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### Researching & Designing Marketing Materials for Rachel Messer & Connor Dale

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Bridgewater College

The American West as a Cultural Phenomenon

Honors Project Research Component

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Throughout American history, the West has been considered a mystical place where people have yearned to explore. The American West has been an integral part of American culture throughout history, and continues to be an obsession today. This Western obsession occurred in the beginning of American History, leading to a massive Western expansion. As time has gone on, this “obsession” with the West became mixed with American culture. A boom of Western films and pop culture arose, which continued into modern times. Today, the fascination continues to thrive through western inspired music and television. This is specifically evident in the current landscape of country music. Many artists are adopting the more traditional sound, embracing country music’s Western roots.

Rachel Messer and Connor Dale are modern country artists embracing the more traditional side of country music. They both love the sound of traditional country, and emulate those sounds in their own music. Rachel Messer, a previous contestant on *The Voice*, and Connor Dale are husband and wife, and travel across the country performing together. Rachel has a presence across social media platforms, and often uses those platforms to promote her shows, songs, and merchandise. I will be working in conjunction to create an array of marketing materials, such as concert posters, stickers, and any other design material they may need. As a creative who would like to pursue a career in marketing, this will be a great opportunity to build my portfolio and gain some professional experience.

Through this research paper, I hope to gain some knowledge on the American West and use my newfound knowledge for inspiration in creating marketing materials. After the historical research component of this essay, I plan on discussing the scope of my project, and mention specific posters I’ll be designing for certain performances. I’m also planning on designing social media graphics and other marketing materials for the duo, which I will discuss in detail. Then,

I'll discuss how I plan to use Western style aesthetics in my marketing materials for Rachel and Connor. I'll feature design examples from Old Westerns and discuss certain trends and aesthetics I plan to use in my work. I will also reflect on my aesthetic and design decisions, based on their audience demographics, musical genre and their own personal style.

Michael L. Johnson, in his novel, *Hunger for the Wild* describes the initial draw Americans had for the West. It's important to note, that to the Native Americans, their home was not considered "the West." It was their home. To the European settlers, the direction "aligned with the movement of the sun" (Johnson, 5). It was a mysterious place to them, one they had to explore, and exploit.

To European settlers, the West had a certain quality to it. It had a sense of "otherness" (Johnson, 5). It seemed beyond their control, a vast wilderness of beautiful landscapes. They dreamt about this mystical place, sometimes even comparing it to Cibola, the Spaniards' fabled Seven Cities of Gold (Johnson, 27). This wild place called them. They wanted to be "conquerors of her natural beauty" (Johnson, 27). The West proved to be wild, and the fight to conquer her proved difficult.

As Europeans inhabited the coast, Eastern tribes were wiped out with disease, and the rest were forced to migrate West. These tribes then fought for territory and slowly diminished (Iowa.gov.). As Europeans continued to push Westward, they were met with these Native Americans, which sometimes brought conflict. These conflicts continued throughout the Western expansion, leading to a troubled past between Europeans and Native Americans.

Native Americans, in contrast with Europeans who wanted to conquer the land, lived alongside it. Unlike the European religion of Christianity, there was no fall of nature into corruption. Instead, they believed that "all parts of [nature] functioned together to sustain it"

(Johnson, 21). The once untouched West slowly became transformed into a different landscape than before. After the Civil War, the railroads to the West were completed. This brought even more settlers to the West to farm and ranch. A culturally diverse landscape emerged as Chinese railroad workers settled in, and African Americans came from the deep south. They were convinced that by establishing all-black western towns, peace could be found there. As these people migrated West, the huge herds of Bison diminished, and the rolling plains were now planted with wheat and other crops (The Library of Congress).

The diminishing natural landscape caused a great deal of trouble for Native Americans. During the later 1800's, there was much conflict between tribes and migrants moving into their home territory. Although the Native Americans were able to win occasionally, the numbers and military force of the Europeans made for an uneven fight. By the later 1880's, most Native Americans were forced to live in reservations in parts of the West that were less desirable to migrants (The Library of Congress). This created a complicated relationship between Native Americans and settlers.

As European Settlers began to populate the West after the Civil War, tensions with Native Americans were at an all time high. Desperate to protect the little bit of land they possessed, Native Americans of the plains would often protect their land from the crowding of settlers, leading to conflict. This led to a massive demonization of Native Americans. Articles were published with pictures of dead bodies killed by Native Americans, and their languages were deemed satanic and "unevolved" (Johnson, 137). This demonization made it easy for settlers to get rid of Native Americans, and take their land without feeling remorse. It's important to recognize the harsh reality of how Native Americans were treated.

