The Birth of a Ballad

A Note on a Cow-Boy Minstrel

By Freda Kirchwey

It is still possible to go beyond the range of the radio and its tidings of stock quotations and the latest dance tunes. And yet as we traveled on foot and on horseback up the slow trail toward the ragged peaks at the head of the Green River Valley, as we left the easy ranges covered with cattle for a perpendicular desert inhabited by elk and mountain sheep, I carried with me a fear that we might yet come upon some outfit encamped in a narrow pass with a radio set beside the fire raising impudent arms to the genii of the air and demanding in that wide solitude the production of *"It ain't gonna rain no more."* It did not happen, but I have no doubt that many such blasphemies have been committed in remote corners of the mountains; and when they become common, then will be the long-heralded end of the real West. The sound of its own songs will die out with the men who now sing them; they will be copied into anthologies, their sources disputed, their texts compared, and the portable culture of New York will take over the West.

Of course we too carried with us the products of the radio, if not the instrument itself. New York's gayest jazz orchestra had tickled the ears of our guides, Bert and Charlie and Will; they knew the words and tune of every song that Broadway dances to, and they knew the dances. But they still sang the old tunes, as they still danced the old dances—tunes that slip pleasantly from the edge of an ancient harmonica. Around our camp-fire, in our own bleak pass, we distilled strange mixtures. Late jazz and early ballad mingled and faded out on the thin air; the dying old and the strident new came from the same throats and announced to the mountains our age of change. And quite incidentally we stumbled upon the birth of a Westerm song as authentic as "The Cow-boy's Lament," and as breezy and effective as many that have already been collected and sold in books.

It was Charlie's song, and his own cheerful career makes it easy to account for. Charlie ran away into the mountains when he was a small child, beating his way from Seattle on freights and wagons, and he headed as straight as his fortunes would allow into the wildest country left in the United States. He read Daniel Boone and Kit Carson, and with vast tenacity and singular success he has made himself into the likeness of his heroes. From the day he left home he has earned his living herding sheep on lonely ranges, rounding up cattle,

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cooking, horse-wrangling, guiding, trapping, hunting. And now he is a substantial citizen with a homestead, which he leases to another man, six or eight horses, and an ability to live by the pursuit of adventure. Strangely enough, the joy of adventure has not deserted him even though he hunts bears as a business; and after he has spent a winter alone in the mountains, with the snow piling forty feet deep in the cañons around his hut, and nothing to break into his awful intimacy with himself—after four months of that he "comes out" to a town of two hundred souls, sends his furs East, rounds up his horses, grub-stakes himself, and starts out again to spend his earnings in a summer of lonely freedom, riding and hunting and fishing through the mountains of Wyoming and Utah and Idaho. Sometimes he breaks his human fast by guiding a party of "dudes" or he gets a job during the fall round-up or works at a tie-camp. But nothing holds him for long—nothing but the mountains. And he is looking for a girl who will trap and skee all winter and take the trail all summer; but she must know how to cook and wash, too.

Charlie was younger than the other two guides, but he seemed older. His independence of human companionship, his conscious feeling for the hard romance of the mountains, his steady belief in the glamour of a life of freedom, made him a mature and complete person. All three of our guides made the same jokes and told the same stories, and in the same rumbling minor sang songs of loneliness and death.

" . . . In a narrow grave just six by three
We buried him there on the lone prairie.

"Yes, we buried him there on the lone prairie,
Where the owls all night hoot mournfully,
Where the buzzards beat, and the wind sports free—
We buried him there on the lone prairie."

Such a song in all its local variations sounds well against a back-drop of dark emptiness and broken peaks. Charlie would sing it with mournful conviction, and then would swing from the contemplation of death to the equally melancholy theme of blighted love.

"'Oh, a curse on your gold, your silver, too,
And all pretty girls that don't prove true.
I 'll go back West, where the bullets fly;
I 'll stay on trail till the day I die.'

"'O Billy, Billy, stay at home,
Don't be forever upon the roam.
There 's more pretty girls, more truer than I;
Don't go back West, where the bullets fly.'

"'The girl is married I adore;
I 'll stay at home no more, no more.
I 'll go back West to the sage-brush land,
I 'll go back West, join a cow-boy band.'"

There were many songs, all of many verses, sent up into the darkness that pressed in against our fire, and the liveliest, sung loud and often, turned out to be the song of Charlie's own making. The chance is small that it

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has been printed or even written down before, though it has doubtless spread, as such songs do, out through the circles of Charlie's friends and their friends; therefore it is worth giving here, with all its spirited imperfections and with the story of its painful and comic birth.

Imagine Charlie hunched lean, red-brown, dressed in jeans and flannel shirt, his eyes fixed on distances beyond the darkness and the black cliffs that faced us across the river. Bert and Will were smoking; the rest of us crouched close to the fire, smitten by the cold behind us. Charlie wiped off his harmonica and put it carefully away in the rear pocket of his trousers. He ignored the rest of us and raised his voice, making the steep walls of the cañon humbly repeat the stanzas of his saga:

"I was just bummin' round the town,
Spendin' my time;
Out of a job,
I did n't have a dime.

"When up steps a man.
He said, 'I suppose
You 're a bronco-fighter;
I can tell by your clo'es.'

