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School of Criminal Justice, University at Albany
Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture
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ISSN 1070-8286

“Love of a Clean and Manly Sport”: The Texas Prison Rodeo and American Popular Culture

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“We welcome you to the greatest event staged by any penal institution in the world—the nationally known Texas Prison Rodeo.”

INTRODUCTION

On June 10, 1931, Alan Lomax and his father John, pioneering musicologists, anthropologists, archivists, folklorists and men of many hats, appeared at the Huntsville Walls prison unit, seeking admittance on their first prison visit as they began a journey through the South collecting folk songs sung by African American inmates. Their research would eventually yield entire collections of folk music from around the world as well as introduce the wider world to the music of Muddy Waters and Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter and many others. ¹The impact of their music on popular music and culture cannot be overstated. The Lomaxes targeted rural regions of the country and other environs in order to collect black folk songs, from which they could add to the dearth of materials on African American folk culture. By most accounts they were searching for music sources that had been “unaffected by popular tastes” and were “closer to the music of Africa as it existed in the Americas through slavery and into the Twentieth century (Wolfe and Lornell, 1994:111).” Although they initially settled on lumber camps and similar repositories of labor, prisons and penitentiaries would emerge as the predominant focus of their research. They would make their greatest strides toward achieving their objectives in 1947 and 1948 when they were given access to Mississippi’s Parchman Farm, a complex of fifteen labor camps that many regarded as among the most “[closed] societies of black men” in America.

According to one Lomax biographer, despite dropping the names of local connections, among them politicians and the president of the University of Texas, they were denied entry to

the Huntsville State Penitentiary. Nonplussed they moved on to more accommodating locations where they would have more luck capturing and preserving the folk music of African American culture (Szwed, 2010:39). Another version has it that the elder Lomax was well-acquainted with Prison Superintendent and Texas Prison Rodeo (TPR) founder Lee Simmons, but that he was out of town when they arrived, and his substitute wanted nothing to do with the enterprise and sent them down the road (Wolfe and Lornell, 1994:111).

Few could have predicted that just a few months after the Lomaxes were rebuffed, the Texas State Penitentiary at Huntsville, better known as “the Walls,” would begin opening its gates to the world, beginning an affair with American popular culture that would last more than a half century. Between 1931 and 1986 the Texas Prison Rodeo would capture the attention of the America and the wider world as it earned a reputation as the “World’s Fastest and Wildest Rodeo.”ⁱⁱ It should also be added that it was the first prison rodeo as well. What started as an entertainment and recreation opportunity for inmates and employees would win a permanent place in East Texas folklore and greater popular culture.

This article uses the rodeo as a prism from which to observe the changing mores, values and entertainment of the free world’s popular culture. Indeed, the TPR stood at the intersection of numerous forms of popular culture during its heyday, from Negro spirituals to Wild West shows, from Hollywood Westerns and television “oaters” to country singers and the new teen idols of 1950s Pop music. During its more than fifty year run a virtual who’s who of popular culture was associated with various aspects of the TPR. Luminaries that included Tom Mix, Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, James Arness, Ricky Nelson, John Wayne, Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays, and the notorious stripper known as Candy Barr, all lent their fame to an October Sunday either just by showing up or performing. What would have been probably the greatest performance of all was prevented by tragedy in 1935. Just months after meeting with Prison Director Lee Simmons and promising to attend a future performance, America’s best-known entertainer of his day, Will Rogers, was killed with his pilot Wiley Post in an Alaskan plane crash. Simmons later admitted it “was the bitterest of all my disappointments in the years of my prison management (Simmons, 1957:100).” Indeed, there is a certain irony that two of America’s leading icons bridging the eras of the vanishing West and the first half of the twentieth century perished using the technologies of the modern era, Rogers in a plane crash and Tom Mix in a car crash just five years later.

For most of the Texas State Prison system’s history, except for food and lodging, minimal spending was allocated by the state legislature for funding the needs of prisoners. But the TPR rectified this to a certain extent, by allowing prisoners to participate in good “wholesome” entertainment while raising money for prison education, recreation and medical programs. Any profits went into a Prisoners’ Welfare Fund to purchase books, band and orchestra equipment and “motion picture machines” so that each prison unit “can have a modern talking picture show weekly (Prison Rodeo Highlights clipping, 1930s).” From the various money-making pursuits on rodeo days such as selling their arts and crafts to marking up and selling rodeo programs, prisoners earned a few coins to buy newspapers, magazines, art supplies and even false teeth, hearing aids, and eyeglasses.

