

David M. Wrobel

---

# Western Themes in Contemporary Rock Music, 1970-2000: A Lyric Analysis

Badlands, you gotta live it everyday,  
Let the broken hearts stand  
As the price you've gotta pay,  
We'll keep pushin' till it's understood,  
And these badlands start treating us good.

Bruce Springsteen, "Badlands"

Who were the homestead wives?  
Who were the gold rush brides?  
Does anybody know?

Do their works survive their yellow fever lives in the pages they wrote?

In letters mailed back home her Eastern sisters they would moan  
as they would read accounts of madness, childbirth, loneliness and grief.

10,000 Maniacs, "Gold Rush Brides"

The American West has a tendency to show up where one might least expect it. A recent television news segment on the tremendous popularity of rodeos and country music radio stations in the Central European city of Prague is a case in point. Western imagery has a psychic pull on a broad and diverse public, both inside and outside of the West, and this helps explain its cultural pervasiveness and the attention that scholars give to it. Scholars have explored western themes in advertising, in art and literature and in film and television.<sup>1</sup> But music has, on the whole, received considerably less attention from those interested in the construction, elaboration and dissemination of western themes and myths. The phrase "western music" likely brings to mind various genres: Woody Guthrie's hobo traveling songs, old-time cowboy campfire songs, the Austin honky-tonk sound of Willie Nelson, Gene Autry's movie ballads, perhaps even the rock-influenced melodies of Garth Brooks and a host of other popular contemporary country artists. Possibly, for some, Dvořák's *Symphony #9: From the New World* (1893) or Aaron Copland's ballet scores for *Billy the*

*Kid* (1938) and *Rodeo* (1942), or Ferde Grofé's *Grand Canyon Suite* (1932) spring to mind.

It is less likely that popular artists, especially rock stars of the last thirty years, enter into one's thinking when contemplating western music.<sup>2</sup> This should come as no surprise, however. While there is a massive body of writing on recent pop and rock music, western themes have gone largely unexplored in this literature.<sup>3</sup> Still, given the huge audiences that rock music reaches (many of the albums discussed in the following pages have sold in the millions)<sup>4</sup> and the explosion of interest among scholars since about 1950 on the subject of the West in popular culture, it seems worth exploring the connections between the musical genre and the place.<sup>5</sup>

Historian Richard Aquila (in one of the few available treatments of the topic), notes that western themes were explored in rock-and-roll music as early as the late 1950s. The 1960s were marked by the "California Sound" that developed out of the surfing songs of the Beach Boys and the "San Francisco Sound" of bands such as the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane, often referred to as "psychedelic rock" or "acid rock," but here "California" is not necessarily synonymous with "western."<sup>6</sup> Contemporary country music too (as one would expect from its earlier marketing moniker "country-and-western") often focuses on western settings and themes.<sup>7</sup> So does contemporary folk music (including the work of Tom Russell, who released the album *Cowboy Real* in 1992),<sup>8</sup> building on the foundation laid by Woody Guthrie more than a half century ago. But the theme of the West in the apparently unrelated musical genre of rock music since the 1970s has received scant attention.<sup>9</sup>

What follows is an overview of the pervasiveness of western themes in recent rock, marked by a special emphasis on lyrical, narrative content rather than musical, formal construction, and by only carefully qualified attempts at linking lyrical content to cultural trends. Popular rock bands such as the Eagles in the mid-1970s (along with like-minded film-makers) were demythologizing the West long before the media turned its attention to the latest wave of western revisionist scholarship, commonly known as the New Western History, in the late-1980s and early-1990s. Yet, on the other hand, works of history and literature have at times influenced rock lyricists. Nonetheless, the connections remain far more tenuous than one might assume. Rock songs can be viewed as social/cultural history documents, to be sure; yet we need to be careful in linking lyricists' influences and intentions to specific cultural trends. Books, films, television shows, works of art, and the work of other musicians all influence rock lyricists, often substituting for actual lived exposure to the people and places written about. The linkages can be difficult to establish and influences may be subconsciously processed by the individual artist. The occasional linkage between cultural context and lyrical content is drawn in the pages that follow, but care has been taken to avoid overly speculative readings of lyrics. The primary goal of this study is to provide readers with information on the actual presence, and ultimately a sense of the scope and scale

of western themes in rock music since the early 1970s. For my purposes here, the West is broadly defined as the area of the United States stretching from the West Coast of the continental United States to the eastern edge of the Great Plains states (i.e., the second tier of trans-Mississippi states, stretching southward from North Dakota to Texas).

A few basic claims are made in this overview. First, rock music deserves more recognition in our studies of the West in popular culture because it has been an extremely popular and influential medium of expression. Second, rock music has often treated the West in more complex ways than one might expect. Rock-and-roll music is often dismissed as structurally and lyrically immature (as compared with classical music, jazz, and even blues), and there is certainly some validity to such criticisms. Still, rock lyricists have often treated western themes in a surprisingly subtle and sophisticated manner. Third, the West has been a source of artistic inspiration for rock and pop lyricists on both sides of the Atlantic (the focus here is on the United States and the United Kingdom). This should come as no surprise since the magnetic attractiveness of the mythic West has been felt in Europe for two centuries.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the most influential early rock artists in the United States and the United Kingdom—such as the Beatles, Van Morrison, Bob Dylan, and The Band—influenced each other heavily. Indeed, the influences were so great and the two musical markets so fundamentally tied together by record companies, tour promoters, disc jockeys, etc., to make it virtually inevitable that the American West would emerge as a thematic backdrop for British musicians if it did for American musicians.

