whitman’s honky-tonk sock rhythm revival of it in 1955 (1996)—is available on the recent release by Archeophone titled *Monarchs of Minstrelsy* (2006). Another of Matt Keefe’s songs, “Mountain High” (1914), was later recorded in 1934, 1939, and 1947 by Elton Britt as “Chime Bells” (1997), but credited to Britt and Bob Miller. It became Britt’s best known song and was often recorded by others.

Particularly significant was the song “Sleep, Baby, Sleep,” a lullaby written and published by John Handley in 1885. This song was often recorded during the acoustic era and became a favorite of the later southern rural singers: both Riley Puckett and Jimmie Rodgers recorded it, in 1924 (n.d.) and 1927 respectively, and Rodgers was not alone in interpolating its yodel melody into other lullabies and songs with nostalgic or sentimental themes.

Ward Barton is a transitional figure who actually sounds modern, despite old-fashioned repertoire like Canning’s 1886 “Rock-a-Bye Baby” and waltz-time songs such as “I’m Dreaming of You” (recorded in 1916 and 1915,



respectively). He deserves mention as the first yodeler on record to use ragtime rhythms, for example in "When the Moon am Shining" and "Hawaiian Love Song" (both 1916). The latter is particularly noteworthy: after a dreamy verse it breaks into a spirited syncopated section culminating in a crazy cut time episode driven as much by Barton's rhythmic guitar-tapping as by his and Frank Carroll's wordless singing. Yodeling gets nothing quite this eccentric again until the De Zurik Sisters in the 1930s.

These early acoustic recordings are worth exploring both to gain insight into song genres that for the most part pre-date Tin Pan Alley and to appreciate the sources of melodic material heard in later yodel songs. The continued appearance of a small corpus of yodel tunes is striking. Regularly-recycled themes include the "Sleep, Baby, Sleep" yodel, J. K. Emmet's "Cuckoo" yodel, and two melodies that can be identified by the scale degrees of their incipits: 5-6-5-3-1-5 (for example, Barton's "Rock-a-Bye Baby") and (5-6-7-) 1-1#-2 (for example, Keefe's "Yodel Song," also called "Mountain High").<sup>6</sup> Recordings of "Roll On, Silver Moon," moreover, demonstrate that yodel songs did not always involve rapid switching between registers or vocables.<sup>7</sup>

Recordings of George P. Watson, Frank Wilson, Pete LaMar, Matt Keefe, Frank Kamplain, and Ward Barton can be heard on the Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org/index.php>) and the Cylinder Preservation and Digitization Project (<http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/index.php>), and one

of Watson's several recordings of "Sleep, Baby, Sleep" is on Christoph Wagner's excellent compilation, *American Yodeling 1911-1949* (1998). The extant recordings of the African American singer Charles Anderson are available on two discs from Document: *Eddie Heywood & the Blues Singers, 1923-1926* and *Male Blues of the Twenties, Vol. 2, 1923-1928*.

### *Hillbilly Yodelers*

By the time the southern rural singers began to be recorded around 1925, yodeling had been firmly established in North American music for about seventy-five years. And as their repertoire was filled with traditional songs, it is no wonder that many of these were yodel songs. Indeed, one of the first hillbilly recordings to feature a yodel was Riley Puckett's version of "Sleep, Baby, Sleep" ([1924] n.d.). He also recorded Emmet's "Sauerkraut is Bully," calling it "Sauerkraut" ([1926] 1998). Yet it was Jimmie Rodgers who became the most significant and influential yodeler among the white, southern, blues-influenced singers. Rodgers recorded a broad range of material and added yodeling to virtually all of it (109 out of 112 recordings). Yodeling was thus integral to his music making, and his influence on very many performers appearing in his wake is discernible in the shared repertoire, melodic devices, rhythms, and even yodeling vocables.

The first academic interest in Jimmie Rodgers came with John Greenway's article "Jimmie Rodgers as a Folksong Catalyst" (1957).

Greenway presented him as a carrier of the African American blues tradition. But as important and influential as that was, Rodgers continued other traditions as well. Rodgers also maintained a number of lyric themes deriving from the earliest yodel songs, continuing the connection with mountains and wandering or roaming in songs such as “Away Out on the Mountain” ([1927] 1992) and in many of the blue yodels. While maintaining in some songs the nineteenth-century theme of the desire to return home, he likewise introduced new and important lyric images, themes, and personae to the yodel song repertoire, such as railroads, hobos, and rounders in his blue yodels, as well as romantic cowboy themes in “The Land of My Boyhood Dreams” ([1929] 1992) and “The Cowhand’s Last Ride” ([1933] 1992).