THE TEXAS PRISON RODEO AND COMMUNITY IN A PRISON TOWN

In the battle over becoming the capital of Texas, Austin won the capital; Huntsville the prison system, after the first Legislature of the State of Texas established the state penitentiary there on May 11, 1846. It opened in 1848 with 240 cells and was considered “vastly overbuilt.” During its first decade it accepted only 412 prisoners, most sentenced to 2-5 years for cattle rustling, thievery and various assault charges. Similar to other small towns that housed major prisons, Huntsville proper maintained an uneasy relationship with the prison system. On one hand it offered jobs and was an important cog in the local economy, while on the other, residents often became defensive whenever they heard their community referred to as a “prison town.” But the truth is that despite being the last home and burial place of Sam Houston and the location of the Sam Houston State Normal School (that opened just thirty years after the prison), the prison system was indeed at the center of the local economy.

Initially the prison rodeo was a hard sell outside the Walls in the arch-conservative burgh of Huntsville. One needs to remember that its beginnings paralleled the start of the Great Depression and the last years of Prohibition (ended in 1933). What’s more, the beginning of the 1930s was a time of prison strife, escapes and riots across the country. In fact just the year before the first rodeo in 1931, the Ohio State Penitentiary in Columbus, Ohio witnessed the country’s worst prison disaster when an incendiary device started a fire that killed more than 320 prisoners in less than an hour.ⁱⁱⁱ Despite all the fears to the contrary during its 55 year run only three prisoners^{iv} ever escaped and few local crimes were attributed to the avalanche of visitors from the outside.

When prison director Lee Simmons conferred with a construction foreman explaining his vision for the rodeo ring, the foreman replied, “Mr. Simmons, of course I’m going to do what you tell me; but you’re throwing away your money. You can’t get any crowd here. They ain’t gonna come (Simmons 1947: 93).” Few could have imagined that over the decades total yearly attendance at the Sunday-only October shows would reach 100,000. The initial trepidation about hosting the TPR was soon cast aside once local merchants saw the money rolling in from visitors each year. It did not take but several years for local merchants and entrepreneurs to recognize the potential lucre that would rain down on the sleepy town every October Sunday (except for 1943 and 1950). During the October Sundays no expense was spared in helping visitors absorb “some of the Texas culture” whether it coincided with historical reality or not.

But the TPR was never intended to become the extravaganza that it eventually became. It was designed as a private affair for inmates, employees and their families. But no sooner had the first Sunday event taken place than local residents began checking it out. Word spreads fast in a small town (and still does). Within two years attendance had swelled to 15,000, leading to the erection of stands and the charging of admission. At first they tried to limit competition to inmates with ranch and rodeo experience. But the following year it was opened up to convicts with clean records. Strict security was of course of paramount importance, but not too much so that it detracted “from the authenticity of events.”

THE RODEO AS AMERICAN ENTERTAINMENT

In the days before the telegraph, penny presses, radio and television, 16th century Spaniards introduced cattle and horses to Mexico and the Southwest. The earliest cowboys or vaqueros, created a working world of cattle and horses that laid the foundation for the modern rodeo.^v Following in their footsteps and hoofprints, American working cowboys had been competing with each other and testing their skills and mettle for sheer amusement as long as their occupation existed. Many accounts have the first actual rodeo taking place in 1864 when two bands of cowboys from competing ranches met in Deer Trail, Colorado to settle an argument over who were better at their jobs. Although there is still some debate about this, it is generally accepted that the first rodeo that charged admission and offered prizes took place in Prescott, Arizona in 1888. Today Prescott Frontier Days ranks among rodeo's top 25 events.

Prior to the advent of the modern rodeo, Wild West shows replicated the Old West experience for spectators, giving them an opportunity to witness an extremely selective representation of frontier experiences. It was William "Buffalo Bill" Cody who came up with the idea of bringing the cowboy experience to a public fascinated by a West that by 1882 was rapidly vanishing. Buffalo Bill shaped and exploited the Western legend, much as the TPR would in its aftermath and in his Wild West shows and subsequent dime novels based on his life, Cody proved "once and for all how commercially profitable the West really was (Steckmesser 1967:253)."

One rodeo historian suggested that as more and more rangeland became enclosed with barbed wire and privately owned it probably "stimulated creation of the [Wild West] show (Fredriksson 1985)." The 1880s coincided with a diminution of the prototypical cowboy experience as the job had become "a seasonal occupation" and cowboys were often out of work half the year due to the exigencies of modern cattle culture. Since by the very nature of their working skills it limited their choice of occupations, many found employment in the various Wild West shows during their downtime. By the end of World War One, moving pictures had put Wild West Shows out of business, opening a niche which would be filled by the modern rodeo promoter (Fredriksson 1985:15).