Songs that play into and popularize mythic conceptions of the West and the theme of the “West as Promised Land” are examined first in this article. This grouping includes the sub-category of “cowboy songs.” The second category of western-themed songs examined are those that seek to demythologize the West and are generally marked by a degree of cynicism—even anger concerning notions of the West as promised land—and view the place more as a veritable Badland. This second section includes coverage of songs that explore Native American themes and issues. While my analytical structure is dualistic, I am not suggesting that mythic western songs parallel an “old western history,” while lyrical efforts to demythologize the West parallel the New Western History. Such easy connections belie the complexities of western American historiography and musical treatments of the American West. The main purpose of the juxtaposition of a mythic and a demythologized West is to underline the coexistence of both genres over the last three decades. I am reminded of the scholarly tendency in western American literary history and criticism to chart the rise of “serious” western literature in the late twentieth century and the concordant decline of “popular,” “frontier,” “pot-boiler” literature. But the sustained popularity of Louis L’Amour (more than 250 million copies sold to date) and other traditional western authors, suggests that such postmortems on the popular have been conducted prematurely. Further-

more, the side-by-side display in bookstores of “mythic western works” (L’Amour’s) with “serious western works” (e.g., Annie Proulx’s book, *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, New York: Scribner, 1999), suggests that the separation of the serious from the popular in scholarship may not mirror audience reading and purchasing patterns. No clear progressive movement onward and upward, from the mythic musical West to the demythologized musical West, is charted in this overview. However, it does seem to be the case that the latter category—the West as Badland—has been more prevalent, especially in more recent years. In fact, the pervasiveness of hard-edged realism in western-themed rock songs and the conceptualization of the West as a Badland are truly noteworthy factors.

### **Promised Land: The Mythic Musical West**

The theme of the West as a land of fulfillment where people could start life afresh was articulated most famously by newspaper editor Horace Greeley from the mid-1840s, by historian Frederick Jackson Turner in the 1890s, and by countless other writers, artists and historians before and since. It is less commonly known, however, that the British rock band Genesis, in 1978, released one of its most melodic paeans to the westward movement of white European American settlement. Their song, “Deep in the Motherlode,” which features Greeley’s famous slogan “Go west young man” in the chorus, chronicles a young man’s search for gold and a new start in California.<sup>11</sup>

In the United States in that same year, 1978, the theme of the mythic West is evident in the work of Bruce Springsteen. Springsteen toyed with western themes on his 1975 *Born to Run* album, but largely avoided specifically western imagery.<sup>12</sup> But on his next album, *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978), Springsteen sang of both “Badlands” and “The Promised Land,” placing the songs in specific western locales, like the Utah desert.<sup>13</sup> These songs are not as dark as some critics have suggested. The imaginative listener might even imagine that the “tramps like us” from *Born to Run* have made it to the West, are struggling with life and love in a new place, and have not given up hope. Springsteen declares that despite the “dark cloud rising from the desert floor,” he still “believe[s] in a promised land,” and that he’ll “spit in the face of these badlands . . . till . . . these badlands start treating us good.”<sup>14</sup>

Similarly hopeful though mixed messages about the West are evident on the debut album from Bruce Hornsby and the Range, *The Way It Is*.<sup>15</sup> The album features a string of western-themed tracks: “The Wild Frontier,” “On the Western Skyline,” and “The Red Plains.” “The Wild Frontier” is a song about escaping the traffic, the fumes, the urban claustrophobia, and the excesses and the shallowness of the music business in some unnamed metropolis, presumably Los Angeles. Hornsby sings, “This ain’t my style, this ain’t my home/I’m going where it’s safe to roam/Take me all the way back/To the wild frontier.”<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding all of the post-modern

urban angst in the song, the hope of a wild frontier to escape to remains.

A more tragic example of the West as promised land in contemporary rock is Dave Alvin's title track "King of California" (1994), from one of the most critically acclaimed albums of the 1990s.<sup>17</sup> "King of California" is a moving song about a prospector who leaves his sweetheart behind and then meets with a tragic fate in the Sierra gold fields. Despite the ending it remains an inspirational love song in a western setting, rather than a song about the hollowness of western dreams. Alvin, whose poor protagonist in the song views the West as the source of hope and wealth that will enable him to marry a woman of higher social standing, repeats the chorus at the close of the number.

My darling dear, please shed no tear  
I think it's fair to warn ya'  
That I'll return to claim your hand  
As the King of California.<sup>18</sup>

These kinds of songs about the West as a land of hope are hardly rosy, romantic tales. Even Genesis's "Deep in the Motherlode," a song that starts out so full of western promise, actually ends on a more somber note with the recognition that following Horace Greeley's advice did not ensure success and happiness for every young man. Vocalist Phil Collins sings:

The golden fields that beckoned you  
Are darkened by the years.  
If you knew then what you know today  
You'd be back where you started a happier man. <sup>19</sup>

The myth is generally less muddled and more optimistic in cowboy songs. The image of the cowboy stands at the heart of western mythology and continues to endure as a symbol of a way of life, of "quintessential westernness," of "the way things used to be" in a pastoral dream time. The symbol endures in part (and has for more than a century) because the cowboy evokes a spirit of freedom and individualism in a world that seems increasingly structured and confining. One suspects that it is these qualities associated with the cowboy that have inspired rock lyricists in the first place. The year 1973 was a good one for cowboy songs in America. Perhaps the more complex cowboy of late 1960s and 1970s western-theme films—picture Clint Eastwood in *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (1966) or *High Plains Drifter* (1972)—a loner who rejects the strictures of society, appealed to twenty- and thirty-something males frustrated by the failed dreams of the era, heightened by the scandalous conclusion of the Nixon administration and the tragedy of the war in Vietnam.<sup>20</sup> Rock music scholar Paul Friedlander certainly suggests as much when he describes the Eagles' *Desperado* album<sup>21</sup> as a "thematic, a symbolic representation of the rock and roll band as outlaws in society."<sup>22</sup> Whatever the case, *Desperado* was full of cowboy songs, most memorably, "Doolin' Dalton," and "Des-

perado,” and the band appeared as prisoners on the album cover, laying on the ground, roped together and guarded by gun-toting deputies. The title track mourns the end of the openness of the West and admits the need to settle down, to grow out of and away from the cowboy life, to “let somebody love you, before it’s too late.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, “Desperado” is also a powerful, romantic number that glorifies the protagonist. It is a feel-good song about the old West, a paean to the open range, not a post-mythic exploration of western realities.

