Sound Reviews


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In conjunction with Smithsonian Folkways Recordings’ 70th anniversary, “The American Songster” Dom Flemons’ new album Black Cowboys shakes the dust off the obscured traces of the singing African American trailhand. Flemons exposes the influential roles of Blacks, often hidden by nostalgic fieldwork and the romantic popular cultural history of the American West, across the “Great American Desert,” following shifts in frontier life music as it moved from the trail to the rail. An adept at many folk styles, Flemons curates an album of mostly traditional blues, ballads, and fiddle tunes, recombining the variety of Southwestern folk music and instrumentation into a more informed picture of African American presence in the mestiza folk world of white and Black cowboys and Mexican vaqueros, and he crafts new compositions to emphasize recovered material. By the time of secession in 1865, Texas had 182,000 slaves, and, with valuable skills learned wrangling plantation livestock, Blacks became integral to all parts of the cattle business, some becoming ranch owners themselves. One out of four cowboys was Black, most bringing familiarity with Appalachian and Southern musical traditions and considered competent and fraternal companions by white cowboys on the cattle trails at a time when merely having the right to ride a horse was a status denied to many slaves. Work to collect and preserve cowboy songs started by John Lomax and Nathan Howard Thorp challenged the prevailing perceptions of ballad professors that cowboy songs were crude and valueless, and Black Cowboys continues this quest by producing a more accurate and inclusive depiction of the “singing cowboy” that still fascinates folklorists and the American public.

The opening track, “Black Woman,” is a composite of field hollers collected by folklorist Harold Courlander and a 1937 recording by “the ballad hunter” John Lomax of Vera Ward Hall, a Black sharecropper from Alabama. Because the tune recalls familiar feelings of ranch life and lonely spaces, Flemons thought it a fitting tribute to the African American women frontier pioneers whose folk history is hidden perhaps even more than the Black cowboy. Historian William Loren Katz writes: “Although few in number, they [Black women] earned an honored niche in the saga of the wilderness. As the nation grapples with the history of its multicultural past, the story of the frontier African American women deserves a telling” (p. 15). The West could not be “civilized” until women brought domesticity, manners, and the other folkways of family life, giving impetus to building schools and churches as social foundations instead of the saloon. Flemons puts Black women at the album’s forefront, confirming that it was the hardworking female partner of the trailhand and homesteader that truly brought African Americans into “good standing” as community builders, a status that paid dividends in the civil rights movement. Flemons’ solo vocal on “Black Woman” reverberates with the empty spaces, physical and emotional, of life on the plains, highlighting the competent engineering skills of Folkways’ Grammy-winning recording engineer Pete Reiniger. On most other songs, Flemons is backed by the formidable talents of guitarist Alvin Youngblood, featured frequently on Hawaiian guitar, Fraulini Angelina on six-string, Jimbo Mathus on mandolin and harmonica, and Stu Cole, who plays the upright bass with aplomb.
Flemons found the best traces of Black singing cowboys in a limited body of folk revival period scholarship and Library of Congress recordings collected by John and Alan Lomax. (It should be said the father and son team often had complicated relationships with their cultural informants in terms of racial bias and cultural ownership.) Flemons’ original inspiration for the album came when he discovered the 1965 publication _The Negro Cowboys_ (Dodd, Mead) by Philip Durham and Everett Jones in a gift shop during one of his many cross-country tours, but _Black Cowboys_ is also a personal project of exploring his own family’s cultural heritage of coming out of Texas and Arkansas to settle in Arizona. The primary source of cowboy song material many turn to is John Lomax’s 1910 collection with a dedication written by Theodore Roosevelt: “You have done a work emphatically worth doing and one which should appeal to the people of all our country, but particularly to the people of the west and southwest. . . . It is therefore a work of real importance to preserve permanently this unwritten ballad literature of the back country and the frontier” (_Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads_, Macmillan, 1910). Roosevelt affirmed the public value of Lomax’s Anglo-centric cowboy ballad collection that paid close attention to sources, which seems to have inspired Flemons’ own interventionist mission in _Black Cowboys_.