Texas Prison Director Lee Simmons witnessed his first rodeo at the age of eight, and was always proud to note that the very first piece of property he bought with his own money was a saddle (Simmons 1957). When he took over the expanding Texas prison system in 1930, he put into practice his belief in discipline and just as importantly, keeping prisoners occupied. To this end he allowed his charges to play baseball games, and participate in plays, bands and concerts. It would probably be difficult to convince any modern sports fan that did not grow up in the 1960s that baseball was America's sport until the 1970s, when it was eclipsed by faster paced sports like football and basketball. (Baseball player-turned television star of the *Rifleman* Chuck Connors, became part of a triptych of popular culture when he appeared at the TPR.) When the first TPR was being conceived baseball was among the most popular sports in Texas, where semi-pro and minor league teams abounded. However, by most accounts rodeos almost rivaled it in popularity. There was a baseball field at the prison before there were rodeo grounds. When the first rodeo was put together for inmates, staff and their families in 1931 it took place on the Huntsville Walls Unit baseball field, where they had formerly played every Sunday afternoon.

In 1931 Simmons met with Warden Waid, Albert Moore and livestock supervisor R.O McFarling, near the dairy and mule barns to discuss his vision for a prison rodeo. Others chimed

in with suggestions, including Texas outlaw Milt Good, who before his criminal career had been a world champion steer roper (Simmons, 1957:194). They decided that it would have to take place on Sundays (after getting permission from local preachers) to be successful, since this was the only day that prisoners and system employees and families could all be on hand together. It must be remembered that the rodeo was designed to be an entertainment only for the local prison community of inmates and correctional officers. Few could have imagined its future prominence. It was decided that the first one would take place in October 1931, with the onset of some decent weather after six months of unremittingly high temperatures.

THE RODEO AS GLADITORIAL GAMES

As the announcer greeted rodeo crowds on October Sundays he intoned, “We welcome you to the greatest event staged by any penal institution in the world—the nationally known Texas Prison Rodeo.” For the historical minded these games often summoned up images of the ancient Roman gladiatorial games as the TPR added chariots and other crazy elements unknown in any other rodeo of its time. One observer and obvious critic of the TPR noted that, “gladiator style cruelty contest has been reinforcing felon’s aggression since 1940 under guise of ‘tradition.’”

Over time as the public became more and more inured to the cowboy mystique, particularly in the wake of the countercultural 1960s, rodeo promoters had to find a way to draw attendance. At one Old-Timers Day, a veteran participant claimed to “juice it up with packs of fake blood when action slowed (Applebome 1987).” In similar fashion, events were made faster and more dangerous as if to rev up the bloodlust of the watching crowd. During the heyday of the Roman games attempts to break the monotony of the action by introducing new elements as well, although these were typically new ways of inflicting death. Sometimes this included acting out fatal myths with the condemned playing the role of victims. In a sense many of the prison rodeo stars were participating in various versions of the American Western myth, and with a number of them serving life sentences it would be tough to argue that they too had nothing to lose.

The Roman gladiatorial games, was probably the most ancient allusion made between the TPR and other events that have featured prominently in popular culture. During the first two centuries of the Common Era these games were a common part of Roman life, and of course no edifice represented the glories more than the majestic Coliseum, where slaves and professional warriors, as well as prisoners and wild animals engaged each other in life and death struggles in front of huge crowds. It is no surprise that one observer compared TPR events to the Roman games, noting, “The crowd alternates between Roman-like cheers and apprehensive gazes each time the ‘gladiator’ pits himself against the beast (*Houstonian* 1979).” There were of course a number of parallels between the TPR performances and the Roman games (and much later, medieval tournaments). Both took place in iconic settings, where visitors came hoping to be shaken out of their daily stupor by watching brave if not unfortunate men and animals risk life and limb to satisfy crowds and sometimes find self-respect in the process. One of the main differences was the fact that only one cowboy died during the Texas games, while tens of thousands perished in the Roman amphitheater. Another major difference was that Texan prisoners chose to participate, while the vast majority in Rome had no choice (some volunteered from outside to make a name for themselves).

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

African Americans have had a complicated relationship with rodeo culture, which has been maintained as a bastion white popular culture. In reality, it has been estimated that about one third of the cowboys participating in the cattle drives of the late nineteenth century were either Hispanic or black, many of whom had been former slaves who had mastered the skills of riding and roping. No black cowboy was as prominent as Bill Pickett, who was immortalized as the first black cowboy admitted into the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City in 1971, almost 40 years after his death.^{vi} Not only was he the only African American member of the 101 Ranch Wild West Show, he is generally credited with the invention of bulldogging, a staple of the modern American rodeo circuit (Hanes, 1979).