Similar sentiments are evident on Billy Joel’s powerful and empathic song “The Ballad of Billy the Kid,” included on his breakthrough *Piano Man* album.<sup>24</sup> Joel presents “the Kid” as a heroic outlaw, a legend in his time, a Robin Hood type character who “the cowboys and their kin, Like the sea came pouring in” to pay their last respects to at his hanging. Joel even draws a humorous parallel between the young Billy the Kid—“a boy with a six-gun in his hand—and his younger self—“a boy with a six-pack in his hand.”<sup>25</sup>

A more mixed musical portrait of Billy the Kid appeared around the same time that Billy Joel was eulogizing the infamous outlaw. Back in 1968, Bob Dylan had penned the song “John Wesley Harding” and named the album it appeared on after the violent Texan outlaw (albeit misspelling the name Hardin).<sup>26</sup> In 1973, Kris Kristofferson invited Dylan to Durango, Mexico where director Sam Peckinpah was filming *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. Dylan ended up not only writing the soundtrack, but actually played a part in the movie as the Kid’s sidekick, Alias.<sup>27</sup> Peckinpah’s westerns were violent and morally ambiguous, and that latter quality distinguished them from the conventional western format. Dylan’s songs (most importantly the number “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door,” from the soundtrack which became a hit for him in 1973) fit the mood of the film (if not the specific scenes)<sup>28</sup> and were a far cry from Joel’s upbeat and quite melodramatic number, which was more in keeping with the tenor of traditional westerns.<sup>29</sup>

Warren Zevon, America’s foremost exemplar of song *noir* (an informal rock/pop sub-genre marked by cynical, acerbic, dark, and scathing lyrics)<sup>30</sup> penned an uncharacteristically straightforward and sympathetic tribute to “Frank and Jesse James” in 1976.<sup>31</sup> Zevon’s lyrics urge the two mislabeled and misunderstood outlaws to “Keep on riding, riding, riding, ‘Till you clear your names.”<sup>32</sup> Reflecting a sentiment common to the popular legends surrounding Billy the Kid, Frank and Jesse James, and later outlaw figures such as Pretty Boy Floyd, Zevon concludes that:

No one knows just where they came to be misunderstood  
But the poor Missouri farmers knew  
Frank and Jesse do the best they could.<sup>33</sup>

That sentiment seems typical of treatments of the cowboy/outlaw figure by American rock artists in the 1970s.

America hardly had a monopoly on the cowboy theme in the 1970s. British songster Elton John released perhaps the most interesting cowboy number of them all in 1973, "Roy Rogers," written by lyricist Bernie Taupin for the *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* album.<sup>34</sup> Taupin, who at that time had not been to the United States, was fascinated with western imagery, as evidenced on two Elton John albums released prior to *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, *Tumbleweed Connection* and *Don't Shoot Me, I'm Only the Piano Player*.<sup>35</sup> *Tumbleweed Connection* sported old western style sepia-toned cover art, including pictures of John and Taupin in front of an old western general store and in a Southern Pacific railroad car, and featured a string of western-themed numbers, including "Ballad of a Well-Known Gun." Elton John's two albums after *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, *Caribou* and *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy*, were both, fittingly, recorded at the Caribou Studios in Colorado.<sup>36</sup> But of all the John/Taupin western numbers, "Roy Rogers" is the most powerful. The song evokes the childhood inspiration that its subject provided Taupin and beckons the listener to "Turn on the TV/Shut out the lights, Roy Rogers is riding tonight."<sup>37</sup> It is a song about temporary escape for adult males from the confines of everyday life. Taupin closes the lyric with the following lines:

Lay back in my armchair  
Close eyes and think clear  
I can hear hoofbeats ahead  
Roy and Trigger have just hit the hilltop  
While the wife and the kids are in bed.<sup>38</sup>

Less tasteful and touching, but the recipient of extensive airplay still today is Thin Lizzy's "The Cowboy Song" a major hit in Britain and a minor one in the U.S.<sup>39</sup> In it, Irish lyricist, bass player, and vocalist Phil Lynott evokes the old western range and a time when men in their prime roamed the landscape with wild abandon, chasing stray cattle and stray women. The sexual subtext of the lyrics was always made clear through live performance because the song was always followed in concert by "The Boys are Back in Town."<sup>40</sup> By the end of "The Cowboy Song" Lynott arrives at the conclusion that "the Cowboy life is the life for me."<sup>41</sup> But, in the spirit of gender equity, when Thin Lizzy covered Bob Seger's song "Rosalie" on their 1979 album *Live and Dangerous*, Lynott subtitled it "The Cowgirl Song."<sup>42</sup>

The 1970s were surely the golden age for the rock-and-roll cowboy, though the figure has resurfaced periodically in the decades since. For example, the inimitable Lyle Lovett let us know on his 1986 debut album that if you'll "be my cowgirl sweetheart, I'll be your cowboy man"<sup>43</sup> a sweet nod of the head in the direction of the first "cowgirl sweetheart," Patsy Montana. That same year Bob Dylan released the album *Knocked Out Loaded*, which included the epic western saga "Brownsville Girl," a sprawling eleven-minute drama about western lives and landscapes. Gregory Peck's performances in western movies, and changing values in the West

(“even the swap meets around here are getting pretty corrupt,” Dylan sings).<sup>44</sup>