Combining blues with yodeling did not originate with Rodgers. There is ample evidence of this in sheet music from the generation before him, and there were ragtime-era performers who mentioned blues in their lyrics or titles, such as Al Bernard, although Bernard’s music could scarcely be called blues. Moreover, Sara Martin and Eva Taylor recorded Clarence Williams’s “Yodeling Blues” in 1923 (1996) (Abbott and Seroff, 1993, par. 13). But Rodgers was the first to popularize yodeling in twelve-bar blues formulas. His blue yodels—blues songs with added yodels of particular forms—were widely imitated. Perhaps his most influential yodeled device was the blue yodel turnaround figure; this four-bar phrase, sometimes truncated to two bars, was first heard in his “Blue Yodel” (1927) and appeared with variations

in most of his other blue yodels as well as in other songs. It became the staple of all his imitators. It often crops up in songs of later performers and in quite different musical contexts, such as “You Get a Line, I’ll Get a Pole,” by the Girls of the Golden West ([1933] 2002), to mention only one example.

Nevertheless, Rodgers’s repertoire included many other kinds of songs besides blues. In these other songs yodel melodies from earlier practice are evident: the “Sleep, Baby, Sleep” yodel, for example, and the 5-6-5-3-1-5 yodel are regularly used in his nostalgic songs. (The 5-6-5-3-1-5 yodel later appears in Kenneth Houchins’s “The Yodeling Drifter,” “Little Sweetheart Pal of Mine,” and “The Wandering Hobo’s Song,” all from 1933 [2008], to cite only a few examples.) In addition to the blues figures associated with Rodgers’s blue yodels, he introduced other key yodel melodies that occur repeatedly in later performers. The yodel from “Away Out on the Mountain,” which begins on the IV chord (e.g., F in the key of C), reappears in his songs and those of many others. It is one of hillbilly music’s sunniest-sounding yodel melodies, occurring most commonly in light-hearted, carefree songs about wandering and hoboing such as Gene Autry’s “A Yodeling Hobo” ([1930] 1996).<sup>8</sup>

Cliff Carlisle, who played steel guitar on several sessions with Rodgers, was an exuberant and uninhibited yodeler who frequently used Rodgers’s blue yodel format and turnarounds, even imitating his spoken interjections, as did many others. With characters such as tom cats, roosters, and chickens, he created little allegories dramatizing sexual tensions, thus emphasizing a

lewder side of blues eroticism through the sexual suggestiveness of his lyrics, e.g. "Ash Can Blues" ([1932] 2001), "Wigglin' Mama" ([1936] 2001), and "The Nasty Swing" ([1936] 1996). Also noteworthy in this respect is the unusual and somewhat snide-sounding scat-style yodeling in "No Daddy Blues" ([1930] 1996) and "Shanghai Rooster Yodel" ([1931] 1996). Other of his songs without yodeling range over many styles, but the absence of yodeling in his more sentimental material suggests that Carlisle associated the uninhibited yodel with sexual feeling: with lines such as "Got that sweet little woman of mine by the tail on a downhill drag" or "she's as sweet as sugar from chawing up that sugar cane," he simultaneously played up the hillbilly image while increasing its sexual suggestiveness.

Although Rodgers helped to establish early country music, he avoided overt cultivation of the image and persona of the hillbilly. In contrast, the very fine yodeler Goebel Reeves, who recorded from 1929 to 1935, through the addition of trilling, gurgling, and quirky leaps, added a comic outrageousness befitting the image of the unselfconscious hick buffoon, giving his yodels a far more humorous cast than any of Rodgers's.

Mountains remained significant in the imagery of hillbilly yodel songs. Traditionally, mountains have been viewed as either an idealized repository of virtue or as the home of the ignorant backwoods rustic. A swing in the emphasis of mountain imagery plainly occurred in North American popular music toward the end of the nineteenth century. Earlier songs were suffused

with romantic idealism, but when the song's fictional locale shifted to America's southern mountains, such as the Appalachians or the Ozarks, the cultural stereotype of the hillbilly edged out any remnants of romantic idealism. Indeed, where pastoral connotations once reigned, with their suggestions of "caring," "nurturing," "serene," and "peaceful," now "rustic" was ascendant, with a semantic field that encompassed "coarse," "rough," "wild," and "rude." Goebel Reeves's "Reckless Tex" ([1934] 1994) provides a good example, with the yodeling further transformed by his gurgling, trilling, and comical leaps. The new terrain ("Reckless Tex" lists dozens of American towns and regions) and its new character (the wandering Southern hobo) stake out a new semantic territory. It is unlikely that listeners would hear any trace of "Swiss" in this song or its yodeling.

Like Rodgers, pronounced themes of nostalgia occur in Reeves's songs, signified musically with codas based on that most romantic of yodel melodies, "Sleep, Baby, Sleep." For example, in "The Drifter" ([1929] 1994), he yodels the word "mother" to this tune at the end of the song. Reeves also frequently employed the "Away Out on the Mountain" yodel and the 5-6-5-3-1-5 melody, the latter particularly in his sentimental or nostalgic songs. But compensating for this maudlin approach is the irony in his other songs, for example "Blue Undertaker's Blues" ([1930] 1994). However, the principal counterbalance to the sentimentality is his wild yodeling in the more overtly hillbilly numbers, best exemplified in "Happy Days (I'll Never Leave Old

Dixieland Again") ([1934] 1994). With its odd gurgling glissandi, loopy triplet rhythms, high-pitched "deedle eedle" vocables (sounding remarkably like the weird sounds made by Shemp Howard of the Three Stooges), and exuberant yodeling of the word "day" (in "oh happy day"), it is a compendium of devices encoding the hillbilly idea in sound.

