

A Brand-New Cowboy

By: Garrett Rouse

Department of History

Abstract:

Over the past century, the cowboy has become a near mythic figure in American popular culture. From his distinctive hat to his signature six-shooter, and even on to his gruff demeanor, the cowboy has left a mark on the American media landscape. As the country moves into the 21st century the traditional narratives of the cowboy have started to be critiqued, changed, and co-opted by groups beyond the traditional. From music groups like the Village People, to box office hits like Django Unchained, the archetypical cowboy is being updated to mesh more with a modern audience that is more diverse, and more accepting, than before. Through this change the cowboy, and those that revere him, have had to contend with, and have pushed back on the evolution he has undergone. In this new world does the cowboy still retain his place?

For generations of Americans, the cowboy, and his Wild West mystique, is a central part in the story of America. Through exposure in television, film, and other forms of media, the cowboy has attained an iconic status that speaks of a bygone time where real men rode horses, fought bad guys, and saved damsels in distress. This imbued within the concept of the cowboy a meaning that went beyond his belt buckles, spurs, and cowboy hat. The cowboy became an avatar for all of the socially accepted facets of masculine culture and broadcast them to a national audience that readily devoured it all. In the 21st century, this meaning has been undergoing a new shift as other identities seek to make claims on a definition of masculinity that seeks to distance itself from white, straight men. The time for the Black cowboy, the Gay cowboy, the cowgirl has come as these respective groups seek to make that iconic image into their own likeness, despite a growing backlash that seeks to put the genie back into the bottle and return to the old ways.

It is impossible to separate the cowboy from the genre of the Western. The legendary figure that became so widely known today would not have been so without the golden era of the Western, from the 1930s to the 1950s. During this time “Westerns accounted for 20 and 35% of Hollywood features produced between 1935 and 1959.”¹ This made it far and away the most popular genre of the period and it is during this time that major movie stars and feature films would define the era. Perhaps the most iconic of all of these actors was John Wayne, the Oscar winning Iowa native who, for many, stands as household standard for a cowboy movie star.² Throughout his long career he starred in many of the most iconic films of the American West, *Stagecoach* (1939), *McLintock!* (1963), and *The Searchers* (1956), to name a few.³ For

¹ Pete Falconer, *The Afterlife of the Hollywood Western* (Palgrave Macmillan), 3-4, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54671-5_1.

² “John Wayne,” IMDb, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000078/>.

³ Levi Meyer, “20 Greatest Western Films of All Time,” *The 20 Greatest Westerns Ever Made*, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://centerofthewest.org/2020/04/30/best-western-films/>.

generations of Americans, his swagger, shooting, fighting, and hard-nosed determination was the cowboy, and in turn was also stereotypically what every American man should strive to be.

The legend of the cowboy was rooted in the idea that “the western frontier will save America from becoming over-civilized, effete, and decadent.”⁴ In examining the 1902 novel, *The Virginian*, by Owen Wister, author John Jennings places the book into its context as a tool of creation, a birthplace for the heroic cowboy. The original book is credited by Jennings as the catalyst that set in motion the incredible rise to prominence of the cowboy to fame and glory, but it is not the only book to generate attention. Historian Walter Prescott Webb is another major figure in the popularization of the West and of the cowboy as iconic figures.⁵ His books on the Texas Rangers, the Frontier, and on the West in general were extremely popular and helped to push into the national stage the image of the horse riding, six-shooter carrying figure that would spur on the golden age of the Western.⁶

This is the backdrop against which we find ourselves in the 21st century, a near century long celebration of the white, heteronormative hero figure of the cowboy. The first group to strike out at the turn of the millennium was the Black community as stars like Will Smith and Jaime Foxx took roles in movies that sought to center Black men in cowboy hero role that had been so typically white. This shouldn’t come as a shock to anyone who viewed Westerns, there had been Black actors in Westerns playing cowboys since *Sergeant Rutledge* in 1970.⁷ But, these

⁴ John Jennings, *The Cowboy Legend: Owen Wister’s Virginian and the Canadian-American Ranching Frontier* (University of Calgary Press, 2015), 15.

⁵ Webb wrote and published on the American West prolifically throughout his entire writing career. His books *The Great Plains*, *The Great Frontier*, and *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense* became defining books that shaped not only popular perceptions on the life of Americans during the period of westward expansion, but also centered the frontier concept as key to understanding American history.

⁶ Necah Stewart Furman, “Walter Prescott Webb: Pioneer Historian of the American West,” *Handbook of Texas*, 1976, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/webb-walter-prescott>.

⁷ “Blazing Saddles,” IMDb, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071230/>.