In the late 1980s, American rock band Bon Jovi scored a big hit with the song “Wanted, Dead or Alive,” featuring the lyric, “I’m a cowboy, on a steel horse I ride, I’m wanted, dead or alive.”<sup>45</sup> In fact, the “big ’80s” (as those years in music have come to be known) featured many rock bands donning cowboyesque garb and penning rather unpoetic and unmemorable lyrics. The era is generally treated dismissively by rock music critics, but when it comes to western-themed songs and albums there were a handful of memorable releases, including British band U2’s politically charged *Joshua Tree* album with its famous desert landscape cover art.<sup>46</sup> Singer-songwriter Rickie Lee Jones’s 1989 album *Flying Cowboys* featured, in addition to the title track, the western-themed songs “Horses” and “Rodeo Girl,” and was marked by the kind of lyrical sophistication that was not evident in songs of the cowboy rock bands of the eighties.<sup>47</sup> If the 1990s have seen less in the way of cowboy lyrics in rock music than in the two previous decades, the massive popularity of country music in the decade kept the cowboy image in the pop-culture limelight.

### **Bad Land: Demythologizing the Musical West**

Native Americans have always been part of the mythic West, but in the 1990s, Native American issues increasingly overtook the cowboy image as subject matter for lyricists. It is probably no coincidence that after the release of influential films such as *Little Big Man* (1970; directed by Arthur Penn) and *Soldier Blue* (1974; directed by Ralph Nelson), the publication of books such as Vine Deloria Jr.’s *Custer Died for Your Sins*, Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and the emergence of the American Indian Movement in the news, rock lyricists began to feature American Indian issues more prominently.<sup>48</sup> Whatever the proximate cause for the prevalence of American Indian themes, the presence of Indian issues in rock songs can be seen as a part of the process by which the West has begun to be demythologized in the products aimed at the general public. In 1973 Priscilla Coolidge wrote a song titled “Wounded Knee,”<sup>49</sup> addressing the topic of the tragic 1890 incident at Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota that left 25 U.S. soldiers dead and at least 150 Sioux Indians dead and 50 wounded, at a conservative estimate.<sup>50</sup> Contemporaneously, the Eagles were experimenting with peyote tea and exhibiting a general fascination with Native American culture, which is evidenced in the cover art on their early albums (*Desperado* aside): *The Eagles*, *On the Border*, and most memorably on the stunning cover of *One of These Nights*.<sup>51</sup>

The next year one of Britain’s most popular rock bands, Queen, released *A Day at the Races* that featured one of their angriest and heaviest rock songs, “White Man.”<sup>52</sup> The lyrics, penned by band member Brian May, are not especially subtle, but they do testify to his passionate interest in American Indian issues.



White man, white man  
 Our country was green and all our rivers wide  
 White man, white man  
 You came with a gun and soon our children died  
 White man, white man  
 Don't you give a light for the blood you've shed?<sup>53</sup>

This new consciousness about American Indian history was shared by American singer/songwriter Neil Young whose song "Pocahontas," released in 1979, features similarly direct and angry lyrics:

They killed us in our tepee  
 And they cut our women down  
 They might have left some babies  
 Cryin' on the ground  
 But the firesticks and the wagons came  
 And the night falls on the settin' sun.  
 They massacred the buffalo<sup>54</sup>

The 1980s witnessed continued interest in American Indian issues on the part of rock writers and the occasional gem, such as Lyle Lovett's "If I Had a Boat."<sup>55</sup> Fueled less by anger than irony, the song begins with Lovett's image of ultimate freedom—riding a pony on a boat on the ocean—and then champions Tonto's dream of separation from his burdensome role as the Lone Ranger's sidekick.

The mystery masked man was smart  
 He got himself a Tonto  
 'Cause Tonto did the dirty work for free  
 But Tonto he was smarter  
 And one day said "kemo sabe  
 Kiss my ass I bought a boat  
 I'm going out to sea."<sup>56</sup>

If the 1970s were the years of cowboy rock, the 1990s were dominated by Native American lyrics. Robbie Robertson, a former member of The Band, has probably done more to put American Indian issues before the public than any other rock musician. His 1994 soundtrack for the TV series *The Native Americans* is a powerful collection of songs.<sup>57</sup> His second album of American Indian songs, *Contact from the Underworld of Redboy*, is hardier, edgier, and more political.<sup>58</sup> The album includes the song "Sacrifice," which consists largely of a voiceover by American Indian activist/prisoner Leonard Peltier. In the song Peltier tells his side of the infamous incident that occurred on the Pine Ridge Reservation on 26 June 1975, in which one Native American and two Federal agents were killed, resulting in Peltier's subsequent incarceration. During his calm but ominous narration, Peltier refers to the United States Federal Penitentiary as "the fastest growing reservation in the country."<sup>59</sup>

Other memorable examples of American Indian songs and themes in rock and pop music in the 1990s have attracted thousands of sympathetic listeners. After a visit to the site of the massacre at Wounded Knee, Amy Ray and Emily Saliers, better known as the Indigo Girls, began playing a powerful song titled "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee," written by Buffy Sainte-Marie,<sup>60</sup> as part of their live shows early in the decade. They included two versions of the song on their 1995 live album *1200 Curfews*, and in that same year actually played a live show at the Hopi Civic Center on the Hopi Indian Reservation in Kyhotsmovi, Arizona, as part of the "Honor the Earth Tour" which was sponsored by the Indigenous Women's Network and the Seventh Generation Fund to benefit Native American environmental groups.<sup>61</sup> In 1997, Rita Coolidge, Laura Satterfield, and Priscilla Coolidge released *Walela*, a well-crafted album of American Indian songs, including a remake of Priscilla Coolidge's 1973 number "Wounded Knee," the beautiful "Cherokee River," and a delicately melodic and moving version of "Amazing Grace" sung in Cherokee.<sup>62</sup> In 2000 the trio released another album of American Indian songs.<sup>37</sup>

It is hard to gauge the impact that these various Indian issue songs have had on the public. Furthermore, the current wave of popularity for Native American music and culture in general, especially among the "New Age" audiences, raises the complicated issue of co-option of minority cultural expression by the white mainstream. Whether the fascination of white audiences with Native music and craftwork amounts to inappropriate exoticization and commodification of the Native other, or a more subtle and complex process of cultural exchanges is left to the reader to decide. What is clear is that the rock music medium has been placing Indian issues before large audiences for more than three decades. Baby boomers, who were raised on rock music in the 1960s, now comprise the largest audience for New Age music, in which Native themes and melodies loom large.

