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The Singing Charro, the Silver Screen Cowboy, and Valorization of Rural Life in an Age of Social and Technological Transition

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Abstract

The Mexican singing charros and U.S. silver screen cowboys were an integral part of both Mexican and American popular culture during the 1920s through 1950s, particularly as a representation of the longing for and idealization of rural culture in an age of great social and technological transition. Examples of influential singing charros of the period include Tito Guízar, Jorge Negrete, and Pedro Infante, among many others. Similar examples of popular silver screen singing cowboys in the United States include Jimmie Rodgers, Gene Autry, and Roy Rogers. Each of these singers demonstrates a unique style, while incorporating performance characteristics that helped link rural traditions (such as through lyrics reminiscent of life on the ranch) with urbanizing audiences who largely received their performances through the emerging technologies of radio broadcasts, recordings, and film.

Following the Mexican Revolution in the 1920s and the Great Depression in the 1930s, the rapid growth of mass communication played an important role in the development of national culture. The singing charros and singing cowboys quickly became an influential part of this movement, revered at once as icons of tradition as well as symbols of post-revolutionary and urban identity. Many correspondences occur between these Mexican and U.S. popular music icons, and yet it is still imperative to consider regional and national influences that directed their paths to fame and resulting influence on national culture and the valorization of a rural past.