Rex Griffin deserves mention as another significant figure in the hillbilly genre influenced by Rodgers. While he never sounds as slavish to Rodgers's style as Carlisle, the early Gene Autry, and many others, Griffin nevertheless uses other yodel melodies that Rodgers helped resuscitate, such as the "Sleep, Baby, Sleep" tune and, especially, the 5-6-5-3-1-5 tune, heard for example in his "You Got to Go to Work" ([1939] 1996). Interestingly, Griffin yodeled less as he moved toward a western swing style in his later recordings. For example, when he rerecorded "Everybody's Trying to Be My Baby" ([1944] 1996) with a band (the apparent model for Carl Perkins's cover), he omitted the yodel that drives his 1936, guitar-only version.

Riley Puckett's "Sauerkraut," Cliff Carlisle's "The Nasty Swing," Goebel Reeves's "The Yodelin' Teacher" (1934), and Rex Griffin's "You Got to Go to Work" are available on *American Yodeling 1911-1946*. In addition, the Bear Family label has released all of Jimmie Rodgers's recordings on *The Singing Brakeman* (1992) and all of Rex Griffin's on *The Last Letter* (1996). A selection of Goebel Reeves's recordings is available on that label's release *Hobo's Lullaby* (1994).

### *Blackface Yodeling in Ragtime-Jazz Styles*

In contrast to the romantic ballad style typical of late-nineteenth-century minstrelsy discussed earlier, other blackface performers recorded in the acoustic era specialized in styles deriving from coon songs. Aside from the “Dutch” character stereotype (typified by Watson and Wilson), the coon song and other styles related to humorous blackface stereotypes offered plenty of scope for yodeling. Representative of these performers was Al Bernard, among the last to make acoustic recordings. He did not yodel, but he recorded a few songs with Frank Kamplain, who did. Their recordings are interesting in that they document the straight rhythms of vaudeville ragtime styles, a rhythmic approach eventually superseded by swung rhythms such as heard on Emmett Miller’s slightly later recordings from the electrical era. Moreover, the yodeling on these recordings seems to come from two very distinct sources. First there is the Swiss style, clearly marked by references in the lyrics (as in “O-le-o-lady” [1923], which interestingly incorporates the yodel tune from J. K. Emmet’s “Cuckoo”). The second source is of greater interest, coming not from Alpine yodeling, but from attempts to stereotype African Americans through vocalization.

Emmett Miller (1900-1962) was one of the most original yodelers in American music. Yet as Miller’s career was in minstrelsy, playing the comic “coon,” an obvious question is how his yodel style functions as a



representation of the caricatured ignorant and uncivilized black man: how does his use of the voice correlate to the stereotyped characterization he specialized in?

There are many recorded characterizations of African Americans loudly and comically calling or “yoo-hooing” which employ falsetto breaking, some made by African Americans themselves. For example, Edward Sterling Wright’s 1914 recording of Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s poem “In de mornin’” demonstrates that such breaks in the voice were a feature of his representation of a black woman. Wright was “an African American actor educated at Emerson College of Oratory in Boston. His recitations helped to introduce and popularize the works of African American poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar” (Internet Archive).

While Dunbar suggests black speech patterns in his poem’s orthography, Wright’s recitation takes this further; for instance, there is clearly-audible yodeled breaking of the syllables in his pronunciation of the name “Lias,” pronounced on each occasion with a big swell in the volume, rising into falsetto for the final syllable. This way of sounding the name convincingly suggests an exasperated woman calling to a young boy who refuses to get out of bed. This record is a good example of the sort of dialect that white minstrel performers such as Al Bernard imitated. His 1923 recording of “My Dawg” illustrates how the imitation of black speech patterns, quite obviously, was crucial to the minstrels’ stage representations.

