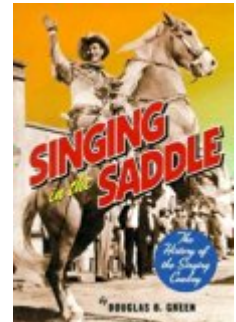


Douglas B. Green. *Singing in the Saddle: the History of the Singing Cowboy.* Country Music Foundation Press, 2005. xvi + 392 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8265-1506-3.



Reviewed by Travis Stimeling

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Commissioned by Christopher J. Scott (University of South Carolina)

In *Singing in the Saddle: The History of the Singing Cowboy*, Douglas B. Green--also known as Ranger Doug (the Idol of American Youth) of the popular cowboy trio Riders in The Sky--presents a meticulously researched history of the singing cowboy from its origins in nineteenth-century popular song and pulp literature to the cowboy revival of the last thirty years. Green, whose earliest work on the subject appeared in the *Journal of Country Music* in 1978, has spent much of his life documenting the lives of the musicians, actors, and businesspersons who were responsible for propelling the singing cowboy into the American imagination.[1] *Singing in the Saddle* stands as a monument both to the singing cowboy and to Green's passion for the subject and represents a significant contribution to the study of American popular music.

Although Green presents the volume as a "history," the text more closely resembles an encyclopedia than a narrative history. The first two chapters quickly examine the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century emergence of the cowboy

as a folk hero through his appearance in dime novels, sentimental songs, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Shows, and the folkloric studies of J. Frank Dobie and John A. Lomax. The remaining eleven chapters offer a survey of the recording, film, and radio stars who performed as singing cowboys from the advent of hillbilly recordings in the early 1920s through the 1990s. Green presents the artists in the order of their debuts, offering much-needed thumbnail biographies of each artist and brief overviews of their significant works. Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, the two most prominent figures to rise from the singing cowboy ranks, receive chapter-length treatments, and significant attention is devoted to the Sons of the Pioneers, a vocal trio that played an important role in shaping the sound of western music and, through the efforts of Bob Nolan, contributed greatly to the western songbook. While Green's primary focus is on the singing cowboy's "golden age" (the 1930s and 1940s), his attention to those artists who emerged in the 1950s and 1960s adds greatly to our understanding of the ways that artists such as

Rex Allen responded to rock and roll, television, and postwar pessimism. Moreover, the concluding chapter, which focuses on revivalists such as Riders in the Sky, Michael Martin Murphey, and the Sons of the San Joaquin, explores the ways that contemporary singing cowboys have reclaimed the histories of both the mass-mediated cowboy and his real-life counterparts, helping to secure the singing cowboy's legacy in the American imagination.

Singing in the Saddle is praiseworthy merely on the basis of Green's carefully written biographies. But Green (and, it should be noted, The Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press) have gone the extra mile by including several important ancillary materials that further enhance the value of the text. A time line (pp. 325-334) synthesizes the artist biographies into a comprehensive overview that, when used in conjunction with the detailed index, grants readers easy access to the information they seek. Two sidebars--entitled "Gene Autry on the Road" (pp. 140-141) and "Tex Ritter on the Road" (pp. 162-163)--provide insight into the thrills of a singing cowboy appearance and add some variety to the otherwise formulaic biographies. Moreover, Green has compiled a second time line that accounts for the Sons of the Pioneers' numerous personnel changes and that helps to explain how the group has persisted for the past seventy-five years (pp. 86-93). Perhaps the most noteworthy supplementary materials are the 150 photographs, sheet music covers, and film posters--the vast majority of which are drawn from Green's personal collection--that document the changing image of the singing cowboy over its more than eight-decade public history and that help us to understand the continued appeal of these artists.

Singing in the Saddle does, however, fall short in a few areas that will be important to several readers. First, although country music historians regularly claim the singing cowboys as "country" artists, Green follows the approach of many west-

ern music purists by downplaying the influence of country music on these artists and by drawing strict boundaries between country and western music. Yet he acknowledges (and, as in the case of former Son of the Pioneer Ken Curtis, celebrates) the influence of classical and mainstream popular music on the genre. By failing to account for symbiosis of

country and western musics, Green seems to suggest that country music diluted the potency of the singing cowboys' works. Second, although Green occasionally makes broad statements about the quality of a particular singer's voice, he goes into relatively little detail about the sounds of cowboy music, again missing an opportunity to make meaningful musical connections between the singing cowboys and other genres of popular music. Finally, occasionally obscured by Green's impeccable biographies, the absence of an overarching narrative sometimes makes the book a difficult read, especially in the later chapters that discuss the unraveling of the singing cowboy.

Like other monumental studies such as Bill C. Malone's *Country Music, U.S.A.* (2002) and Tim Brooks's *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919* (2004), *Singing in the Saddle* reveals Green's deeply personal passion for western music. Green's investment in this topic has opened innumerable pathways for future research in film studies, cultural studies, history, and musicology. While Green occasionally has difficulty seeing the big picture, *Singing in the Saddle* should facilitate a more careful consideration of the singing cowboy in future studies of all American popular music.

Note

[1]. Douglas B. Green, "The Singing Cowboy: An American Dream," *Journal of Country Music* 7, no. 2 (May 1978): 4-61.

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