Black cowboys often fell into roles that were either comic relief or served to help the main character, who was white. This tracks with the actual scholarship that has shown repeatedly that despite being “very well hidden”⁸ and that they were “almost totally ignored by the mythmakers of the Eastern publishing houses and the Hollywood movie sets.”⁹ The 21st century bucked that trend and made them a new centerpiece for the cinema.

Smith and Foxx’s characters in *Wild Wild West* and *Django Unchained* are both the central heroic figures of the story, allowing a Black character to no longer take a backseat to their white counterparts. Quentin Tarantino, director of *Django*, in an interview to NPR goes on to say that he intentionally made Django a slave to give him a heroic journey, an enslaved protagonist overcoming the victimization and setting off on a quest to get payback for what was done to him.¹⁰ The cowboy motif had been brought out of the white bubble that it lived in, and infused with a new “Blackness” it reimagined the iconic figure of the cowboy as a Black hero figure. The cowboy was slowly becoming more aligned with his historical reality, the recognition of the historic figure of the Black cowboy was mainstreamed.

The Black community was not the only minority community that sought to make their claim to the icon of the American Cowboy. The gay community also pushed to remake the Cowboy into their image starting in the early late 2000s in cinema with the Oscar winning film *Brokeback Mountain*.¹¹ In a world that was increasingly opening up to the gay community, states

⁸ Philip Durham, “The Negro Cowboy,” *American Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1955): 291–301. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2710621>.

⁹ Roger D. Hardaway, “African American Cowboys on the Western Frontier,” *Negro History Bulletin* 64, no. 1/4 (2001): 27–32. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24766998>.

¹⁰ “Quentin Tarantino, ‘unchained’ and Unruly,” NPR, January 2, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/01/02/168200139/quentin-tarantino-unchained-and-unruly#:~:text=Fresh%20Air%20Interview%20%2D%20Quentin%20Tarantino%20on%20'Django%20Unchained'%20With,thousand%20times%20worse.%20...>

¹¹ “Brokeback Mountain,” IMDb, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0388795/>.

were slowly legalizing gay marriage and repealing old anti-sodomy laws, cinema was helping to lead the way in the public mind pushing for equality.¹² In terms of their impact, there are few figures in history more iconic than cowboys, using him as a vessel to communicate the issues that the gay community faced in society helped to reshape the conversations of the time.

Both *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *The Power of the Dog*, which was released in 2021 and also won an Oscar, also focus on a portion of the Cowboy identity that spoke in a unique way to the gay community.¹³ In both movies, the main characters, the cowboys who are dealing with confronting their sexuality, push down their feelings while either engaging in straight relationships, or in physically and sexually abusive homosexual relationships. This specifically speaks to a trope in the gay community that so called manly men couldn't be gay. Instead, men had to conceal their homoerotic feelings by burying them deep inside of themselves, never to emerge. The cowboy is simply the manliest of the iconic American figures that people can associate with, and the push by the gay community to utilize it in media shows a conscious effort to reframe that masculinity.

Neither of these groups suddenly emerged onto the scene in the 21st century when their respective movies were released. These communities both had a deeply ingrained history in the entertainment industry that primed them to not only embrace the reconstruction of the cowboy as an icon of their communities, but also helped to set them up for success. For the Black community, this primarily emerged in the 1970s and '80s in the Blaxploitation genre of film. Movies like *Shaft* in 1970 helped to popularize this trend that focuses on using primarily Black actors to portray stories that resonated with Black audiences. The Black community saw these

¹² "The Journey to Marriage Equality in the United States," The Human Rights Campaign, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.hrc.org/our-work/stories/the-journey-to-marriage-equality-in-the-united-states>.

¹³ "The Power of the Dog," IMDb, accessed May 9, 2025, https://m.imdb.com/title/tt10293406/?ref_=sr_t_3.

films as either exploitative efforts to show Black neighborhoods as crime-ridden, or as empowering strong Black lead characters at a time when leading roles were still denied to Black actors. This era of film are the shoulders on which the 21st century Black cowboy stands today.

The gay community did not have the same film history as the Black community did. Their iconic figures were outside of Hollywood, at least those who were out publicly. It was musicians that took up the mantle of preparing the world for the new movement of homosexuals that would rise up and claim their rights in the 21st century. Major artists like Freddy Mercury were openly homosexual during a time when most people held deeply bigoted beliefs, and the popularity of the band Queen was immense despite all of that. This can be seen in no sharper detail than the Live Aid concert for the famine in Ethiopia in 1985 when 1.9 billion people tuned in to hear Mercury sing.¹⁴

What helped to tie the cowboy icon into the gay community was the image of Randy Jones, singer for the Village People, who dressed up as a flamboyant, denim-clad cowboy while on tour with the band. Known for being open about their sexualities and for creating music that spoke to gay culture, the Village People have produced some of the most iconic music that is played today, the staple “YMCA” being the most well-known. This brand of “out” gay culture was a product of its revolutionary times, a stepping stone that later movie productions were able to use to craft their narratives. Marching along in their footsteps came award winning movies like *Milk*, the biography of gay activist and politician Harvey Milk, and *Call Me by Your Name*, the coming of age story of a young man dealing with his conflicting feelings. The Gay icons of the 1970s and 1980s helped to create the very environment where movies with gay cowboys could be greenlit by movie executives and welcomed by crowds of moviegoers.