In Bernard's recording, the same rise into falsetto at the ends of words which signified "Negro" is plainly audible. So by Emmett Miller's time these kinds of yodeled pronunciations of words were well-established signifiers for "black." The same thing can be heard in a more extended "yodel" in Marie Dressler's "Rastus, Take Me Back" (1909), in which Dressler plays an inebriated woman imploring her lover to return. Here, particularly, the yodeled voice clearly signifies the comic drunken African American stereotype, demonstrating that yodeled words or vocables constituted a part of the set of signifiers for the racist construction of the "coon." The next step is in the yodeled singing style of Emmett Miller, where the comical voice breaking of the stage dialect is transposed into musical phrases.<sup>9</sup>

Musically, Miller's yodels are unlike any of the others. He never yodels on vocables; instead, the words become elongated yodeled melismas with his voice breaking usually at the interval of the fourth (instead of the much more common sixth) or dropping through arpeggiated seventh chords in which he emphasizes the tritone between the seventh and third of the chord. Miller is the only yodeler of his generation to emphasize that interval on recordings. An example of this occurs in the first part of the phrase in "I Ain't Got Nobody" ([1928] 1996). Whereas the melody and rhythm of his yodeled gestures clearly are modeled on jazzy blues-style figures of the day, the comical aspect of the voice breaking relates to, if not derives from, the register

breaking of stage-Negro dialect drawn from vernacular practices documented in twenty-five years of recording.

So, to return to the question of how such vocalizations correlate to the blackface stereotype, one possible answer is that such shifts in voice suggest a character who does not have control of himself. Indeed, Miller's vocal antics suggest a character later created by the comedian Jerry Lewis in his film *The Nutty Professor* (1963), a retelling of the Jekyll and Hyde story, with the socially inept Professor Kelp devising a formula that turns him into the cool but hateful Buddy Love, both played by Lewis. The scene in question occurs about one hour and six minutes into the film, when the drunken Buddy Love, the hip alter ego of the klutzy Professor Kelp, sits at the piano, trying to impress his date by singing "I'm in the Mood for Love." As the effects of the formula begin to wear off, the ludicrous voice of Professor Kelp keeps intruding into his smooth singing. The change manifests itself in haphazard switching between registers, similar to Miller and his performance of the "ignorant coon" caricature by means of an apparently uncontrollable voice. In the context of American culture and minstrel portrayals, so it can be imagined, it is assumed that the civilized person is in control, whereas the uncivilized person is not.

Another unusual singer apparently in this tradition is Roy Evans, who appears to have been an African American and not a white man in blackface. Billed as the "eccentric voice" (Ellis, unpaginated liner notes, 1999), he is more

overtly jazzy than Bernard or Miller and like Miller recorded with some famous players, including James P. Johnson. His yodeling is different again: unlike Miller, who only yodeled the syllables of words, Evans yodeled both words and vocables, drawing occasionally on the Jimmie Rodgers blue yodel turnaround but frequently adding comic gurgling similar to Goebel Reeves.

Al Bernard with Frank Kamplain can be heard on the Internet Archive, as can Edward Sterling Wright and Marie Dressler. Emmett Miller's best recordings are on *The Minstrel Man from Georgia* (1996); some of his later recordings and those of Roy Evans are on *Blue Yodelers with Red Hot Accompanists, 1928-1936* (1999), which also includes seven songs by Jimmie Rodgers.

### *Cowboy Yodelers*

The cowboy is one of the triumphs of the mass media: it is an idea of global reach. The mythicizing of the American West and western heroes began in the nineteenth century, but with the development of film, radio, and finally the phonograph, the idea of cowboys as a special type reached well beyond the geographical region they inhabited and beyond even the borders of the United States. Popular music was integral to the mass mediation of the idea and of the representation of the cowboy, and yodeling was one of its primary signifiers. Yodeling sat comfortably with cowboy and western-themed music as it seemed to fit the mythic cowboy image: legends

surrounding Western heroes very frequently depicted these characters with some kind of yell or whoop, and thundering bluster was an important part of their representation.<sup>10</sup>

Swaggering boastfulness, punctuated with whoops and hollers, is easily transformed into song—especially songs with yodeling. Western themes thus provided popular song not only greater scope, but a justification, for bravura yodeling, partly a result of the braggadocio and rowdiness associated with the cowboy culture. Yodeling became not merely a substitute for the cowboy yell, but a correlative of many of the traits thought typical of the cowboy: insouciance, incorruptibility, bravery, loneliness, and wildness, among others; such ideas contributed to the creation of new types—particularly masculine types—that the yodel helped to characterize. At the same time, the door was opened for a feminine counterpart: the singing cowgirl. The mythic image also embraced the landscape, whether mountains or broad prairies, and solitude, themes that had been given expression in yodel songs for at least 100 years.

Cowboys were not just a concern of popular culture. They were having an impact on America's classical composers at the same time; Aaron Copland, Roy Harris, and Virgil Thomson, for example, incorporated cowboy tunes into their works. Another composer of their generation, Elie Siegmeister, popularized American folklore through his performances with the American Ballad Singers, who, according to newspaper reviews printed in their

publicity material, included “cowboy yodels” in their performances of folk music (*Traveling Culture*). Lectures and performances by folklorists such as John Lomax and poets such as Carl Sandburg further contributed to the thorough inculcation of cowboy mythology into America’s consciousness. Through the sanction of these figures, who were among the country’s leading artists and academics, cowboys were validated, strengthening what was already a positive image in America.