Huntsville was located at an interesting juncture between the traditions of the arid Southwest and the tropical Deep South. In its earliest days the Rodeo claimed heritage from both. During the 1930s a prison chorus known as the Cotton Pickers Glee Club, made-up of “twenty two Negroes singing sweet spirituals” performed. Texas Prison System auditor Ray Chapman organized the “famed Darkyland Choir,” described as “a 50 voice ensemble of Negro singers” heard annually beginning in 1932. According to one rodeo brochure, “These Negroes are gathered together from all over the prison system and trained in singing the old-time Darky spirituals (1939:8).” Between the 1930s and 1950s the TPR moved away from Southern-themed entertainment as it appropriated a mantle more closely linked to the Old West, replacing Minstrels and Gospel singers and such Southern-themed fare as Pappy O’Daniel and the Hillbilly Boys, with more modern performers such as the Rhythmic Stringsters, otherwise known as the “Boys in White” who “assaulted” the latest sing music, and the Goree Girls String Band, or “Girls in White,” whose fame rested on their song “I Want to be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart.”

THE COWBOY AS OUTLAW AND OUTSIDER

In the 1980 film *Urban Cowboy*, Bud, played by John Travolta, watches the TPR and comments to his girl, “Damn, these outlaws make good cowboys.” Few Western icons are more recognizable than the cowboy or the outlaw gunman. One historian asserted that the “association of outlaws and the West is an integral facet of the American myth (Prassel 1993).” What’s more few states have been more associated with the outlaw myth than Texas. In the years following the Civil War, the phrase “Gone to Texas,” more often known as “G.T.T.,” suggested that outlaws on the lam were drawn to that state because it had a “less demanding system of justice (Prassel 1993).” Perhaps frontier historian Ray Billington put it best when he wrote, “the image makers singled out Texas as the ultimate haven for scoundrels—a sanctuary for every outlaw and every cutthroat fleeing justice in other lands (1981:269).” Rodeo fans who made it to Huntsville on those October Sundays found many ways to spend their hard-earned dollars, with booths set up to sell souvenirs, prison crafts, and food. Taking advantage of both the prison and Western outlaw mystique that had become mainstays of American popular culture, visitors could purchase wanted posters and have them personalized to display their own faces in place of wanted desperadoes. In perhaps no state did the outlaw mystique exert such a powerful draw as

in Texas. Of course it had something to do with this state becoming the last to leave behind its frontier connections, particularly when it came to upholding one's honor and using violence to do this. A 1947 article in the popular magazine *Collier's* made this connection clear on every page. Not only were some of the "outlaw" horses named Clyde Barrow (as in Bonnie and Clyde), Dillinger and Hell's Angel, but the author noted that "Each 'outlaw' who enters the tournament lists must sign a formal release of any claim against the state (Rives 1947)."^{vii}

One writer compared rodeo cowboys and Wild West performers in their day as "mostly open-air delinquents, Civil War draft dodgers, and out and out saloon wreckers (Fredriksson 1985:13)." Their post-Second World War counterparts were regarded similarly. They were not alone in their "outsider" status. Returning veterans came home with a malaise common to veterans from other wars, but in the wake of the incipient conformism of the 1950s they found few outlets. Some joined motorcycle clubs or the Beat generation. Others lost themselves in the horse operas that took over television in the 1950s and early 1960s. Some have suggested that the appeal of the ubiquitous Westerns "grew out of a rebellion against the conformity of the period especially as the more monotonous regimen of the modern workplace became "the more exciting and glamorous were their fantasies of escape (Wooden and Ehringer, 1996:224)." In the 1950s, the "Beat generation" or beatniks, blazed new trails on a number of fronts, redefining social norms in the process; as did outlaw motorcycle clubs that proliferated at the end of the 1950s. According to the *Presidential Commission on Organized Crime*, "Returning home from war, vets confronted a changing home front. Many returned with cultural values different from ones they went off to war with." Some joined motorcycle clubs and rejected conventional lifestyles (1986:58)."^{viii} On a less bellicose level, beatniks captured media attention and tapped into a reservoir of discontent among the young as well. Originally cowboying was a seasonal occupation. In one respect, they were not much different from the bikers and beatniks of the 1950s and 60s who were attracted to an unstructured lifestyle. In reality they all shared a common bond in possessing skills that were not easily transferred to a conventional job.

