



Gene Autry and Roy Rogers: America's Two Favorite Singing Cowboys

Charles River Editors

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“Music has been the better part of my career. Movies are wonderful fun and they give you a famous face. But how the words and melody are joined, how they come together out of air and enter the mind, this is art. Songs are forever” - Gene Autry

“I did pretty good for a guy who never finished high school and used to yodel at square dances.” – Roy Rogers

In the early 20th century, Westerns were one of the most popular genres in Hollywood, and one of the young stars at the forefront was Gene Autry, a Texan whose life story made him a natural to be the country’s most famous “singing cowboy”. Autry would become a symbol of masculinity and morality on screen during the 1930s, but it was effortless for someone who had already grown up riding horses to school.

Autry came of age at a time when the “singing cowboy” was at the apex of his popularity, and like his most famous successor, Roy Rogers, Autry actually got his start in show business as a singer. Even today, Autry might be best known for being a pioneer of country music and the author of Christmas hits "Here Comes Santa Claus", "Frosty the Snowman", and "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer". Autry would produce hundreds of recordings during his life, helping ensure the popularity of the country music genre and earning inductions into several related halls of fame.

Of course, the popularity of Autry’s music and country music in general was bolstered by the fact that he became one of the biggest stars in Hollywood. After he was discovered in 1934, Autry made dozens of films and was still one of the industry’s biggest moneymakers when he went off to fight in World War II. Though his movie career had already hit its peak by the time he returned, Autry used his popularity and his skills to transition into television, and he dabbled in all kinds of other ventures, including owning a radio station and professional sports teams. By the end of his long life and career, Autry could lay claim to being the only man with 5 stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for film, television, music, radio, and live performances.

Roy Rogers came from an Ohio farm, but regardless of his background, Rogers certainly looked the part of the quintessential cowboy, along with his wife Dale Evans and his horse Trigger. His versatile singing and acting abilities made him successful both on radio and on the screen.

Rogers came of age at a time when the “singing cowboy” was at the apex of his popularity, and that was favorable because he actually got his start in show business as a singer. In the early ‘30s, he bounced around several groups as a country music singer before earning national attention as a member of the Sons of the Pioneers, who were signed to Decca and had a couple of hits. As a result, when he first appeared in movies in 1935, it was usually in bit roles that required singing, but when Gene Autry threatened to quit acting in 1938, Rogers was viewed as a suitable replacement for lead roles. As it turned out, he became the premiere “singing cowboy” in Autry’s stead, and from 1939-1954, he was one of the Top 10 Western stars in Hollywood, and a Top 10 movie star overall during some of those years.

As Rogers evolved into the “King of the Cowboys”, he became a pop culture icon, and he was shrewd enough to capitalize on his image. All sorts of Roy Rogers merchandise hit stores, from action figures to comic strips, and Rogers even banked on the popularity of his horse Trigger by featuring him enough to make the horse a household name as well. Even today, people can find the name Roy Rogers all over the place, if only because he eventually had his name lent to a popular fast food chain in later years.

Gene Autry and Roy Rogers examines the lives and careers of two of America's most famous Western actors.

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