"I thought he was right,
And told him the same,
And I asked if he had
Any bad ones to tame.

"He said he had one
That was quite bad to buck,
And for pilin' the cow-boys
He 'd had lots of luck.

"I got all excited
And asked what he 'd pay
If I 'd ride that old pony
A couple of days.

"He offered me ten dollars.
Said I, 'I 'm your man,
For the horse never lived
That I could not fan.'"

"You know," said Charlie, conscientiously explaining, "fan with yer hat, like you seen Bert do breakin' that pinto pony back to the ranch."

"'I don't like to brag,
But I 've got this to say
That I have not been thrown
For many a day.'

"He says, 'Get your saddle;
I 'll give you a chance.'
So we got in his buckboard
And drifted for the ranch.

"Early next morning,
Right after chuck,
I stepped out to see
If that old pony could buck.

"He was down in the horse corral
Standing alone,
A snaky-eyed outlaw,
A strawberry roan.

"Little pin ears
That touched at the tip,
And an XYZ iron
Stamped on the hip.

"Little hog-eyes
And a long under jaw—
All of the things you see
On a snaky old outlaw.

"I put on my spurs,
I was sure feeling fine,
I pushed back my hat,
I picked up my twine.

"Twine," explained Charlie, "means rope, lasso, lariat." He made a sug-

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gestive, loose-wristed gesture of his arm to complete the description.

"I dabbed that loop on him,
And I knew then
That before he was rode
I 'd well earn my ten.

"I got the blind on him;
It sure was a fight.
Next came my saddle;
I screwed her down tight.

"I stepped up into his middle
And pulled up the blind.
'Git out of the road, boys;
Let 's see him unwind.'

"I guess that old pony
Sure come unwound,
For he did n't spend much
Of his good time on the ground.

"He went straight up,
With his belly to the sun.
He sure was a sun-fishin'
Son of a gun.

"He lit on his feet
And turned up on his side;
I don't see how he kept
From shedding his hide.

"He was the worst bucker
I 've seen on the range;
He could turn on a quarter
And give you back change.

"I tell you, no fooling,
That old pony could step.
I was still in my saddle
A-building some rep,

"When with one of his big jumps
He slipped it in high,
And left me sittin' on nothin'
'Way up in the sky.

"And when I descended
Back down to the earth,
I lit into cussin'
The day of his birth.

"I know now
There 's horses I can't ride;
Some of them is still livin';
They have n't all died.

"And I 'll bet all my money
There 's no man alive
That can ride that old pony
When he makes that high dive."

There were faults one could find with that song, but one does n't snatch up ill considered trifles of grammar and rhyme and meter and tune on a cold August night beside a hot fire. It was a good song. Surely pride was never followed more swiftly by the inevitable fall; and never, I feel sure, has the picture of an "ornery" horse been more neatly drawn.

"How about that 'slipped-it-in-high' line?" I inquired of Charlie.

"The Eastern fellers put that one in," said Charlie. "You see, how that song came to be written was this way. I was on a round-up job down toward the Red Desert." He pointed his thumb over his shoulder into the darkness. "We was all pretty busy and short of men, and one day a couple a young fellers drifted in. They had some outfit. Yeller an' pink han'kerchiefs, ol' wore-out chaps, second-hand Montgomery-Ward saddles, hats about a foot high. Of course anybody 'd know they was dudes, but it never struck them how they looked. They thought they was fixed up all O.K. They said they could ride—seemed to kind o' take pride in their ridin'—so the ol' man took 'em on; said he 'd give 'em a try-out, anyhow.

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Well, they lasted about a month. Of course us fellers kind of kept things lively for 'em; that there buckin' affair was only one of the things happened to 'em. But they was good-natured kids, once they got took down a ways. We liked 'em real well. And when their families sent 'em the money to come home with, I think they come pretty near being sorry to leave, bad as they wanted to go. So me and another feller there fixed up that song to tell their story. They come all the way from Brooklyn, New York, if I remember right; used the money they was s'posed to go off to school with. But they got plumb tired of the wild West."

Charlie smiled reminiscently.

"Of course that song did n't just foller the same trail as they took. And of course they could n't of told it that way, because they did n't know none of the words right. But it hits the main points, anyhow. It was sure some horse we put 'em on to. If I was green like them, I would n't of rode her for thirty cents, bad as I need the money."

When jazz music and the radio win the West and when Charlie is the stout father of a family on a comfortable homestead, that song may find honorable burial in the pages of a thick book, with the name of the author and the date of its composition all complete. But Charlie will say that such a fate is far ahead; that for many a day the West will belong to him and the cattle and the mountain sheep, and that the cow-boy songs will still be made and sung.

Bonnet Sonnet

By Jacqueline Embry

What lady knows a hat as well as I?
Let her come forward with a finer flair!
I like them small, sophisticated, spry,
Or gravely drooping with a trustful air;
I like them lined with white and rather pure;
Or dangerous, and dark as any crow;
I like them reckless, mocking, never sure;
I like a sailor—strictly yes or no.

A pirate turban 's priceless for a talk;
A rose-wreathed leghorn when one 's feeling vain;
I fancy tricornes for the morning walk,
And a little leather London slouch for rain;
Wide, wistful tulles for tea; for windy weather,
A tam o' shanter with a wicked feather.

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