The handgun is an iconic outlaw accoutrement often linked with Texans. Gunplay and gun-related crime were sometimes associated with the rodeo cowboy, especially behind prison walls. In a 1940 *Time* magazine profile, one contestant was described as a 25-year old big time professional "serving three years for a little shooting scrape." However, when perception met reality in the rodeo arena this hombre, who had ridden broncs at the Cheyenne Frontier Days and the Pendleton Round-Up, as well as the "great Broadway roundup in Manhattan's Madison Square Garden" was mortified when his horse refused to budge despite "frantic giggering and ear cuffing." Another TPR prize winner was described as a "plucky little guy" doing twenty years "for shooting a big fellow who picked on him in a saloon (*Time* 1940)."

CO-OPTING THE WESTERN MYTH

The cowboy is the most recognizable, indeed most indelible icon of the American West and for that matter of Texas. However, the West of the cowboy icon was an ephemeral one. In reality very few men spent a lifetime in this pursuit and it was rare for a cowboy to have participated in more than one cattle drive. Except in motion pictures and Dime novels, it was rare to see an old cowboy. Cowboys and rodeo hands have often been portrayed as the last heroes of the frontier. No modern writer did more to perpetuate this image than Louis L'Amour. Like his predecessor

Zane Grey, *L'Amour* was a practitioner of what one scholar labeled as “the West as ought to have been (Marsden 1978).” It is worth noting here that this genre has long been popular in prisons around the country and that in the 1950s, in the halcyon years of the television Western, related novels made up almost twenty percent of the paperback market. It has been reported that *L'Amour's* books were such valuable commodities in prison that inmates could count on receiving five books in exchange for any one of his titles (Roth 1999).

From an historical perspective, when it came to popular culture and the cultivation of the cowboy mystique its exemplars were overwhelmingly white, while in reality, probably one third had either an African American or Hispanic background. On the other hand, in the real world of the rodeo racial barriers persisted that were only surmounted in the prison version, since by its very nature—decentralized, localized and uncontrollable--it was quite difficult in a prison environment to segregate by race and ethnicity. So in effect, the Texas Prison System with its large population of minority and poor inmates probably more adequately represented the demographics of the “Old West” than did Hollywood, television, and Wild West shows that were overwhelming white and geared toward a white popular culture. For most of its fifty-plus year run the Texas Prison Rodeo mirrored white cowboy culture as well, with few African Americans outside of the Southern-themed entertainment of its early years, featured as musical entertainers or celebrities before the 1960s. This again reflected the dominant cowboy culture of the twentieth century that revolved around Country and Western music and cowboy television shows and movies, that did not feature black performers until the 1960s when football heroes such as Woody Strode^{ix} and Jim Brown broke new ground.

East Texas, from Dallas south has consistently tried to co-opt the legacy of the cowboy's West. Visit Dallas today and with the numerous references to the cattle business in art and names of businesses one would think it was central to the cattle trade during its heyday in the late nineteenth century. This has not been lost on Dallas critics, with one sagely commenting on the recent construction of a sculpture of a cattle herd in Dallas, noting it would have been more realistic if it featured sculptures of Neiman-Marcus bags. When it came to the cattle culture of the West, its western neighbor Fort Worth played an important role, while Dallas had more in common with the Deep South and television's Ewing Family than cattle drives and cowboys. It is worth noting that even by 1947 journalists recognized that “Many of the contestants have had no closer communion with life on the range than that provided by Roy Rogers on the silver screen (Rives 1947).” This dichotomy was not lost on TPR observers either, with one noting, “Although Huntsville is an East Texas City, such will not seem to be the case when Sunday, October 6, rolls around—for that time this staid old home of the Great General Sam Houston will be one vast, grand-scale cow town, and Gateway to the Golden West.”^x

According to one writer who witnessed numerous rodeos in his days, he could not “remember a single instance when he was not thrilled and sent away with a glowing feeling of pride for his ancestors, the hearty souls who settled the glorious West in the days before the automobile and machine age in which we are now living and enjoying things too complicated, too marvelous, and too far-fetched for the old-timers of the covered wagon days to even dream in their wildest dreams.”^{xi} The TPR was but one of many instances that popular culture has reinvented and selectively reproduced the mythic West for popular consumption. Hollywood has perhaps played as big a role as any trend setters, just witness the number of retro-Westerns of the 1960s and 70s that reinterpreted that era. In 1973 the first film ever directed by bestselling author Michael Crichton, *Westworld*, imagined a near future when a couple of hucksters develop an

adult holiday resort where affluent tourists are offered imaginary vacations in perfect replicas of ancient Rome, medieval England, or the Wild West. Here guests indulge their fantasies in every way with humanlike android. The West as represented here was perhaps as realistic as the one created for the TPR attendees “In the colossal corral known as Texas (Rives 1947).”