Although cowboy songs had appeared on recordings before, Jimmie Rodgers was the first to yodel in a newly-composed romantic cowboy song. That was “The Land of My Boyhood Dreams” ([1929] 1992), making the prairie a key theme and incorporating the “Sleep, Baby, Sleep” yodel tune as a nostalgic signifier. When Rodgers moved to Texas, he quickly adopted the western image. Publicity photographs were taken showing him in full cowboy regalia, and on one of the recordings he made with the Carter Family (“Jimmie Rodgers Visits the Carter Family” [1931] 1992), A. P. Carter referred to him as “the first cowboy we’ve seen in a long time.” According to Bill C. Malone, other hillbilly singers were quick to appropriate the cowboy image, motivated partly by the desire to escape the negative connotations of the hillbilly (Malone 1993:94-5).

Because a number of performers sang songs of both types, it is impossible to distinguish absolutely between the hillbilly style and the cowboy or western-themed style of yodeling. Nevertheless, differences in

hillbilly and cowboy yodeling are discernible, as illustrated even in such dissimilar performers as Roy Rogers and Wilf Carter. Differences include the avoidance of Jimmie Rodgers's blue yodel turnaround figure, a preference for major key tonality rather than blues modes, greater rhythmic dexterity, a return of references to Switzerland in the lyrics, and, in ensembles, harmony yodeling.

The Canadian Wilf Carter (Montana Slim) serves as an example. His yodeling differs markedly from the Jimmie Rodgers models, a fact apparent in his first hit, "My Swiss Moonlight Lullaby" ([1933] 1997), which although not a cowboy song, illustrates key features of his style. Carter opts here for longer yodel sections than the turnaround formulas or brief refrains used habitually by Rodgers: this song's yodel comprises two separate strains. Rather than simply holding the falsetto notes like Rodgers, he yodels in rapid, athletic sixteenth notes. The second strain is also based upon vigorous oscillation of the sixths that conventionally make up the melodic material of yodels in popular music (Emmett Miller excepted). Carter links quite consciously with Alpine yodeling here, musically as well as in his choice of titles and themes. Additionally, in other songs famous nineteenth-century yodel melodies are resuscitated, as in his "I Miss My Swiss" ([1934] 1997), which features the yodel from Emmet's "Cuckoo Song."

Carter's rhythmic patterns, moreover, subdivide the beat evenly—that is, the rhythm is straight, whereas Jimmie Rodgers and the southern rural

yodelers always swing the beat in an easy-going fashion. The speed of Carter's breaking, his peculiar shifting of syllables to create a complex sound (his so-called three-in-one effect), and his straight and spirited rhythm give his yodeling a vitality and vigor at some remove from the hillbilly blue yodelers (with the possible exception of Reeves). Carter had a basically cheerful sound, was occasionally sentimental, but hardly soulful or pained. Thus, the occasional light-hearted Swiss-themed songs fitted in with his overall image of family entertainer.

Carter's material is very eclectic, embracing both of the primary personae of the era: cowboy and hillbilly. He recorded a great number of songs, many ballads and narrative type songs—"event" songs in the terminology of D. K. Wilgus (1970:164)—often without yodel. But his cowboy and hillbilly songs virtually always feature yodeling, so it may be concluded that the yodel was a distinguishing feature separating the cowboy and hillbilly songs from other types and that the yodel for him was integral to the musical representation of both cowboy and hillbilly.

Among the greatest exponents of 1930s western-themed music were the Sons of the Pioneers, who through well-crafted romantic songs of the American west—often featuring three-part harmonized yodeling—created a new genre in early country music that was quite distinct from that of the so-called hillbillies (see Sons of the Pioneers 2009). Founding member Leonard Slye won even greater fame as Roy Rogers, the King of the Cowboys, after he



replaced Gene Autry at Republic Studios making singing cowboy films. With his “extremely tricky and athletic ornamentation” (Green 2009:6) Rogers’s yodeling set a new standard. Rogers, like Wilf Carter and Elton Britt, would occasionally employ some of the same blues-derived cadential patterns as both Jimmie Rodgers and Goebel Reeves; “Night Herding Song” ([1937] *Sons of the Pioneers* 2009) or “Listen to the Rhythm of the Range” ([1938] *Sons of the Pioneers* 2009) serve as examples. Nevertheless, the cowboy yodelers created a very different yodel style, marked by quick and intricate interchange of register, and in the case of Rogers, often with up-tempo, swinging accompaniment.

In contrast to the masculinized hillbilly blue yodel, with its hobos, rounders, and gamblers as the chief personae, the cowboy style that emerged slightly later allowed space for female singers to develop yodeling styles and to reclaim and indeed to feminize the yodel. Not that there were no hillbilly women performers: Sara and Maybelle Carter of the Carter Family are the obvious examples. But much of the Carter Family material generally followed a different tradition, stressing family roots, close ties to the land, and religious faith. Other themes depicted by Rodgers and his followers such as lawlessness, restlessness, and carnality were in many ways antithetical to these, although the traditional ties to hearth and home are found in Rodgers’s material too. Thus, the usual personae of the masculine hillbilly types simply were not an option for the female performers of the era, who tended toward

gingham-clad comediennes with stage names such as Lulu Bell (Bufwack and Oermann 1993).

