

Cowboy Songs

Although gut string Spanish guitars have been around for centuries now, the steel string acoustic guitar wasn't even invented until around the middle of the 19th century, and it was not in widespread use until well after the turn of the 20th century. The popularization of the steel string acoustic guitar, which before then was used almost exclusively for blues, traditional, and jazz music, began with the tremendous commercial success of the singing cowboys of the 1930's and 1940's, most notably Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. The singing cowboys, as well as the many popular and talented singer/guitarists of the 1950's, 1960's, and early 1970's who followed them, paved the way toward a general acceptance of and familiarity with the steel string acoustic guitar, an incredibly versatile instrument that has become much more popular and widely owned than the Spanish (classical) guitar, and that in fact is well suited to playing practically any style of music.

There will no doubt always be a special place in the hearts of music lovers everywhere for the singing cowboys, those lonesome denizens of the Old West. In truth, there were probably a great many singing cowboys back in the old days, and for very good reason, since singing has a very calming effect on cattle, and a calm herd was obviously much preferred out on the trail over a restless and agitated herd that might stampede at any moment. I had resolved to do an album of cowboy songs several years before this album was recorded, and I had already nearly completed gathering the songs for this project. But as I was researching the words in the making of this album, reconciling different versions of verses and editing them into a cogent whole as best I could, I could not help but notice that many of the songs have a great many verses and are actually rather long. This again makes perfect sense in context, since the longer the cowboy sang to them, the longer the herd remained calm.

The 8 songs on this album that date back to the Old West all have a fairly simple musical structure, so I decided to add a second guitar part for each, in a different key of play, in order to make the music a little more interesting. I added harmony vocals on each song for the same reason, though I don't expect that the harmonization of cowboy songs was very commonplace until Roy Rogers and his singing troupe the Sons of the Pioneers came along. In the interest of ensuring a greater continuity throughout the album, I also added a second guitar part and harmony vocals for the four other songs, none of which is a cowboy song per se, but all of which are cowboy-themed. "Cool Water", "I'm An Old Cowhand From The Rio Grande", and "Ghost Riders In The Sky" all date back to and were popular during the singing cowboy heyday of the 1930's and 1940's. "Little Cowboy", from the 1968 Harry Nilsson album "Aerial Ballet", is a song that was written by and sung to him by his mother when he was a boy. This song in particular recalls for me with fondness my own aspirations of one day becoming a cowboy when I was a boy, and rounds out rather nicely my efforts to somehow try to capture that spirit in the making of this album.