Besides American Indian issues, regional songs of the last three decades have questioned the old-fashioned paradigms in various other ways. Indeed, a review of western rock lyrics from the last three decades suggests that most songs do not play innocently to the standard myths but call them into question and express disillusion over the failure of the West to live up to its billing as America's promised land. Constructing a chronological framework to help explain the transition from a static "old" West (dominated by mythic characters or cartoons) to a more complex "new" West (whose inhabitants refuse to behave according to a fixed script) is not the point, however. There is certainly no clear and dateable moment when romanticization of the West gave way to politically informed representations of the region as Badland. Some lyricists have over time shifted away from lyrical representations of the mythic West to more mordant or bleak images while others have not.

There is no great incongruity here; the Old West and the New West have co-existed in the broader cultural consciousness for decades now; it is no surprise that the same should be the case with Western music. One



British rock artist was surely Joe Jackson's "Wild West," released in 1986 on his *Big World* album.<sup>69</sup> The album also includes the song "Tango Atlantico," a cynical indictment of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's enthusiastic waging of the Falklands War a few years earlier. "Wild West" takes issue with the unbridled individualism that lies at the heart of so much western mythology and, it seems safe to assume, at the Wild West rhetoric of Thatcher's ideological partner President Ronald Reagan. The bitter ironic twist is unmistakable. In the wild western America of the 1980s, Jackson seems to be suggesting, you can have it all, and damn the consequences:

In the land of the free and the not so often brave  
 There's both love or money so choose what you will save  
 But keep thinking that way and you won't get nowhere  
 You've got a right just to get where you're going to  
 Gotta keep running gotta be the best  
 Gotta walk tall in the Wild West<sup>70</sup>

Back in the United States, Bruce Springsteen took the process of debunking western myths to a new level in the early 1980s when he released *Nebraska*, a thoroughly gloomy album with an ominous title track.<sup>71</sup> In the song a man on trial recounts his killing spree from Lincoln, Nebraska, to the badlands of Wyoming as a series of uncontrollable acts. In an apparently disordered explanation of his rampage he remorselessly tells the judge: "Well, sir, I guess there's just a meanness in this world."<sup>72</sup> Thirteen years later Springsteen released another grim solo album, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*.<sup>73</sup> The title track draws on Tom Joad's famous farewell speech from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Among the album's many other highlights is the song "Sinaloa Cowboys," about two Mexican immigrant brothers, Miguel and Louis, working on a Fresno chicken ranch. Their job—far from the mythic activities of cowboys, riding, roping, and branding—is cooking methamphetamine. Springsteen sings:

You could spend a year in the orchards  
 Or make half as much in one ten-hour shift  
 Working for the men from Sinaloa  
 But if you slipped the hydrochloric acid  
 Could burn right through your skin  
 They'd leave you spittin' up blood in the desert  
 If you breathed those fumes in.<sup>74</sup>

The story ends with the shack exploding and Miguel burying his brother. "Balboa Park" is about border boys coming out of their sleeping places under the freeway to offer their services to men in Mercedes driving in San Diego's Balboa Park. "Somewhere Across the Border" can be viewed as a companion song to "The Promised Land," released two decades earlier. The hopefulness of that earlier number is replaced here with starker realism. Springsteen's West is no longer a world filled with disillusioned

white urban and suburban boys searching for Eden; it is a racially, economically, and behaviorally diverse place, and one that Springsteen, who moved to Los Angeles in the early 1990s, could only really have come to know by living in it.

Singer/songwriter Dave Alvin is also a Los Angeles resident (albeit a considerably less well known one than Bruce Springsteen) and his *Black Jack David* album includes “California Snow,” a song in which the hardships of contemporary life in California are juxtaposed against the promised land and warm weather imagery that characterize the Golden State.<sup>75</sup> The song’s protagonist, Alvin himself apparently, comes across a Mexican woman whose infant child has died of heat and thirst during a border crossing. Within the lyrics, snow becomes an unexpected metaphor for the abundant hardships of life in the Land of Sunshine. He drives the woman back across the border to her family and laments, “No one ever tells you about the California snow.”<sup>76</sup>

The American band 10,000 Maniacs, with singer Natalie Merchant providing the lyrical inspiration, recorded a western song on each of their three major studio albums, *In My Tribe*, *Blind Man’s Zoo*, and *Our Time in Eden*.<sup>77</sup> All three songs present a decidedly unromantic picture of the region. “The Painted Desert” tells about unrequited love set against the backdrop of a desert land where the morning frost has killed all the blooms. Lyricist Merchant sings: “Is a cactus blooming there in every roadside stand/where the big deal is cowboy gear sewn in Japan?”<sup>78</sup> Merchant’s lyrics are particularly anti-illusionary: the song “Dust Bowl” uses the horror of the 1930s ecological disaster (redolent of Woody Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads*) as a backdrop for a tale of a mother who can’t afford to buy toys for her children and places her hopes on a lottery ticket. She concludes:

There’s a new wind blowing they say, it’s gonna be a cold,  
cold one. So brace yourselves my darlings, it won’t bring  
much our way but more dust bowl days.<sup>79</sup>

The most imaginative and incisive of the three songs is “Gold Rush Brides” (1992), in which Merchant asks:

Who were the homestead wives? Who were the gold rush brides?  
Does anybody know? Do their works survive their yellow fever  
lives in the pages they wrote? The land was free, yet it cost  
their lives.