But once the barroom, the boxcar, and the jailhouse locales had been abandoned for the wide prairie and the cattle trail, women—white women, that is—could saddle up and sing too. Of course, the blues had had many important female singers, from Mamie Smith (who was the first to make a blues record in 1920) through to Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey and Memphis Minnie, to mention only a few of the best known; but these were all black performers. For respectable white women of the American South during this era, the blues was off limits. For them, the cowgirl persona offered an acceptable alternative.

There is a fairly clear delineation of types that were available for women singers in the depression era. These include cowgirl songs, lullabies, sentimental romantic songs, and comic songs. Blues-influenced yodels, strongly associated with masculine types, were avoided by women. Later, in the 1940s, once boogie woogie styles had been appropriated for mainstream popular music by performers such as the Andrews Sisters, blues-based yodeling became acceptable for white women. Rosalie Allen's "Yodel Boogie" ([1949] 2000) is a typical example, but this was in the era after World War II. In the 1930s, women generally avoided blues topics.

Perhaps best remembered of the female yodelers of this era is Patsy Montana, a successful performer on the radio barn dance programs of the

1930s and 40s who recorded a wide variety of material, much of it vaguely hillbilly or mountain ballad. But her fame rests upon her image as a cowgirl singer, as reflected in her stage name. Her biggest hit, "I Want to be a Cowboy's Sweetheart" ([1935] 2001) is a cowgirl dream song expressing a wish for a different life as a cowboy, and both the guitar and the yodel are highlighted as essential ingredients:

I want to pillow my head near the sleeping herd

As the moon shines down from above.

I want to strum my guitar and yodel-ay-ee-hoo,

That's the life I love.

This song contains some of Patsy Montana's most spirited yodeling. While she avoided the showiness of a virtuoso such as Wilf Carter, she often yodeled snappier rhythmic patterns or quicker passages than would Jimmie Rodgers, whose style did not include speedy tricks. The cowboy themes of activity, bravado, and braggadocio generally found a sonic correlative in flamboyant yodeling. Like the crack of the bull whip, or the whirl of the lasso, the spiraling yodel was an acoustic fit.

In 1931, Jimmie Rodgers made the first recordings featuring two-part harmony yodeling with Sara and Maybelle Carter: "Why There's a Tear in My Eye" and "The Wonderful City" (1992). It was a one-off for Rodgers. With the Sons of the Pioneers, however, harmony yodeling became a prominent feature of western-themed music, and has remained so. Of the many groups

following suit in the new idiom, two stand out. The Girls of the Golden West specialized in slow, dreamy romantic material, while the De Zurik sisters excelled in wit and spectacular agility. The yodeling and material of these all-female, cowboy-inspired duos provide an interesting comparison with the so-called hillbilly songs.

The De Zurik Sisters, for example, follow the tradition of florid yodeling extending back to the mid-nineteenth century, when stars such as Madame Sontag and Jenny Lind gave performances of Carl Eckert's "Swiss Song."<sup>11</sup> The florid yodeling in the printed version of that piece looks well beyond the capabilities of many amateurs and thus equates with the coloratura of these famous nineteenth century singers. Although the De Zurik Sisters were not a part of the classical tradition, their yodeling is nevertheless analogous to coloratura display. Their dazzling harmony yodeling in "The Arizona Yodeler" ([1939] 1998), with its dizzying speed, trilling, and lip buzzing, is unlike anything their contemporaries ever attempted and is the most flamboyant and virtuosic of the Western-style yodelers, a genre already crowded with virtuosi. "I Left Her Standing There" ([1939] 2003) similarly employs trilling effects and rapid harmony yodeling. Tracks by the De Zurik Sisters and the Girls of the Golden West are included in *American Yodeling 1911-1946* and *Flowers in the Wildwood: Women in Early Country Music, 1923-1939* (2003).

Elton Britt's "Patent Leather Boots" ([1939] 1997) is a prime example of the bravura yodeling heard in many cowboy-themed songs, built on the snappy ragtime-derived rhythms first recorded by Ward Barton. Britt's yodel incorporates the bluesy sound of Jimmie Rodgers' turnarounds, but the rhythm is very much punchier and with a greater show of virtuosity in the range and speed. This is evident in the briskly descending cadential figure heard often in cowboy yodeling, as well as the recordings of Goebel Reeves, the showiest of the hillbilly yodelers. But in Britt's version, the yodeling has shed all connotations of the backwater rube. His deft swinging of the tune and shaping of the vocables add a polish matching the shined-up patent leather of the title. This strutting cowboy analog to Chaucer's Chanticleer marks a new and different masculine association for the yodel which contrasts sharply with the slowly-drawled blue yodel turnaround.

