

Cowboys as Folk: American Country Music and Western Movies in the early 1960s

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Abstract

This paper examines how Japanese communists, musicians, and fans of American country music reimagined cowboys as “authentic folk” figures in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Some Japanese communists viewed the cowboys in western movies and TV western programs as humble, proletarian characters who embodied egalitarian ideals. Meanwhile, country music musicians and fans in Japan performed and promoted the cowboy as a hardworking folk figure to defend what they saw as the authentic appreciation of American country music at a time when rockabilly was rapidly gaining popularity.

Although their ideological backgrounds differed, both groups projected onto the cowboy their anxieties over rapid economic growth and the fear that modern life threatened a basic sense of humanity. By tracing these contrasting constructions, the paper highlights how the Japanese appropriated American symbols to articulate social concerns in postwar Japan.

Biography



Mari Nagatomi is an associate professor at Kansai University. She researches transnational popular music history in Japan. She is a co-editor and author of *Introduction to Popular Music Cultural History: Re-reading Post War Japan* (August 2024), and *Changes in Country Music: Various Storytelling* (November 2024) .