In letters mailed back home her Eastern sisters they would moan as  
They would read accounts of madness, childbirth, loneliness and  
grief.<sup>80</sup>

REM’s vocalist and lyricist Michael Stipe joined Natalie Merchant on stage a number of times in the early 1990s and was possibly influenced by Merchant’s historically-informed documentary vision of the West. Whatever the immediate inspiration, REM’s 1996 album *New Adventures in Hi-Fi*

shares Merchant's dour realism.<sup>81</sup> It features a grim western desert landscape on the cover and a number of songs dealing with atomic testing, including "The Wake-Up Bomb" and "New Test Leper." The album's most powerful track is "How the West Was Won and Where It Got Us," a biting and depressing account of the environmental consequences of commercial and technological development, featuring the memorable chorus:

The story is a sad one told many times  
 The story of my life in trying times  
 Just had water stirred in lime  
 How the West was won and where it got us.<sup>82</sup>

The answer to Stipe's implied question, in the estimation of some observers, is a single word that also serves as the title of the latest Red Hot Chili Peppers album: *Californication*.<sup>83</sup> The Golden State having been at the center of so much of the rock representations of the West as promised land in the 1960s—a paradise of peace, love, and surfing—had come to be, by the 1990s, the representation of everything lamentable in the New West at least for some cultural critics. Hardly surprising, then, that the theme of *Californication* would find its way into the rock lexicon; indeed, the concept without the word itself had been out there since at least as early as the mid-1970s when the Eagles released *Hotel California*.

The West in rock and pop music has a more interesting and complex past than the casual listener or the western scholar might initially expect. Western-themed lyrics run the gamut from the sophisticated feminist political poetry of Natalie Merchant to the often misogynistic fantasy lines of 1970s hard rock bands. The West has co-existed as both Promised Land and Badland in rock music of the last three decades. While historians, travel writers, and novelists have presented us with complex and compelling stories about the western past in recent years, musicians have been far from silent in expressing their own lyrical images of the West. In turning our attention to the musical delineations of both the myth and the counter-myth of the western United States, we may find new sources of material through which to explore rewarding interactions between the creative voice and its contextualized place, as well as between regions and continents, listeners and readers.

## Notes

1. For western themes in popular culture broadly defined, see Robert G. Athearn, *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986); and Michael L. Johnson, *New Westers: The West in Contemporary American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996). For advertising see Elliott West, "The West in Advertising," *Montana: The Magazine of American History* 46 (Summer 1996): 36-49; for art see William M. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986); for literature see Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University

Press, 1950, 1970); for film see Richard W. Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992).

2. The term rock music is used throughout this essay because the vast majority of the songs discussed are by artists who are generally categorized within the genre "contemporary rock." On occasion this essay analyzes the work of artists who might as easily be placed in the genre of modern "pop" music as "rock" music, such as the work of Elton John. However, it is worth noting that Elton John's earlier work (during the 1970s) was generally categorized as rock music, while his later work (in the 1980s and 1990s) was categorized as pop music, and it is the earlier work that is treated here.

3. The more useful examples include: B. Lee Cooper and Wayne S. Haney, *Rock Music in American Popular Culture: Rock 'n' Roll Resources* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Harrington Park Press, 1995), and *Rock Music in American Popular Culture, II: More Rock 'n' Roll Resources* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1997); Simon Frith, *Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, eds., *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990); Paul Friedlander, *Rock and Roll: A Social History* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996); Clinton Heylin, ed., *The Penguin Book of Rock & Roll Writing* (New York: Viking, 1992); Mikal Gilmore, *Night Beat: A Shadow History of Rock & Roll* (New York: Doubleday, 1998); Keith Negus, *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 1997). A rare exception to this trend of general indifference among western historians to rock/pop music as subject matter is Richard Aquila's informative article, "Images of the American West in Rock Music," *Western Historical Quarterly* 11 (October 1980): 415-432.

4. The term "album" is used here, rather than the more common term CD, since many of the records discussed were released (on vinyl) prior to the introduction of compact disk technology in Europe and the United States in 1983.

5. Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), can be viewed as the real beginning of this heightened scholarly interest in American western popular culture.

6. Aquila, "Images of the American West," 419-424.

7. For more on western themes in country music see Johnson's chapter "Garth and Friends: Re-singing the West, Dancing to the Cowboy Beat," in *New Westers*, 260-302 and William W. Savage Jr.'s chapter "The West of Record," in his *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History and Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979).

8. Tom Russell, *Cowboy Real*, PH 1146 (Philo, 1992).

9. Aquila does provide coverage of developments in the 1970s in the previously-mentioned article "Images of the American West in Rock Music," but the only significant area of coverage that is replicated here is of western themes in the work of the Eagles.

10. See Ray Allen Billington, *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981). There is no comprehensive overview of the West in the European imagination in the twentieth century. Still, the widespread popularity of western movies throughout Europe, the continuing popularity of pulp western fiction writer Karl May in Germany and the incredible popularity of rodeo and country music in Prague all attest to the sustained fascination with the West in Europe in the twentieth century.

11. Genesis, "Deep in the Motherlode." *And Then There Were Three*, 19173-2 (Atlantic Records, 1978). "Deep in the Motherlode" was written by Mike Rutherford.

12. Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run*, CK 64406 (Columbia, 1975).

