

BOOK REVIEW

Public Cowboy No. 1: The Life and Times of Gene Autry. By Holly George-Warren. New York: Oxford University Press, c. 2007, Pp. 406. ISBN 978-0-19-517746-6. \$28.00.

Keith Richards, the eccentric Rolling Stones' musician, succinctly summed up the success enjoyed by Gene Autry, the businessman, during a television interview. The TV host supposedly said to Richards, "Well, Keith, I guess you've done about as well as any guitar player could ever hope to do." And Richards responded, "No. My idea of success is Gene Autry sitting in *his* hotel room and watching *his* baseball team over a broadcast from *his* television station."

While this story cleverly and humorously suggests the extraordinary business talents possessed by the Singing Cowboy, we should not let it obscure the most important fact about him: the man could really sing, and he had the uncanny ability to discern, and fulfill, public tastes, whatever the era or circumstance. In this insightful, comprehensive, and meticulously researched biography, Holly George-Warren has reminded us of Autry's lengthy and multifaceted career as a singer, and has explained the factors that drove his success. He had a warmly assuring and adaptable voice, a highly focused ambition, and a disciplined work ethic that emerged largely as a reaction to his impoverished origins in East Texas and alcoholic ne'er-do-well father. George-Warren has given us as complete a picture of Autry as we are ever likely to get. She has written an admiring biography, but by no means does she gloss over her subject. She presents the Singing Cowboy in all his flawed glory. For example, he never completely won his battle with Demon Rum, although it sometimes marred his reputation as a Cowboy Saint, and he dallied with other women throughout his long first marriage, including a well-known illicit relationship with his costar Gail Davis (television's Annie Oakley).

But, above all, George-Warren presents a man who knew his way with a song and was able to translate this talent into an international acclaim that few entertainers have enjoyed. Autry, she noted, is the only person who was awarded

five stars in the Hollywood Walk of Fame, marking success in the five areas of recording, movies, radio, television, and live theater performance. In a musical career that stretched from 1929 to 1964, Autry reinvented himself many times: First as a yodeler and hillbilly blues singer in the late twenties and early thirties, then as a cowboy singer of romantic Western songs in the mid-thirties, then as a pop country singer in the forties with smooth well-rounded tones and faultless articulation, and, finally, as a singer of seasonal and children's songs in the fifties. When you compare the Autry of 1929, who was arguably the best Jimmie Rodgers imitator among the dozens of similar aspirants, with the singer of 1949 who implanted the story of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" into our collective consciousness, you can scarcely believe that you're hearing the same singer.

Autry's heyday, of course, came in the years running from 1934 to 1953 when his ninety-three movies and Melody Ranch radio shows made him not only one of the most popular actors in Hollywood, but also helped to disseminate a romantic view of cowboys that has virtually crowded out the real story of working cowboys. Who wants to identify with poor, sweaty working stiffs when one can vicariously taste the freedom of the open range with the man who sang "Back in the Saddle Again"?

Gene Autry touched the lives of millions of people, in ways that he could have never fully understood. He knew of course about the thousands of people who were introduced to music through the Gene Autry Roundup Guitars sold by Sears. And he was certainly aware of the other singing cowboys who followed in his wake, and must have had some inkling of the multitude of country singers and even blues and pop singers, like Leadbelly, Fats Domino, Aaron Neville, and James Taylor, who acknowledged inspiration from him. But he could not have known the many individual ways in which his songs insinuated themselves into the consciousness of people and affected their lives. Songs, after all, often take on lives of their own, long after they have been forgotten by their singers. I will never forget the times spent with my mother in a little hamburger joint on the courthouse square in Tyler, Texas, during the Second World War, just passing the lonely hours away, thinking about my older brother who was far from home in military service. We put coin after coin in the jukebox listening to the plaintive voice of Gene Autry as he sang, "I'll Wait for You." He helped us maintain the faith that our family circle would survive the trauma and separation of war, and would soon be reunited.

I do not believe that I am alone in my warm memories of Gene Autry's music. Other people who read this book may recall instances when an Autry song intersected with some meaningful, and emotional, phase of their lives. Others, who may not have heard him at all, or who may know of him only as the portly corporate executive who was sometimes glimpsed at California Angels' baseball games (*his* baseball team), will acquire some understanding of why he captured the hearts and memories of millions of people. Thanks, Holly George-Warren, for rekindling these memories, and for explaining why they matter.

Bill C. Malone
Madison, Wisconsin