Much of the cowboy repertoire developed alongside the early blues found in mixed Black and white communities of the Delta region, the music sharing similar functions to educate; ameliorate hard and often dangerous work; and lift lonely spirits. Master bluesman Blind Lemon Jefferson and more eclectic songsters like Henry Thomas and Mance Lipscomb circulated through the diverse musical communities near East Texas, melding elements of Anglo-Saxon ballads, vaudeville minstrelsy, Mexican dance hall music, cowboy poetry, and the blues. Many songs on _Black Cowboys_ play on the harsh reality of cowboy life. The blues ballad “Little Joe the Wrangler,” based on an eyewitness account of the death of a young cowhand, was collected and transformed into a country classic in 1908 by Nathan Howard “Jack” Thorp in his extremely popular book _Songs of the Cowboys_. Thorp included Black cowhands as informants and was remarkably prescient in describing the folk process of creating this material and the function it played: “Maybe cowboy singing was an answer to loneliness. Maybe it is just another way of expressing good fellowship. Maybe it was several things. Something happened on the day’s work, funny or sad, and somebody with a knack for words made a jingle out of it; if it was liked, others learned it and passed it on” (26).

Matter-of-fact philosophy, humor, and practical lessons learned in the wrangler’s life speak clearly in biographical pieces like “Old Proc,” written by cowboy poet Wally McCrea. We hear a boy’s proud recollection of hearing grizzled cowhands “rave and postulate about who was fair and who was great,” but one ranch hand outshone the rest: “Proc could speak horse!” The true tale turns on the boy’s revelation when finally meeting this legendary “mounted Paladin,” that “no one minded old Proc was Black, and his folks were slaves.” The shared challenges of stampedes, wolves, and rustlers, and the sheer size of the cowboy’s workspace made distinguishing race unimportant, where cultural and social talents were valued alongside herding skills.

Cowboy poet Bob Day once remarked, in an undergraduate course I took on literature of the West, how a ranch hand might “lose his words” after a long spell of only equine companionship, and appreciated the intentional loquaciousness of other trail riders, and _Black Cowboys_ confirms verbosity as a valuable skill for these men denied formal education. More of the tumbleweed rhythm and the dry humor of cowboy oral tradition flows in the tall tale “Tyin’ Knots in the Devil’s Tail,” which Flemons acquired from Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, who learned it directly from rancher Gail Gardner, who wrote the tale as a song in 1917. Flemons continuously disrupts popular images of Western history with the rollicking “The Real Lone Ranger,” emulating the style of Lightnin’ Hopkins as he retells in song the true story of Bass Reeves, an ex-slave who gambled his way to freedom, became a trail boss and a trick horse rider with “true grit,” and then became a US Marshall working from Ft. Smith for “Hanging” Judge Parker. Ex-
posing the uniquely American style of Western humor, these narrative pieces show that a Black man was truly out of place in few professions. Such stories and songs brimming with sagebrush imagery and wordplay offer lessons in Southwestern diction and vocabulary in the cadence of wondrous memory, while also giving names to the anonymous Black cowboy and demonstrating that skin color was not always determinative of character or rank.

The golden spike that completed the transcontinental railroad in 1869 brought about the next major shift in the African American cultural history of the West. As the frontier was tamed and the ranches fenced in, cattle were moved by rail, and the era of the classic American cowboy drew to a close. Many Black former trailhands moved on to railroad work, laying the track to connect the network of cow towns, and some became Pullman porters. In addition to valuable geographic knowledge of every trailhead and Indian trading post of the old West, railroad porters occupied a special social position as intermediaries of cultural contact, their experiences with a diversity of people across races and classes, accumulating another layer of professional respect for their part in building the American nation. Nat Love, former slave, lariat expert, and trick shootist, better known as Deadwood Dick in dime novels, was one of the few Black cowboys who made a mark in popular and official histories of the West. He also became a Pullman porter, his portrait gracing the cover of Durham's *The Negro Cowboys*. African American railway porters later became critical in the circulation of Civil Rights publications like the *Chicago Defender*, while they also spread African American musical culture, working as distributors for companies selling race records. In the railroad-themed "One Dollar Bill," Flemons produces a jaunty Western jig that honors public figures like Deadwood Dick and the first Black film star, the legendary "Bull-Dogger" rodeo rider Bill Pickett. Ironically, "One Dollar Bill" comes across as a white-hat version of "Stag-o-lee," the bad man of blues narratives.