13. Bruce Springsteen, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, 25AP 1000 (CBS, 1978). For good coverage of "Badlands" see Gilmore, "Bruce Springsteen's America," in *Night Beat*, 209-224, 209-210.

14. Springsteen, "Badlands" *Darkness on the Edge of Town*.

15. Bruce Hornsby and the Range, *The Way It Is*, ARK1-5904 (RCA 1986).

16. Hornsby, "The Wild Frontier." *The Way It Is*.

17. Dave Alvin, "King of California," *King of California*, HCD 8054 (Hightone Records, 1994).

18. *Ibid.* For more on Alvin, see "The King of California: On the Road with Dave

Alvin, the Golden State's Working-Class Troubadour Legend to Be," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 July 2000, *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, 10-14.

19. Genesis, "Deep in the Motherlode."

20. For more on the theme of the great dreams of the 1960s and the disillusionment that accompanied their non-realization see David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s* (NY: Hill and Wang, 1994).

21. Eagles, *Desperado*, CS 5068 (Asylum Records, 1973).

22. Friedlander, *Rock and Roll*, 153.

23. Eagles, *Desperado*.

24. Billy Joel, *Piano Man*, CK 32544 (Columbia Music, 1973).

25. Joel, "The Ballad of Billy the Kid," *Piano Man*; also on Billy Joel, *Songs in the Attic*, TCT-37461 (Columbia Music, 1981). Incidentally, folk rocker Joe Ely's song "Me and Billy the Kid," *Live at Liberty Lunch*, MCAC 10095 (MCA Records, 1990), is considerably less empathic: Ely sings "Me and Billy the Kid never got along."

26. Bob Dylan, *John Wesley Harding*, PCT 9604 (Columbia Records, 1968). Bob Spitz provides a good commentary on the album in *Dylan: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 89-94.

27. Bob Dylan, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, CT 32460 (Columbia Records, 1973). For information on Peckinpah's film and Dylan's soundtrack see Cameron Crowe's liner notes to Bob Dylan, *Biograph*, CXT 38830 (Columbia, 1985), 21; and William McKeen, *Bob Dylan: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 52-54, 103, and 249-250. The film received horrible reviews and Columbia Records even threatened to withhold the soundtrack from release.

28. The film editors rearranged Dylan's score, inserting pieces of it in places where Dylan had not intended it to go. As a consequence, Dylan not only felt artistically compromised but felt the whole project had been a waste of time.

29. For more on Joel's song and Peckinpah's film see Stephen Tatum, *Inventing Billy the Kid: Visions of the Outlaw in America, 1881-1981* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 154-161.

30. Singer/songwriter Randy Newman is another good example of the song *noir* sub-genre.

31. Warren Zevon, "Frank and Jesse James," *Warren Zevon*, 7E 1060-2 (Asylum Records, 1976).

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. Elton John, "Roy Rogers," *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, 821 747-4 (Polydor, 1973).

35. Elton John, *Tumbleweed Connection*, DIDX-377 (MCA, 1972); Elton John, *Don't Shoot Me, I'm Only the Piano Player*, 528 154-2 (Mercury, 1973, 1995).

36. Elton John, *Caribou*, MCAC-1612 (MCA, 1974); Elton John, *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy*, 821 746-4 (Polydor, 1975).

37. John, "Roy Rogers."

38. *Ibid.*

39. Thin Lizzy, "The Cowboy Song," *Jailbreak*, 822 785-2 (Polygram, 1976). The song also appears on the album *Live and Dangerous*, L5 3213 (Warner Bros., 1978), as does "Rosalie: The Cowgirl's Song." Thin Lizzy also recorded another western-themed number, "Buffalo Gal," (copyrighted by Palace Music, 1979), on *Thin Lizzy: The Collection*, CCSCD 117 (Castle Communications, 1987). Another memorable cowboy song of the era is Van Morrison's recording of "Western Plain" recorded in 1975. lyrics by Ledbetter, included on the Van Morrison album *The Philosopher's Stone*, 31453 1789 4 (Polydor, 1971, 1998). Also indicative of the presence of old western themes in British rock music of the period is After the Fire's "Wild West Show," from their album *80-f* EPC 84545 (Epic, 1980).