As the West became more established, cowboys became a prominent symbol, which has continued through modern times. As westerns began to be published in the late 19th century, the popular image of the cowboy was often depicted as a heroic and glamorous white figure.

However, the first cowboys were actually Spanish vaqueros, who introduced cattle to Mexico (Library of Congress). The term cowboy actually began as a derogatory statement. During the American Revolution, the term “cowboy” was applied to workmen who “organized raids on the Whigs’ cattle” (Fishwick, 78).

The ideas of cowboys and ranching being white dominated are actually quite the contrary. By the late seventeenth century, “the foundations for Western Hemisphere equestrian cultures had been laid [throughout Latin America]” (Johnson, 154). Ranching became an art in Mexico, and as those cattle’s descendants wound up in Texas, European settlers learned the art of cowboys from those Mexican vaqueros. By the late nineteenth century, cowboying had spread to the West. However, this profession was not seen as glamorous. The grueling work of cowboys was often reserved for lower class white men and non-whites (Johnson, 154). In fact, 1 in 5 cattle trail workers were a cowboy of color (The Evolution of Cowboy Culture). It’s interesting how this once looked down upon profession became a great American symbol. This goes back to the allure of the West. The chaos, mystery, and wildness of it all painted this sort of fantasy to settlers. This same fantasy continues today, and is seen in many aspects; such as the glorification of cowboys. The West, upon analyzing its history, is a blend of cultures that have painted this fantastical image.

As modern society developed, Western media began to develop, further glorifying elements of the West. The American public embraced these stories, launching the “Wild West” obsession into the mainstream. Western stories, although they continued through modern times,

have been around since the times of the Wild West in the 1870's. One of the most prolific Western writers was Louis L'amour. He's known as the writer who "defined the Western genre" throughout the 20th century. Most Western stories are either written by L'amour or inspired by his work (Miller).

When L'amour wrote his works, he had no plan. Like the unpredictability of the West, he wrote the story one day at a time. This strategy led to many twists and turns throughout his stories, giving them a sense of excitement and urgency. This is one of the reasons his work is so popular. Readers feel as if they're also in on the adventure (Miller).

Once stories were written, films were made about this mystical place known as the West. Not only was the genre popular, but Westerns were easy to produce. Many parts of California during the early 1900's were fields, which made Westerns cheap to produce (Miller). This strategy also proved successful when gauging the popularity of these films. The stunning American West was now on the big screen, exploited through film. The serene landscapes and stories of crime drew crowds to theaters (Buscombe, 75). Up until the 1960's various Westerns flooded the Hollywood market. According to Beau L'amour, Louis L'amour's son, this genre gave people a chance to escape. During World War I and II, people wanted to experience something foreign, wild, and new. They didn't want reminders of the current political landscape (Miller).

As the US approached the 1970's, the West, as well as Louis, saw a major surge of popularity. Wanting to find peace in the violent landscape of the world, the West was embraced. They wanted a sense of freedom away from society, an escape. People began integrating certain aspects of Western sub-culture into their style, including cowboy boots and Indian braids (Miller).

Nowadays, there's been another Western surge. In our growing world, there's less and less of untouched civilization. People want that lost sense of freedom; the open road (Miller). There's been a surge of Western television shows, such as *West World* and *Yellowstone*. Aspects of Western culture are also seeping into the fashion industry, like collections by *Dior* and *Coach*. These clothes are reminiscent of cowboys, with fringed jackets, boots, and pearl-snap shirts (Ezra).

Possibly the biggest resurgence of the Old West can be seen in country music. Country music doesn't necessarily have one origin. Country music arose from fiddle tunes and hymns of the open west, tunes from Appalachia, and the deep south (PBS). This blend of genres ultimately took place when the East Texas oil field was discovered, bringing many southerners to Texas. The music of the deep south melded with the music of Texas. These styles included music from Mexico, fiddle tunes from the open west, southern "Anglo" black, and Louisiana Cajun. This melding, which eventually sounded like the country music we know and listen to today, still shows many aspects of its Western roots (Long reads).

Recently, country music, especially more traditional sounding music, has boomed. Zach Bryan, whose music is considered country folk music has been taking off. When listening to Bryan's music, it doesn't embody pop-country at all. His music sounds as if you're sitting by a fire, listening to a man tell stories on his guitar. His music blends country, rock, and folk together, creating a more traditional sound (Zach Bryan's Self-Titled Album Is His First No. 1). This "sound" is wildly popular, and is altering the music industry. This new traditional country surge has caused a new surge in popularity for the genre. This year, a third of the 15 most streamed albums are country albums. In fact, the genre has grown 22 percent in the past year, making the genre "the second-fastest-growing core genre behind only world music." Bryan leads



this triumph. His songs are often in the number one spot, such as *I Remember Everything*, with Kacey Musgraves. The song has held the number one spot on Billboard's Hot 100, making it the fourth consecutive country song to do so (Country Music's Summer of Streaming Domination). Other notable artists taking on this traditional sound include Laney Wilson, Whiskey Myers, and Tyler Childers.