The material Elton Britt recorded represents an interesting cross section in the affective connotations of the yodel. A boogie-inspired song such as "The Cannonball Yodel" ([1953] 1997), where the high tessitura yodeling correlates to the train whistle of the lyric, maintains the link between yodel and its early association—mountains and joy—and those newly acquired in the depression, for example, prairies and trains. In others, he keeps alive the Swiss connection, like Carter, with specific references to Switzerland, such as the waltz-time "In a Swiss Chalet" ([1949] 1997). Such waltz-time songs hark back to the hits of the turn of the century: indeed, Britt's biggest hit was

“Chime Bells,” a modernized version of “Mountain High,” which readers will recall was recorded by Matt Keefe in 1914. That the two are the same song is an observation no other writer seems to have made. Regardless, these songs illustrate how Swiss themes generally are matched by more flamboyant, rapid yodeling and more intricate rhythms than songs with other themes.

The cowboy-themed songs that began increasingly to appear in the 1930s thus feature yodeling that is distinct from hillbilly blues yodeling in a number of significant ways. Broadly speaking, they have a different approach to rhythm: cowboy-themed songs were much more likely to be performed in straight rhythm (for example Wilf Carter) or up-tempo swing (Sons of the Pioneers), as opposed to the slower grinding, bluesy swing of the blue yodel; cowboy songs tend, moreover, toward major key tonality than blues modality, except in the case of some of Elton Britt’s songs. Additionally, cowboy yodels show a much greater tendency toward virtuoso display. These latter features correlate with attributes of the cowboy stereotype, such as swagger and bravado; as such, they function as the musical signifiers in the romantic cowboy construction that developed in America’s early-twentieth-century mass media. Cowboy-themed songs, at the same time, offered greater scope for women yodelers, who developed counterpart gendered yodel types. And unlike the hillbillies, the cowboys made frequent allusions to Switzerland, although typically in light-hearted contexts.

At the level of the basic musical materials, on the other hand, both yodeling styles link with the wider yodeling tradition by frequently drawing upon the same archetypal melodic material as the older yodeling songs. Interestingly, however, some of the dreamier yodeling in this constructed cowboy image—similar to the non-yodeled falsetto vocalise of Tex Owens’s “Cattle Call” ([1934] 1994)—seems almost accidentally to reestablish a connection with its original context: vocalization associated with herding.

Despite the popularity of many of the songs, yodeling tended generally to appear in marginalized musics. Yodeling remained on the outer fringes of America’s mainstream possibly because it never lost its folk or rural connections. Some of the performers seemed to sense this. Most singers who made more than a handful of recordings omitted yodeling on some of them, whereas Jimmie Rodgers, Emmett Miller, and Goebel Reeves made the yodel central to their music. Thus, it is striking that neither Jimmie Rodgers nor Emmett Miller yodeled on their smoothest material— “My Blue-Eyed Jane” ([1930] 1992) and “She’s Funny That Way” ([1929] 1996), respectively.

Interestingly, by the 1940s yodel songs had entered mainstream pop: the Andrews Sisters (2002), for example, recorded Artur Beul’s published yodel song “*Nach em Räge schint Sunne*” (1946) as “Toolie Oolie Doolie,” albeit without much of a yodel. The general popularity of country music at that time—particularly western-themed music—coupled with the equally popular boogie woogie styles meant that songs such as Rosalie Allen’s “The Yodel

Boogie" ([1949] 2000) or her duet with Elton Britt, "Yodel Blues" ([1942] 1997), had a chance of reaching a broad audience.

Yet by the 1950s, yodeling, like the cowboy suit, was losing out to urban trends in fashion and in behavior. Neither cowboy nor hillbilly blended easily with the emergent "hip." Moreover, because the yodel had become so closely linked with country and rural music, by the time of the countercultural movement of the 1960s yodeling began to be used in youth-oriented popular music to signify the reactionary right wing: social divisions caused by the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam war meant that yodeling lost out to new, satirical uses. The yodel's drop in countercultural prestige is indicated, for example, by its unlikely appearance in the 1971 film *200 Motels* by Frank Zappa, in which the oafish, hippy-hating Lonesome Cowboy Burt is characterized as much by his yodeling as by his cowboy outfit.

Yodeling, quite simply, never shed its connection to the mountains, to the land, and, conversely, its distance from the city. It remained "folksy" and proved incompatible with a post-World War II aesthetic that favored sophistication and urban values. It fitted hillbilly wildness and cowboy idealism, but was too uncouth or too romantic for the newer styles. As such, it remained at the margins of late twentieth century music. Its proscription even by the country music establishment in the Nashville Sound is telling.