40. Thin Lizzy, "The Boys are Back in Town," *Jailbreak*, 822 785-2 (Polygram, 1975).

41. Thin Lizzy, "The Cowboy Song."

42. Thin Lizzy, "Rosalie: The Cowgirl's Song," *Live and Dangerous*, L5 3213 (Warner Bros., 1978).

43. Lyle Lovett, "Cowboy Man," *Lyle Lovett*, MCAC 5748 (Curb Records, 1986).

44. Bob Dylan, "Brownsville Girl," *Knocked Out Loaded*, C 40439 (Columbia, 1986).



45. Bon Jovi, "Wanted, Dead or Alive," *Slippery When Wet*, 830 264-1 (Uni/Mercury, 1986). The band's lead singer, Jon Bon Jovi, also released a solo album titled *Blaze of Glory: Songs Written and Performed by Jon Bon Jovi and Inspired by the Film Young Guns, II*, 846 473-1 (Uni/Mercury, 1990).
46. U2, *The Joshua Tree*, 842 298-2 (Island Records, 1987).
47. Rickie Lee Jones, *Flying Cowboys*, D194110 (Geffen, 1989).
48. Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins* (New York: Macmillan, 1969); Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970).
49. One recording of this song can be found on Walela (Rita Coolidge, Laura Satterfield, Priscilla Coolidge), *Walela* 314 536 049-4 (Triloka/Mercury Records, 1997).
50. Robert Utley, "The Reservation and Destruction of Indian Culture," in John H. Cary, Julius Weinberg, Thomas L. Hartshorne, and Robert A. Wheeler, eds., *The Social Fabric, Vol. II: American Life from the Civil War to the Present* (New York: Longman, 1999), 23-34, 32; quoted in Robert Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846-1890* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984). Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* estimates that nearly 300 Sioux Indians were killed in the conflict (*Bury My Heart*, 444).
51. Eagles, *The Eagles*, CS-5054 (Asylum Records, 1972); Eagles, *On the Border* 7E-1004-2 (Elektra/Asylum, 1974); Eagles, *One of These Nights*, 7E-1049 (Elektra/Asylum Records, 1975). See Friedlander, *Rock and Roll*, 153.
52. Queen, "White Man," *A Day at the Races*, CDP 7 46208 2 (EMI, 1976).
53. *Ibid.*
54. Neil Young, "Pocahontas," *Rust Never Sleeps*, 2295-2 (Reprise Records, 1979).
55. Lyle Lovett, "If I Had a Boat," *Pontiac*, MCA-42028 (MCA/Curb Records, 1987). While often classified as a country music singer, Lovett has huge crossover appeal with rock/pop audiences.
56. *Ibid.*
57. Robbie Robertson, *Music for the Native Americans*, CDP 7243 8 28295 2 2 (Capitol Records, 1994).
58. Robbie Robertson, *Contact from the Underworld of Redboy*, C4 7243 8 54243 4 2 (Capitol Records, 1998).
59. Robertson, "Sacrifice," *Contact from the Underworld*. Peltier is the subject of an impassioned letter, "United States v. Leonard Peltier," by Peter Matthiessen, E. L. Doctorow, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., and William and Rose Styron in the *New York Review of Books* 47, n. 12 (20 July 2000): 56.
60. Buffy Sainte-Marie recorded her own version of the song on her album *Up Where We Belong*, 7243 8 35059 2 0 (Angel, 1996).
61. Indigo Girls, "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee," *1200 Curfews*, E2T 67229 (Epic, 1995). See liner notes to *1200 Curfews*, 4,13.
62. Walela, *Walela* 314 536 049-4 (Triloka/Mercury Records, 1997).
63. Walela, *Unbearable Love*, 8063-2 (Triloka Records, 2000). Bill Miller is another Native American artist (Mohican and German) who also merits attention in this context. Miller has released three albums this year: *Ghostdance*, 79565-2 (Vanguard Records, 2000); *Hear Our Prayer*, B00004YC2M (Integrity-Word, 2000); and *Reservation Road-Live*, B0004U1GB (Vanguard, 2000).
64. It may be the case that scholarly reinterpretations eventually find their way into the popular culture representations of the West, which in turn influence the public. Thus, the direct influence on the public comes from the rock lyricists or movie makers, while the indirect influence is traceable to scholarly works.
65. Eagles, *Hotel California*, TC-5103 (Asylum Records, 1976).
66. The Eagles. "The Last Resort." *Hotel California*. Aquila provides some good analysis of *Hotel California* in "Images of the American West," 426-427.
67. Dire Straits, *Communiqué*, 3330-2 (Warner Brothers Records, 1979).
68. Dire Straits, "Telegraph Road." *Love Over Gold*, WB4-23728 (Warner Brothers Records, 1982).
69. Joe Jackson. "Wild West." *Big World*, CD-6021 (A & M Records, 1986).
70. *Ibid.*
71. Bruce Springsteen. *Nebraska*, QCT 38358 (CBS, 1982).

72. Springsteen, "Nebraska," *Nebraska*.

73. Bruce Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, CK 67484 (Columbia, 1995). David Wyatt provides good discussion of the songs on *The Ghost of Tom Joad* in his *Five Fires: Race, Catastrophe, and the Shaping of California* (New York: Addison-Wesley Co., 1997), 237-241.

74. Springsteen, "Sinaloa Cowboys," *Ghost of Tom Joad*.

75. Dave Alvin, "California Snow," *Blackjack David*, HCD 8091 (Hightone Records, 1998).

76. *Ibid.*

77. 10,000 Maniacs, *In My Tribe*, 60738-1 (Elektra, 1987); *Blind Man's Zoo*, 60815-2 (Elektra, 1989); *Our Time in Eden*, 9 61385-2 (Elektra, 1992).

78. 10,000 Maniacs, "The Painted Desert," *In My Tribe*.

79. 10,000 Maniacs, "Dust Bowl," *Blind Man's Zoo*.

80. 10,000 Maniacs, "Gold Rush Brides," *Our Time in Eden*. When the 10,000 Maniacs recorded their live *MTV Unplugged*, 9 61569-2 (Elektra, 1993) album, Merchant prefaced "Gold Rush Brides" by reading from a woman's overland diary chronicling the hardships of the journey for her eastern sisters back home.

81. REM, *New Adventures in Hi-Fi*, 4-46320 (Warner Brothers, 1996). A review of the album in the 9 September 1996 issue of the British publication *New Musical Express* described *New Adventures* as "one of the most disillusioned albums ever made . . . a litany of trouble beyond despair"; cited on amazon.com.

82. REM, "How the West Was Won and Where It Got Us," *New Adventures*. Incidentally, Robbie Robertson's self-titled first solo album, GHS 24160 (Geffen, 1987) featured the single "Showdown at Big Sky," which also deals with the theme of nuclear testing in the West and the possibility of nuclear war.

83. Red Hot Chili Peppers, *Californication*, 9 47386-4 (Warner Brothers, 1999).

This article is an outgrowth of my keynote address on "The West in Contemporary Rock/Pop Music: A Transatlantic Perspective," delivered at the "Listening to the West: Music as the Heart and Soul of a Region" conference sponsored by the Center of the American West and the American Music Research Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and the Chautauqua Association in August 2000. I wish to thank the audience members and Colin Loader who offered valuable suggestions concerning additional artists and songs to include in the coverage, as well as Janet Ward and Andrew Bell who provided insightful commentary on the essay itself.