THE TEXAS PRISON RODEO DISCOVERS THE TELEVISION WESTERN

In the 1950s television fought for dominance of the entertainment market as it attempted to supplant motion pictures and Hollywood as the main purveyor of trends in popular culture. This was made clear when the Texas Prison Rodeo was featured on NBC’s *Wide World of Sports* in 1956 featuring trained animal acts, a mounted quadrille, and “Marilyn Rich, the Original Helicopter Girl” engaging in “death defying acrobatic stunts from rings and a rope attached beneath the helicopter (Simmons 1957).” Coming off the bloodiest war in human history, in the postwar boom of the 1950s many Americans sought the comforts of earlier eras such as the Old West, which was more often than not a wishful figment of their imaginations. However, this longing for the past found expression in a number of Western-themed entertainments, including rodeos. During the 1950s more than 10 percent of published novels were Westerns. What’s more, eight of the top ten television shows were Westerns; this shouldn’t be surprising since at least thirty were produced in the 1950s. In 1958 alone, 54 Western motion pictures were released. According to one survey, 1958-1959 was the most successful year for the TV Western (Wooden and Ehringer, 1996:225). To top this off, seven of the top ten shows were devoted to this genre including the top four shows.^{xii} The list of celebrities who were featured in the TPR arena in the 1950s was a virtual “Who’s Who” of Western entertainment that included Richard Boone (*Have Gun, Will Travel*), Dale Robertson (*Tales of Wells Fargo*), Robert Culp (*Trackdown*), James Arness (*Gunsmoke*) and Steve McQueen (*Wanted Dead or Alive*).

But by the end of the 1950s the popularity of these shows was leveling off as tastes turned in new directions. The appearance of John Wayne with teen heartthrob Frankie Avalon in 1960 was just the first inkling of this trend. By 1963-1964 only *Bonanza* was listed in the top ten, with the other places filled with Sitcoms such as the *Lucy*, *Andy Griffith*, and *Red Skelton* shows. Soon the TPR would have at least several featured entertainers from this new vanguard of popular culture, including African American performers Fats Domino and Bo Diddley.

PRISON COWBOY MEETS URBAN COWBOY

By the late 1950s most Texas prisoners called cities home, with few possessing the requisite skills to perform in the rodeo. Popular culture would follow suit in the next decade as most of the Western television shows went off the air. Studios tried to invigorate the genre with two shows featuring rodeo cowboys including *Stoney Burke*, which featured Jack Lord as the eponymous hero. Critics had a field day with his performances labeling him “Phoney Stoney.” The “outsider” was often associated with those stuck in the past, unwilling or unable to make the transition to changing times. The release of the 1962 film *Lonely are the Brave*, starring Kirk Douglas, an early anti-Western, brought together major threads of the cowboy-prison-popular culture experience. Its original working title was “*The Last Hero*,” but studios still mired in the

recent past wanted to market it as another Douglas Western vehicle, once a surefire bet at the box office. The movie was based on the 1956 novel *The Brave Cowboy: An Old Tale in a New Time*, by environmentalist and literary outlaw Edward Abbey, with a script by the formerly blacklisted writer Dalton Trumbo. The book and film were both prescient and perceptive. The film revolves around a fiercely independent cowboy who wants to get himself locked up in jail so he can help a buddy escape from the penitentiary. As Jack Burns, Douglas is the embodiment of the modern cowboy, rejecting modern technology, eschewing modern identification such as draft cards and drivers' licenses, while working job to job. Jack is constantly expressing his disassociation with modern society, where a man is restricted from doing what he wants to do. During the course of the story and after a beating from the sheriff, it is revealed that Douglas had been a much decorated Korean War vet. In the end, following his escape Burns and his horse are hit by a truck driver delivering a load of toilets while crossing a road. Jack is dead and the sheriff has to put the horse out of its misery with a bullet. Douglas would later admit he was drawn to the story because it was "a point of view" he loved—"the difficulty of being an individual today (Cady n.d.)."

It is not uncommon for prison inmates to claim they ended up behind bars by taking part in an opportunity "to be an individual." This claim rings somewhat hollow if not hypocritical since they belonged to a prison and criminal subculture that functioned according to rigid but unwritten rules and restrictions concerning what is or is not acceptable behavior. The Kirk Douglas character expressed this in *Lonely are the Brave*, when he mentions a litany of rules and regulations that society has created to control antithetical behaviors, "Have you ever noticed how many fences they're getting to be? And the signs they got on them...no hunting, no hiking, no admission, no trespassing, private property, closed area, start moving, go away, get lost, drop dead." Trying to snap him out of his almost anti-social rant, one acquaintance responds, "You know you can't go on like this—you're in the Twentieth Century now."