The album consistently challenges perceptions of Black rural music; even the blues songs repeatedly echo the optimism of the West and its promises of adventure, jocularity, and fraternity. "Going Down the Road Feelin' Bad" was changed to a jaunty string-band dance song for western audiences, and this version is energized with the cross-border twang of Folkways producer Dan Sheehy on guitarron. "Texas Easy Street" presages more flexible elements of the "country blues" formed between the Delta and Texas, connoting the feel of rapid travel and freedom later found in the wide-ranging styles of Lightnin' Hopkins and Charley Patton. The folk song "Charmin' Betsy" became popular as a race record by Harry "Ragtime Texas" Thomas, an itinerant musician who rode the rails of East Texas, and his Vocalion records were sold via *Chicago Defender* ads distributed by Pullman porters. Flemons stretches this song into a medley, adding Southern lyrical cores found in both white and Black communities, in a solo version played on banjo and quills, traditional African American instruments he often champions for cultural revival in his live performances.

"Steel Pony Blues" shows off Flemons' exceptional songwriting and finger-picking skills, capturing the new momentum of the Industrial Age coming to the West. While Flemons focuses on the shared musical landscape of Black, white, and Latino cowboys, original blues songs like this one speak to the persistence of movement as an idiom in Black folklife, looking forward to "catch the first thing smokin.'" The lyrical declaration "Now the folks call me Mr. Flemons" affirmed African Americans' new professional status and recognition in opening up new networks of economic, cultural, and political exchange. Powered by idioms of fast travel and freedom, this song articulates new melodies and lyrical patterns evoked during the transformations of Black urban and rural life and suggests the unknown guitar player W. C. Handy overheard when he "discovered" the blues in a Mississippi railway station in 1901 was once a cowboy.

Flemons often pays living tribute to Huddie Ledbetter, Lead Belly, the original "American Songster" in his music and his own public personae, and he gives this key figure in American folk music special attention in *Black Cowboys*. Eschewing folkloristic concerns with au-
authenticity, Flemons’ self-appellation as a “songster” honors the work ethic of itinerant musicians like Lead Belly and Blind Lemon Jefferson, occasional busking companions on the dusty roads and cattle trails between New Orleans and Houston, who earned a living by playing and sang whatever songs found public value, from Tin Pan Alley hits to local traditional favorites. Lead Belly was “a walking jukebox” of popular and traditional material, and Flemons notes that many of the earliest photos of Lead Belly show him in Western outfits against a Western background. Flemons dug into the Library of Congress recordings made by Alan Lomax, selecting, “Po’ Howard/Gwine Dig a Hole to Put the Devil In” to exemplify Lead Belly’s commanding singing and playing style likely heard on Texas street corners. Lead Belly himself claimed that Po’ Howard deserved attention as “the first fiddler after Negroes got freed from slavery times,” and Flemons adds that “Gwine Dig a Hole to Put the Devil In” celebrates an act of civil disobedience against a cruel master (p. 22). Flemons manages to reproduce on banjo much of Lead Belly’s prowess on the twelve-string, but he also uses this instrument specifically to honor Pete Seeger’s signature sound and the activism that defined his music.

Ultimately, Black Cowboys is an act of cultural democracy. Like much of Flemons’ work, this album carries a subtext of social justice by uncovering African Americans’ role in shaping the cultural and social patterns of the West, a key component of our shared American identity. This project easily harmonizes with founder Moe Asch’s vision for Folkways Records to document “the people’s music,” recovering the musical sensibilities that travelled with slaves and freedmen as blues, ballads, and tall tales, mixing with Anglo and Latino music to engender new folk songs and styles from their components. These songs and stories memorialize the taming of this diverse and challenging frontier by Black cowhands, railroad workers, and women homesteaders. African Americans have been marginalized in the history of the West and its folk song traditions, but Flemons shows that they can lay equal claim to their place in westward expansion. A musical and rhetorical challenge to the racial homology of popular country and western recordings, this album rightfully puts Bass Reeves and Lead Belly ahead of Gene Autrey in the pantheon of heroes and singing cowboys largely accepted by popular culture and rarely questioned in folk song study. Flemons concludes that the hard-won moral authority acquired through the combined pioneer spirit and cultural legacy of the Black cowboy established a résumé of “good standing” for all African Americans, providing a foundation for the twentieth-century civil rights movement that many see as beginning with J. Philip Randolph organizing the first union of Black Pullman porters. This is an album equally as valuable for its corrective ethnomusicology as its entertaining artistry, so get on your horse and rustle up a copy of Black Cowboys.