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Actor, singer, music publisher, television producer and businessman, Gene Autry was one of the most successful and influential popular artists of the twentieth century. Moreover, despite being (largely) held in little regard in country music circles or by film historians, his impact on the development of country music, in terms of both themes and presentation, and the Western film genre was decisive.

In the *Motion Picture Herald* Top Ten Money-Making Western Stars poll, Autry was listed every year from 1936 to 1942 and 1946 to 1954 (he was serving in the US Army Air Corps in 1943–45), holding first place from 1937 to 1942, and second place (after Roy Rogers) from 1947 to 1954. During his greatest period of film success—he made some 100 movies—he had numerous record hits including the million sellers ‘Tumbling Tumbleweeds’ (1935), ‘That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine’ (1935), ‘You Are My Sunshine’ (1941) and ‘Jingle Jangle’ (1942). Following the decline of the series Western in the late 1940 and early 1950s, Autry redeployed the commercial deals he had previously made (see below) to help re-configure himself as the gateway to Christmas for his young fans via further million-selling recordings, such as ‘Here Comes Santa Claus’ (1947 and regularly re-released), ‘Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer’ (1949) and ‘Frosty the Snowman’ (1950). Subsequently Autry extended his reach to Easter with a yet another million-seller, ‘Peter Cottontail’ (1950).

While Autry’s film and recording success is little remembered these days, his visual impact remains through the flamboyant clothes of Hollywood couturier Nudie (a former G-string manufacturer) that Autry chose to wear. Such was the force of this presentation of the Western hero that by the mid sixties Nudie was dressing some 80 per cent of ‘Western’ oriented country music stars—and their cars, replacing simple door furniture with six guns, rifles and the like. A further mark of this shift from country themes and images to Western topics and motifs...
occurred within the genre as a nomenclature battle, akin to that within black music, as ‘country’ music, previously ‘hillbilly’ music, became ‘country and western’.

Autry, like Nudie, has gone but his influence and continuing presence as a hero whose clothes were rarely dirtied, let alone torn and tattered, lives on. Indeed, in a wealth of songs and films (such as The Amazing Rhythm Aces’ ‘King of the Cowboys’ or the gnomic cowboy who offers comforting advice to the Dude in the Coen brothers’ The Big Lebowski) the image of the innocent hero, who kissed his horse rather than his leading lady, has been revived as a reflected common memory: a child watching him at the Saturday morning picture show in more complex times, or a stumbling individual seeking insight/hope/advice at a difficult time. In the past such options were gold-plated with the (singing) cowboy a modern version of the knight setting out to rescue a damsel in distress. On screen, Autry was successful and order was restored. However, as ‘Americana’ replaced ‘country and western’ and the problems raised in the songs thereof changed equally dramatically, the immediate influence of Autry declined. That said, the values Autry represents remain compelling (hence the repeated appeals in various country songs to a golden age in which country stars were proper heroes and innocence was possible).

The construction of that innocence was a complex endeavour. In his book The Filming of the West, one of the few accounts to treat series Westerns as well as the works of mainstream directors such as John Ford, John Tuska presents what he calls ‘The Autry Phantasy’. In this the star is essentially a creature of fable, able to overcome the worst of dangers with a soothing song, his dandified country outfit protecting him as if it were armour, a man who wears his guns with an indifference that is threatening. In short a creature of legend, disdainful of the messy realities in which most (competing) cowboy stars were enmeshed. In such a world Charles Starrett might have been the Durango Kid and William Boyd was Hopalong Cassidy, but Gene Autry was Gene Autry, no less. Tuska’s description of Mexicali Rose (Republic, 1939) offers a detailed account of the ‘The Autry Phantasy’, in action:

Gene persuades Noah Beery, Sr, ...playing a Mexican bandido, not only to release him from bondage but even to sacrifice his life on the side of the law by singing to him about Robin Hood. Tied up at the campfire, Autry and [Smiley] Burnette discover that Beery’s principal recreation is collecting Gene Autry records. When Beery’s recording of the title song is broken, Gene takes over and continues the song, a full orchestra accompanying him right out there on the prairie, the bandidos forming a male chorus. There is no attempt at even suggesting reality or realistic motivation. That is the point of the Autry phantasy, it is a wholly consistent substitute for reality.

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Holly George-Warren does not engage with this debate. Her account of Autry’s life, for which she was given full access to the Autry archives, is detailed, but barely rubs shoulders with the Autry phantasy. Rather, she centres on the effort that went into creating the Autry brand, by a man who initially rode badly, acted wood- enly and sang averagely, but with hard work overcame these problems and then set about capitalizing on his success. In the course of the book she explodes several myths. Thus, while Autry was not a songwriter, he was a regular (and astute) buyer of compositions, often from his staff as they were driving from performance to performance. Autry paid (mostly) $5 per song. This entrepreneurial spirit flowered further after the bizarre serial *The Phantom Empire* (Republic, 1935), in which he battled crooks, robots and an underground race of Muranians while all the time having to rush back to his ranch in time to sing his songs, made him a film as well as recording and performing star. Thus, when he came to understand how much Republic pictures was making and how little he was, he went on strike, secured a better contract and started expanding his business activities, becoming in effect Gene Autry Inc. A common joke of the period was that when filming or recording Autry spent more time on the phone doing business deals than in front of the microphone or camera.

If Autry was the Elvis Presley of his day, a gentler image for a gentler time, he was also its Colonel Tom Parker, a man aware of the performer as a brand. His first merchandising deal was made with catalogue company Sears, Roebuck in 1932, before film broadened his appeal considerably, for a version of his ‘Round-Up’ guitar. Costing $9.75, it was a huge seller. By 1938, now a film star too, he had expanded his merchandising activities from guitars and the like into a wealth of children-oriented products. First came a merchandising deal for a Gene Autry cap pistol which, on a royalty of 5 per cent, earned him $15,458 in the first year. That was swiftly followed by product endorsements for clothes, lunch boxes, comics, lamps, bedspreads and such like, eventually reaching 45 licensed items by 1950, when *Fortune* magazine dubbed him ‘Hollywood’s #1 Businessman’. As his career grew, he set up his own music publishing companies, the Flying A production company which made his television series, a record company, Challenge (on which The Champs, named after Autry’s horse Champion, had their US chart-topper ‘Tequila’)—all the while buying radio, and later television, stations and even a baseball club, The LA Angels.

George-Warren’s Autry is a successful businessman who through hard work transformed a minor talent into millions of dollars while at the same time remaining a decent person—his story is full of cheques sent to friends and acquaintances in difficulties. Along the way George-Warren uncovers—Autry kept everything—a vast array of information about a work in progress. What is missing is the phan-
tasy, and except for a select few (notably Autry’s heirs) it is the phantasy that makes Autry important. It was the phantasy, not their business acumen, that gave the likes of Autry and Presley access to presidents—Autry frequently met with Nixon—and it is the phantasy that captures in a variety of ways the changing shape of American (popular) culture in the course of the last century.