

“Happy Trails”--Roy Rogers and Dale Evans (1952)

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Essay by Theresa Kaminski (guest post)*



Dale Evans

Dale Evans (born Frances Octavia Smith on October 31, 1912, in Uvalde, Texas) penned “Happy Trails” in about three hours, probably sometime in 1951, while at home, taking care of her daughter, Robin Elizabeth. At the time, Dale was the most well-known singing cowgirl in the United States. In 1947, after cycling through three marriages while she built a career on radio, the big band circuit, and in the movies, she had married her Republic Pictures co-star, the singing cowboy Roy Rogers. “Robin’s birth did not mean the end of my career,” Dale later observed. “In some ways, she was an inspiration.”

That day in 1951, Robin prompted her to think about the music performed on the radio program “The Roy Rogers Show.” Dale considered its theme song, “Smiles Are Made Out of Sunshine,” as being not “Western enough [...] it didn’t say enough about what it means to be a cowboy—especially when the trails you ride *aren’t* always sunny ones. A cowboy has to ride no matter what the weather is.” She did not know how the trail would end with Robin, who had been diagnosed with Down syndrome after her birth in 1950, and she wanted to write something that sounded both realistic and hopeful about life.

Songwriting was not new to Dale. She had already had several solo and collaborative compositions to her credit, many of them with a Western flair like “My Heart is Down Texas Way” and “Cowgirl Polka.” The day she wrote “Happy Trails,” she remembered how much she liked “The Grand Canyon Suite,” a five-movement orchestra piece written in the late 1920s by the American composer Ferde Grofé. It contained a trombone slide that sounded to Dale like someone saying “happy trails” in a deep canyon, producing an echo sound.

Dale may also have been inspired by “Happy Trails in Sunshine Valley,” a song written by Foy Willing of The Riders of the Purple Sage for Roy’s 1951 movie “Spoilers of the Plains.” That

song opens with “*Happy trails in Sunshine Valley, where a smile goes a long, long way*” and continues with upbeat lyrics about smiles, happy hearts, and skies that are always blue.

Dale’s song starts with a parting: “*Happy trails to you, until we meet again. Happy trails to you, keep smiling until then.*” Then it lightly touches on troubles that can be conquered: “*Who cares about the clouds when we’re together? Just sing a song and bring the sunny weather,*” followed by “*Some trails are happy ones, others are blue. It’s the way you ride the trail that counts.*” It is a catchy, swaying melody with simple, easy to remember verses.

In 1951, when Westerns still enjoyed peak popularity, “The Roy Rogers Show” secured a new sponsor, General Foods, and found a new network, NBC. On radio, the program remained basically the same as when it had recently run on the Mutual Broadcasting Network: an adventure set in the fictional Paradise Valley, Roy playing a ranch owner who solved mysteries and thwarted crimes, with Dale as the owner of her own ranch. A vocal quintet, The Whippoorwills, provided background singing for the closing number on each show, plus the new theme song, “Happy Trails.” The television version of the show, with the same title and setting (though Dale’s character owned a restaurant rather than a ranch), premiered on December 30, 1951. Roy and Dale, on horseback, sang “Happy Trails” over the closing credits. The program was a hit and ran until 1957.

“Happy Trails” became the couple’s song. They performed on radio, television, and in front of audiences at rodeo shows and other personal appearances. They used its title on many of the ads for the dozens of merchandising tie-ins that fans of all ages eagerly snapped up. This kept Roy and Dale’s catchy tune at the forefront of contemporary Western music.

They first recorded it for RCA Records in 1952, the year Robin died. Roy included “Happy Trails” in that year’s launch of his “Roy Rogers Folio of Western Songs,” released to coincide with the couple’s appearance at the Madison Square Garden World Championship Rodeo. In 1954, Roy and Dale became the first Western artists to sign with Little Golden and Bell records. They received a guaranteed production of three million records for each of the three contract years. Enhanced by a 16-piece orchestra and a seven-voice chorus, “Happy Trails” was part of the first recording session.

Roy and Dale sometimes adapted “Happy Trails” to specific occasions. For instance, they added a new verse, focused on the theme of “Go West, Young Man!” when they performed for hundreds of thousands of spectators from the Post Cereals-sponsored float in the 1955 Tournament of Roses parade. In 1977, they gave it a Christian slant on the album, “Roy Rogers and Dale Evans: The Good Life,” for Word Records, a label specializing in religious music: “*Happy trails to you, it’s great to say ‘hello’ and to share with you the trail we’ve come to know. It started on the day that we met Jesus.*”

Even as the popularity of Western programs declined during the 1960s, the infectious tune stuck with those early fans as they grew up. San Francisco psychedelic rock band Quicksilver Messenger Service titled its 1969 album “Happy Trails,” wrapping up side two with the title song. Janis Joplin, a bluesy rock singer, taped a verse of it as part of a birthday greeting for John

Lennon in 1970. The American rock band Van Halen concluded its 1982 album “Diver Down” with a one-minute, acapella “Happy Trails.”

The 1980s brought a resurgence of interest in cowboys and the West, and both “Happy Trails” and Roy Rogers rode the nostalgia wave. In the now-classic 1988 action movie “Die Hard,” the heroic main character John McClane (played by Bruce Willis), who claims he was always partial to Roy Rogers, uses the pseudonym Roy as he foils a terrorist plot, finally dispatching the main villain while sardonically wishing him “Happy trails!”

The following year, “Happy Trails” received an orchestral arrangement, and Roy sang it with the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra for a new “*Happy Trails*” album. He then traveled to Nashville to record the song for a duet with the country star Randy Travis, which was included on “*Randy Travis Duets: Heroes and Friends*.” The year Roy turned 80, he produced a similar album for RCA, “*Roy Rogers: Tribute*,” and teamed up with Dale and their son Dusty, backed by 25 country singers and groups, for “Happy Trails.”

The song has endured into the 21st century. The Quicksilver Messenger Service album was re-released in 2012 on CD and in 2013 on vinyl. Members of the Western Writers of America gave it the number 22 slot on their organization’s list of the top 100 Western songs of all time. More than a television and radio theme song, “Happy Trails” is embraced as a nostalgic remembrance of the 1950s and as a heartwarming song about parting and the hope for reunion.

Theresa Kaminski, a retired history professor, is the author of several nonfiction books about women in American history. She published “Queen of the West: The Life and Times of Dale Evans” (Lyons Press) in 2022.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.