In the context of the dominant late-twentieth-century aesthetic paradigm, then, recordings such as Elton Britt's "Skaters' Yodel" ([1954] 1997) strike even devotees as beyond the pale. The kitsch aspect of combining yodeling with light classical repertoire (in this case, Waldteufel's "Skaters' Waltz") seems only to highlight the yodel's distance in such contexts from the sources that once gave it emotive power.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, it is interesting that at least one opera star, Cecilia Bartoli, has recorded a nineteenth-century yodeling display piece: Hummel's "Air à la tirolienne avec variations" (2007).<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, the musical forms discussed here by and large established paradigms and trajectories that to some extent are still followed. Western-themed music and latter-day cowboy yodeling live on, nurtured particularly by the Western Music Association. Riders in the Sky can be singled out as the most popular and successful followers in the tradition begun by the Sons of the Pioneers. The Riders' founder, Douglas B. Green, is not only a fine singer and exceptional yodeler; he is one of country music's best scholars and historians. His books *Singing in the Saddle* (2002) and *Way Out There* (2009) will be of particular interest to anyone desiring more information on yodeling in western-themed music. Likewise, Janet McBride deserves special mention. She has stayed true to the yodel throughout her long career (see McBride 2002), influencing and teaching a new generation of yodelers, including LeAnn Rimes. The recordings of the late Texan Don

Walser (see Walser 2006) also merit investigation. His jovial yodeling style married to a western swing approach won him many fans. And from Quebec, Manon Bédard has attracted many followers with her appealing blend of country, bluegrass, Cajun, and rock styles. Her sometimes athletic and spectacular yodeling recalls the great Canadian yodelers Wilf Carter and Hank Snow, while her song “Un p’tit air country” (1999) explicitly celebrates yodeling as a key signifier for “country.”

What is apparent when surveying a broad range of recordings with yodeling is the way the yodeling functions as a sonic analog to moods, situations, and particularly characterizations: metonyms of pastoral society or the “old country,” expressions of joy or sadness, or depictions of the uncouth hillbilly, the fictitious “ignorant coon,” the idealized cowboy, and so on. Yodeling serves a purpose in musical contexts, and this review has attempted to illuminate some of its conventions.

Many of the items discussed here are easily obtainable on discs. *American Yodeling 1911-1946* (1998), compiled and with notes by Christoph Wagner, is an excellent cross section of yodeling including songs by many of the performers mentioned here. *The Ultimate Yodelling Collection* (2003) is a good introduction to mainly hillbilly and country styles. *The Rough Guide to the Yodel* (2006) is a fascinating recording compiled by yodel expert Bart Plantenga which offers an interesting selection of yodeling from around the world. In addition, the German Bear Family label produces top class releases

of many yodelers, often as complete sets of their recordings, typically including scholarly articles and exhaustive bibliographies.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Tobler called yodeling the syllables of words “stylized yodels,” according to Max Peter Baumann in his article on Switzerland in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (2001). For a more extensive discussion of yodeling types, see Wise (2007).

<sup>2</sup> The titles of songs on nineteenth-century sheet music were highly variable; thus, Emmet’s “Lullaby to Lena” was published as “Lullaby” and Carl Eckert’s “Swiss Song” was also published as “Eckert’s Swiss Song.”

<sup>3</sup> Some examples are “Rockin’ Yodel” by the Leake County Revelers ([1928] 1998), “Rock All Our Babies to Sleep” by Jimmie Rodgers ([1932] 1992), and “Yodeling My Babies to Sleep” by Wilf Carter ([1941] 1997).

<sup>4</sup> See also Frank Wilson’s “The German’s Arrival” (1913).

<sup>5</sup> It was composed by Charles Sloman and Nathan Barker (1848), and although the sheet music gives no indication of its being a yodel song, all the recorded versions feature yodeling.

<sup>6</sup> In other words, the notes in the key of C would be G-A-G-E-C-G (an octave lower than the first G) and G-A-B-C-C#-D.

<sup>7</sup> For a fuller discussion of yodeling on acoustic recordings, see Wise (2008).

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion of Rodgers, see Wise (2010).

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<sup>9</sup> Tony Russell has already remarked on Miller's use of stammering to suggest black speech in his unpaginated liner notes to *Herschel Brown: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, 1928-29* (1996).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the cowboy boasts related in Botkin (1946).

<sup>11</sup> Their names are on the 1880 edition of this popular yodel song published by Oliver Ditson & Co. of Boston. An earlier edition was published in New York by Wm. Hall and Son in 1852. Eckert's "Swiss Song" is a translation of his "Er liebt nur mich allein."

<sup>12</sup> The Australian yodeler, Mary Schneider, has built a career on yodeling classical music selections.

<sup>13</sup> This is rare among present day classical singers; however, a few classical performers in an earlier generation made records with yodeling. Two examples are Elizabeth Schumann-Heink singing Millöcker's 'I und mei Bua' (1909), accessible on YouTube, and Luisa Tetrazzini singing Eckert's "Swiss Echo Song," i.e., Eckert's "Swiss Song" mentioned already (1911), accessible on Internet Archive.

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