¹⁴ Holly Thomas, “33 Years Later, Queen’s Live Aid Performance Is Still Pure Magic,” CNN, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2018/11/opinions/queen-live-aid-cnnphotos/>.

the 1970s and 1980s helped to create the very environment where movies with gay cowboys could be greenlit by movie executives and welcomed by crowds of moviegoers.

Notably absent from the stories here are the inclusion of women in a 21st century rendition of the cowboy, or in this case the cowgirl. Although there are movies such as *Annie Oakley* (1935) and *Calamity Jane* (1953), there has not been a major example of a cowgirl focused major movie since.¹⁵ Instead women are still relegated to their traditional roles as a foil to their male counterparts, the actresses are either a damsel to be saved or a cowgirl that can hang with the boys by being masculine herself. This is exceptionally prevalent in the 21st century show *Yellowstone* where the characters of Teeter and Beth both are rough, willing to fight, and can drink with the boys. Instead of creating a space where female characters can lay claim to an interpretation of the heroic icon of the cowboy that is uniquely theirs, they continue to be the object of their affections and the standard to which they must judge themselves. A good cowgirl is therefore not an Annie Oakley or a Calamity Jane, women who made their West uniquely theirs, but a hollow storytelling device that is used in the industry to prop up the masculine figure of the cowboy. She does not step out into the picture as a unique character but is a literary device that mirrors the cowboys around her. While Beth and Teeter are fun characters that do show that being feminine is not the only thing a woman can do, their portrayals in the show leave much to be desired.

This continuation of the status quo for women is perhaps the most striking of the examples when it comes to modern film and television approach to the cowboy iconography. The recent trend of opening up the heroic qualities and the complex nature of the cowboy to a more

¹⁵ “Annie Oakley,” IMDb, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0026073/>. “Calamity Jane,” IMDb, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0045591/>.

diverse population just could not bridge the gap between an idealized masculinity and the feminine. It is in this context that we see the burgeoning conservative backlash against diverse cowboy figures that has begun to take shape in the 2020s. The television shows *Yellowstone* and *Landman* both have taken the traditional Western aesthetic and reapplied it to the white man. In the case of both television shows this has brought back a facet heretofore unmentioned in the iconography of the Cowboy, the gunfight.

When one meets with a modern ranch hand, a real living example of a cowboy, they can be struck by the difficult job this individual has to do. But almost never does that job involve gunfights and longstanding feuds with neighboring groups, cartels, and developers. Within the plots of both *Yellowstone* and *Landman* the characters get involved in the old tradition of the gunfight that is meaningfully different from *Django* or *Brokeback Mountain*. While *Django* is a bounty hunter who is fighting slavers and the lovers in *Brokeback* don't engage in these running gun battles, both television shows that harken back to the bygone era of white cowboy films have these as central plot points. Whether it is fighting the cartels or killing a biker gang for coming onto the ranch, these modern reimagining's of the old white cowboy center violence as a key part of their legend. Gone are the lighthearted, but scantily clad, cowboy of the Village People, or the swagger filled styles of Tarantino's Black lead actors. Instead, as scholars have begun to point out, the modern white western is beginning to look more like *Sons of Anarchy*, like violent biker gangs.¹⁶

Although for movie viewers the modern cowboy might seem to be an increasingly different character than they are used to, increasingly racially diverse, non-heteronormative, and

¹⁶ G. L. Castleberry, (2014), "Revising the Western: Connecting Genre Rituals and American Western Revisionism in TV's 2019 *Sons of Anarchy*" in *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies* 14, 269-278. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708614527561>.

sometimes female, the same ideals that inspired the character remain. Whether it is Black cowboys who are not only saving a damsel in distress, but are actively pushing against their enslavement, or cowboys who are struggling with their sexuality, the independence and steadfastness of the cowboy shines through. Despite the failings of the industry to bring stories of prominent women to the forefront, women have begun to make their way back into the story of the cowboy, a slow rediscovery of a hidden past. The golden era of the cowboy in films played to an audience that wanted to become John Wayne. Now that the audience is increasingly diverse, the cowboy as an iconic figure of American popular culture has to change to appeal to that audience. Whether the cowboy survives and thrives as an icon a hundred years from now will hinge on how he continues to adapt, and on who he adapts to become.