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# Was Gene Autry a Radical?

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OMG! Was Gene Autry, the "singing cowboy" on TV and in the movies, really a radical?

I just discovered this Autry recording of the pro-labor song "[The Death of Mother Jones](#)," about the great radical union organizer -- Mary Harris Jones, sometimes called the "[most dangerous woman in America](#)" by her [enemies](#) -- who died at 100 in 1930. Autry recorded the song in February 1931 during the Great Depression. It is so obviously pro-union that there's no way Autry couldn't have known what it meant.

Like many baby-boomers, I grew up watching Autry in his cowboy films and his popular television show. He was famous for singing cowboy songs like "Back in the Saddle" and "Tumbling Tumbleweeds," as well as popular hits like "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," "Here Comes Peter Cottontail," and "Frosty the Snowman."

In the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, he was one of Hollywood's biggest stars. He made 640 recordings, including more than 300 songs that he wrote or co-wrote. He was the first performer to sell out Madison Square Garden. He appeared in 93 movies, including "Red River Valley," "Saddle Pals," "Apache Country," and "Pack Train." From 1940 to 1956, he was a popular radio entertainer on his "Melody Ranch" show on the CBS Radio Network. He was also the first movie star to transfer his popularity to television. He had a successful weekly TV show from 1950 to 1955. He also produced other Western-themed TV series, including "Annie Oakley," "The Range Rider," "Buffalo Bill," "The Adventures Of Champion," and "Death Valley Days," whose emcee was a fading actor named Ronald Reagan. Autry is the only entertainer to have all five stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, one each for Radio, Recording, Motion Pictures, Television, and Live Theatre/performance.

Autry became a multi-millionaire through his investments in hotels, real estate, radio stations and the California Angels baseball team. In 1958 he endowed the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum in Los Angeles, specializing in Western history.

Don Cusic, author of *Gene Autry: His Life and Career*, says that Autry grew up admiring Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. In mid-life he became more conservative and supported Dwight D. Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Barry Goldwater, and Ronald Reagan. Even so, he remained a registered Democrat, but called himself an "independent."

So what's with Autry recording "The Death of Mother Jones," a blatantly left-wing song? According to Cusic, the recording sold well. Autry did not write the song, but its author is unknown. Here are the lyrics:

The world today's in mourning

O'er the death of Mother Jones;

Gloom and sorrow hover

Around the miners' homes.

This grand old champion of labor

Was known in every land;

She fought for right and justice,

She took a noble stand.

O'er the hills and through the valley

In ev'ry mining town;

Mother Jones was ready to help them,

She never turned them down.

On front with the striking miners

She always could be found;

And received a hearty welcome

In ev'ry mining town.

She was fearless of every danger,

She hated that which was wrong;

She never gave up fighting

Until her breath was gone.

This noble leader of labor

Has gone to a better land;

While the hard-working miners,

They miss her guiding hand.

May the miners all work together

To carry out her plan;

And bring back better conditions

For every laboring man.

Autry's decision to record the song may simply have been a fluke, or he may have absorbed some of the populist and radical ideas floating around the southwest when he was a boy and a young man.

Autry was born in tiny Tioga, Texas in 1907, then moved to Oklahoma as a teenager. His father was a buyer and trade of livestock, but in both places his parents raised cattle and vegetables on a rented farm, and Gene worked

with them. After leaving high school in 1925, Autry worked in several towns as a telegrapher for the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway in Oklahoma, which ran through the state's coal fields.

In the early 1900s, Oklahoma was a hotbed of radical ideas and activism, as Garin Burbank describes in *When Farmers Voted Red: The Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910-1924* (1976), as James Green documents in *Grassroots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943* (1978), and as Jim Sissett shows in *Agrarian Socialism In America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904-1920* (1999). The Farmer's Union (1904-1907) and then the Socialist Party (1907-1920) were influential movements in the state.

The Socialists were particularly strong among tenant farmers, but it also had a base in the cities. In 1911 Oscar Ameringer earned 23 percent of the vote running for mayor of Oklahoma City on the Socialist ticket. In 1912, Socialist Party presidential candidate Eugene Debs garnered 16.4 percent of the Oklahoma vote, the highest margin of any state except Nevada. Four years later, Allan L. Benson gained 15 percent of the state vote for president. But the Socialists' opposition to U.S. entry in World War One led to various attacks and the party was disbanded in 1917. In 1928, the state Socialist Party was reorganized, but it never regained its former influence. Even so, its radical ideas shaped the lives and beliefs of many Oklahomans, including Woody Guthrie, who was born in 1912 and Tom Joad, the fictional protagonist in John Steinbeck's 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, who is radicalized by his experiences as a migrant laborer forced to leave his family farm and move to California during the Depression.

Was Gene Autry one of them?

While working in the railroad telegraph office, Autry was discovered by the popular humorist (and Oklahoman) Will Rogers, who heard Autry singing to himself while strumming a guitar. In 1929 Autry was billed as "Oklahoma's Yodeling Cowboy" on KVOO radio in Tulsa. He got a recording contract in 1929 and was soon performing on the "National Barn Dance" show for radio station WLS in Chicago. His first hit record, "That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine," came out in 1931, a few months after he'd recorded "The Death of Mother Jones." He made his first movie in 1934. For the next quarter-century, Autry was one of America's biggest celebrities.

I can find no documentation of how Autry came to record "The Death of Mother Jones," nor any evidence that he voiced any radical political views throughout his career.

But what about these lines from his popular song, "Here Comes Santa Claus," which Autry wrote in 1946?

"He doesn't care if you're rich or poor/for he loves you just the same."

Mother Jones might not have believed in Santa Claus, but she would have agreed with those sentiments.

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