There were few segments of American popular culture that were not affected by the iconoclastic Sixties and Seventies on some level. This was especially true with the TPR. For example, one writer borrowed counterculture argot to make a distinction between bullriders and other performers, proclaiming "Bull riders are the hippies of the rodeo set. The grooviest, most far out trip to be had is on a nasty-tempered Brahma Bull. The trip is guaranteed to be short—8 seconds or less." While the impact of this era on the TPR was obvious in many respects--clothing and hair styles, and language--it was never really reflected in the music at the rodeos, which except for an occasional Bo Diddley or Fats Domino, clung closer to its Country and Western antecedents with the likes of Rex Allen, Ernest Tubb and Molly Bee. The confluence of prison-cowboy and popular culture was probably more pronounced in the adoption of the cowboy mystique by the counterculture as buckskin, headbands, fringe jackets, beads and leather vests became mainstays of hippy sartorial tastes (Allen 1998).

THE RODEO MEETS THE MOB, HOLLYWOOD AND THE WORLD OF BURLESQUE

One TPR performer famously linked a variety of popular culture standbys, from burlesque and Kennedy conspiracy theories to organized crime and the drug culture. On December 4, 1959, Juanita Dale Slusher (Phillips), the stripper better-known as Candy Barr, was processed into the Texas prison system as TDC Inmate # 153781. Living up to the state's gun culture, Barr was not

shy about admitting she had shot her first husband, but not fatally, in 1956. During her burlesque days in Dallas she performed in a “skimpy cowboy outfit” consisting of a 10 gallon hat, cowboy hat, pasties and “scanty panties”, while aiming a toy pistol under her cocked leg at the audience (Brown 2001:49). With “her name and reputation she became a Texas Folk Hero (Holley 2006).

Barr was sentenced to 15 years for less than an ounce of pot. Nonplussed over the stiff sentence she famously murmured “I always wanted a brick house.” She was paroled in 1963, but not before she had been “persuaded” to appearing in rodeos during the previous three years. She got the biggest ovation of any paid performer in 1960 after performing a rendition of *Fever* on the same bill with Bo Diddley and Ray Price. Initially she only performed behind the walls of the Goree Women’s Prison with the “Goree Girls Band.” Her entry coincided with the planning of the next rodeo. Playing against type, she made a deal that she would perform solo only if she could work in the prison library.

Candy Barr rubbed shoulders and who knows what else with such mobster luminaries as Mickey Cohen but was linked to the most famous murder of the 20th century due to her association with Dallas club-owner and killer of JFK assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Ruby. In fact, immediately after JFK was assassinated she was interrogated by the FBI (Cohen 1975). In a game of *Six Degrees of Separation*, Candy cast a wide net over popular culture, from the TPR through the maze of Kennedy assassination lore, as well as starring in perhaps the first famous porn film (15 minutes long), *Smart Aleck*, in 1951 at the age of 16. In a 1984 issue of the *Texas Monthly* the “ecdysiast” was selected for a list of “perfect Texans” that included Lady Bird Johnson and oil-well firefighter Red Adair. Not even Dan Rather and Walter Cronkite made the cut this time! Fifteen years later *Texas Monthly* named her “Bad Girl of the Century,” noting that “In the early fifties a nymphet with tropical green eyes and a body that would stop the Dow Jones taught the Puritans of Dallas the pleasures of sex, and they taught her their version of justice (Cartwright 1999).” Prior to the changing mores of the 1960s, it was doubtful that Candy Barr would have been allowed to perform at all in the more prurient eras.

THE TEXAS PRISON RODEO AND BEYOND: INTERSECTION OF AMERICAN CULTURE

Parole and discharges depleted the ranks of “real” cowboy performers in this era. For many the TPR had outlived its value. As one reporter saw it, after 55 years, due to a host of reasons, including overcrowding, insurance liability concerns, state budget issues and changing times, “one of the state’s more colorful throwbacks, is in danger of being sent to the great bunkhouse in the sky (Applebome 1987).” For many critics the TPR had outlived its value at a time when inmates were more likely to be in jail for robbing 7-11s than just “wayward ranch hands (Applebome 1987).” Huntsville too was trying to move away from its rural roots. On the eve of the TPR’s 50th anniversary in 1981 some resident lamented publicly “that the constant association with the prison system has warped certain traditional values (Barrett 1981).” Home to not just the Texas Prison System, but a growing state university, local residents no doubt resented the fact that by the 1980s the TPR had become the biggest, and for many locals the only draw in town. But, when engineers condemned the stadium as unsafe it gave opponents a graceful way out. There was something to this. Americans had become more litigious over the years and prison cowboys, although they signed waivers, were more likely than ever before to

take their injury claims to court. This became especially in the wake of the last rodeo in 1986 when 46 were injured, six with broken bones.

