

Striking a nostalgic chord with vintage cowboy guitars

Steve Evans



“Plainsman” guitar, 1940, depicts Wild Bill Hickok on horseback in a forest of pine trees. This art was fashioned after a scene from the 1936 Gary Cooper movie “The Plainsman.”



Early 1940s “Lefty Cowboy on Horse,” made by Kay and sold through Spiegel. The cowboy resembles Gene Autry wearing chaps and a big cowboy hat. Note original owner’s pick-shaped initials “O.S.B.”

There was a time when youngsters dreamed of being a cowboy or cowgirl. Their desires were fueled by the action-packed cowboy movies and fascinating radio shows of the 1930s through the 1950s.

During that era, big mail-order catalogs offered “cowboy guitars.” Sears & Roebuck guitars were made by the Harmony Company and came with stencil painted art, while models sold by Montgomery Ward and Spiegel were made by multiple manufacturers (Kay, Regal or Richter) and featured vivid silk-screen painted artwork.

The attractiveness of cowboy guitar art often has to do with the smallest of details. Look inside the trailing wagon of the “Pioneer Days” scene. This portion of the art shows the silhouette of a woman wearing a bonnet and reading (her Bible?). Maybe she is praying for protection and courage for their trip West.

Take a look at the art of the “Singing Cowboys” guitar. It shows a bright red campfire with the rest of the scene stenciled in cream-colored paint. This two-color scene appears to be illuminated by the fire during the night. It’s really beautiful!



“Pioneer Days” guitar, 1951; artwork shows a wagon train with mountains, clouds and a distant sunset. This shaded brown finish guitar was made of birch, a wood often used for making cowboy guitars.

The guitars shown in this article were made in America, but cowboy guitars were also produced in Canada, Australia, Germany, Holland and

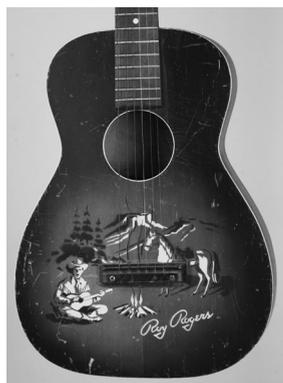
South Africa.

Interest in cowboy guitars declined around 1955 when Elvis Presley and rock & roll music hit the stage. Some people actually painted over the artwork of their cowboy guitars or simply discarded them.

Today, cowboy guitars are usually unplayable because of their advanced age, but some nostalgic folks choose to hang them on their walls to artfully remember the good old days.

To see a short video showing the cowboy guitars in my collection, or to see the “Prairie Ramblers” guitar featured in a bluegrass music video, visit YouTube.com and search for “Antique Trader Cowboy Guitars.”

To view these guitars in person, visit the Jacksonville Guitar Museum, 1105 Burman Drive in Jacksonville, Arkansas. ■



“Roy Rogers” guitar, 1955, shows Roy playing guitar by a campfire and Trigger standing in the background. This guitar has a spruce top with maple back and sides and was made by Harmony.



“Red Foley” guitar, 1941, made by Richter, shows a cowboy on horseback standing by a waterfall with trees and mountains in the background. Inscription reads “Smooth Trailin’ Red Foley.”



This 1938 “Rodeo” guitar’s art shows one cowboy riding and roping, another waving his hat while riding a horse that is reared up on hind legs, and a third cowboy off in the distance riding a bucking bronco.



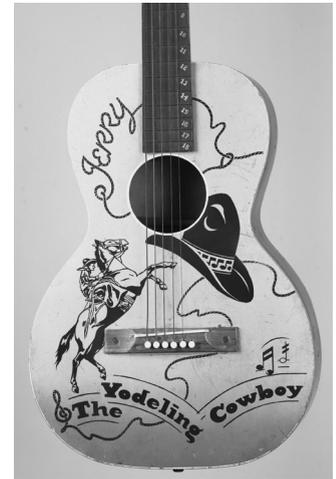
“Lone Ranger” guitar, 1937, shows the Lone Ranger riding Silver while the horse is rearing up on his hind legs, and Tonto riding his horse, Scout. In the distance is a steam engine train silhouetted by the moon.



“Buck Jones” guitar, 1940, shows Buck on his horse, Silver, with an inscription reading “Good Luck, Buck Jones & Silver.” This guitar was made by Regal and sold through Montgomery Ward.



“Prairie Ramblers” guitar, 1958, was made by Kay and sold through Spiegel. The Prairie Ramblers with Patsy Montana singing lead had the popular record “I Want to be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart.”



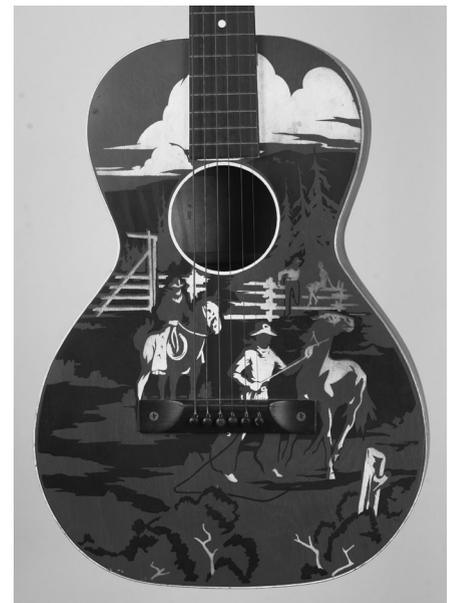
“Jerry the Yodeling Cowboy” guitar, 1940, named after Jerry Smith. Jerry had played in a Western movie when this guitar was produced, but he was better known for having a cowboy radio show on WHO in Des Moines, Iowa.



“Branding Time” guitar, 1941, with Del Oro name on peghead, made by Kay and sold through Spiegel. The art shows a cowboy lassoing a steer; the cowboy and horse look a lot like Buck Jones and Silver.



This 1940 “Singing Cowboys” scene shows five cowboys singing and playing guitars around the campfire. Made by Harmony and sold through Sears with Supertone label inside.



Early 1940s “Corral Scene” guitar with vivid silk-screened artwork. Made by Regal, this guitar is red, but the same art was available on a dark green guitar.



Cowboy Guitar Featured in Bluegrass Music Video



Cowboy Guitars Video

Steve Evans entered the retailing business in 1975 at the age of 18 by opening the Jacksonville Guitar Center in Jacksonville, Ark. He has been collecting vintage guitars since then, and has co-authored “Cowboy Guitars” (Centerstream Publishing, 2002; available online through Booksamillion.com and Amazon.com). Evans has dedicated one end of his retail building to the Jacksonville Guitar Museum, displaying his vintage guitar collection, which, in addition to vintage Fender, Martin and Gibson guitars, includes more than 150 circa 1930s-1950s Cowboy Guitars with Western artwork and a few hundred plastic toy guitars. Evans can be reached at the Jacksonville Guitar Center, 1105 Burman Dr., Jacksonville, AR 72076; 501-982-4933; <http://www.cowboyguitars.net/jvllguitar>. Shop/museum hours are Mon.-Sat., 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