While the TPR followed the cowboy way of life into the ether of memory, the Angola Prison Rodeo at the Louisiana State Penitentiary continues to hold annual and bi-annual events since 1965. One anthropologist studying the Angola Prison Rodeo in Louisiana acknowledged “Contemporary popular culture’s fascination with criminality” as an important draw for prison rodeos, which would hold true for the popularity of the TPR in its heyday, as visitors traveled for hours and maybe days to access one of “society’s most censored realms (Schrift, 2004:331).” The most recent prison rodeo to follow the way of the TPR was one held in Oklahoma which ceased operations in 2010 after a seventy year run. Although administrators cited budget issues, it was probably due to pressure from animal rights groups. From a high of six prison rodeos, only one survives, the rest victims of state budgets, overcrowding, changing sensibilities and concerns for not just the welfare of prisoners but the protection of animals as well. What’s more, rather than attending a selective representation of the West, the cyberworld allows gamers to take part themselves in the more accessible and popular virtual world of the computer.

What is most interesting is that the prison rodeos never took hold in Western states which had more than their share of free-world rodeos. Horse and rodeo programs though have been effectively used in working with convicts and troubled youths. What was once seen as a low-rung occupation by the 1950s the cowboy was seen as a wholesome connection to America’s frontier past and a way to build up self-esteem on horseback. Perhaps, due to the geographical proximity to the land of the real cowboy, Western prisons did not feel the need to live up to the well-established frontier ethos, while Southern prison systems in Texas and Louisiana (and to a certain extent Oklahoma which lies at the nexus of two cultures almost as much as Texas), considered adopting the rodeo as a way of moving beyond the racist shadows and deep connections of a prison system rooted in the social controls of slavery.

Other groups have joined East Texas prison culture in co-opting the cowboy ethos, using the rodeo as a strategy for demonstrating that certain formerly marginalized groups are actually part and parcel of the American experience and have just as much a claim to their historical roots as the short-lived frontier cowboys. Today, one has a rich choice of venues from which to view the rodeo. Today there are African-American, Mexican-American, Native American, Hawaiian, Gay, and Celebrity rodeos, as well as rodeos for the hearing-challenged (Santa Fe), firefighters and police and for seniors.

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ⁱ Although Leadbelly did time in Texas, it was at Angola Prison in Louisiana that the Lomaxes recorded the story of the Midnight Special, the song that identified Ledbetter with Texas prisons.

By most accounts Ledbetter did not write the actual song but added some elements, creating the most popular version of the song.

ⁱⁱ It seems promoters adopted numerous monikers for the rodeo before they found one that seemed to slip off the tongue with more alacrity. Other titles have touted it as “The Southwest’s Most Famous Show,” “The Wildest Show on Earth,” “The Battle of the Outlaws,” “The Biggest Show of its Kind on Earth,” and “The Toughest Rodeo Behind Bars.”

ⁱⁱⁱ The author is currently writing a book on this subject.

^{iv} Actually only one escaped. The other two were caught changing into free world clothes in the stadium and one of the guards mistook them as rascals trying to sneak into the arena to watch the show for free, so he evicted them. Because of the one inmate cowboy who escaped on his own in 1937 his counterparts were forced to wear prison stripes in 1938 to distinguish them from the trusties working the grounds.

^v The term rodeo comes from the Spanish *rodear*, which means to encircle or surround.

^{vi} Ironically Bill Pickett, the world’s most famous bulldogger succumbed to injuries on April 2, 1932.

^{vii} It should be noted here that America was not yet the litigious society it would become in the 1980s, and the threat of litigation loomed large in the last years of the TPR and was probably an unheralded but important factor in the decision to end the rodeo in 1986, especially after 46 rodeo contestants were injured, many with broken bones.

^{viii} This held true for post-Korean War and Vietnam War vets.

^{ix} Woody Strode was one of the first African American to break the National Football League color barrier in 1946. He was featured in John Ford’s western *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960), where he also broke ground by playing an officer in the U.S. cavalry.

^x TDC document box, 1941, “Prison Rodeo Will Feature Nineteen Events.”

^{xi} Lawrence Evans. n.d. “Prison Writer Recalls Top Rodeos of Former Days,” TDC Document box.

^{xii} The top four were *Gunsmoke*, *Wagon Train*, *Have Gun, Will Travel*, and *the Rifleman*, followed by *Maverick* (#6), *Tales of Wells Fargo* (#7), and *Wyatt Earp* (#10).