There are many other emerging artists taking on this traditional sound reminiscent of the West. Rachel Messer and Connor Dale are two artists working their way into the limelight. From West Virginia, the married couple travel across the country performing at venues. Although they're not yet hitting top charts, they sing powerful melodies which have serious star potential.

In order to promote their music, they're in need of some additional marketing materials to use across social media and other platforms. For my honors project, I plan on creating at least 3 posters promoting shows for them, and 10 social media assets. The duo is fully booked for the fall, with new music coming out shortly. Through the use of appealing marketing materials, I hope to increase their engagement.

When discussing these materials with Rachel, she mentioned that they consider their style to be Western, with a 70's flare. Last time I created a poster for the duo, I made the poster resemble an Old Western style, with bright pops of teal to emulate the 70's. For these marketing materials, I plan to study design aesthetics from Old Western posters and integrate that into my work (see Fig 1.)



Figure 1. Isabelle Bauer, *Concert Poster*, 2022

One prominent artist who depicted the West is Frederic Remington. In 1881, Remington traveled to Montana so he could get a glimpse of life in the West. He produced “black-and-white illustrations of cowboys, Indians, and Plains military campaigns that brought him considerable recognition” (Frederic Remington). These depictions follow a similar style. Many of his pieces are black and white, and sketched in intricate detail. His sketches are shaded with many lines, creating the iconic “gritty” Western look that many of us recognize today (see Fig. 2).

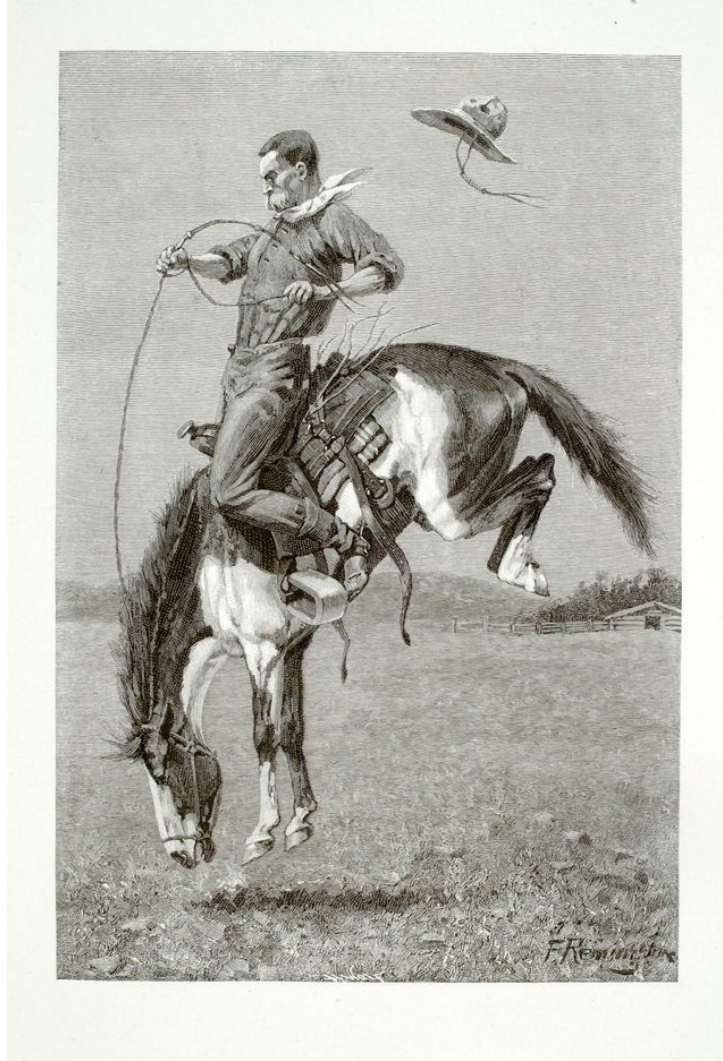


Figure 2. Frederic Remington (copy by Henry Wolf), *Bucking Bronco*, 1887

*A Bucking Bronco* portrays this sketch-look. The image is very detailed, comprised of tiny lines which create a photo-realistic image. I plan on integrating this style into my marketing materials for Rachel and Connor. I may use photos of them in the poster, with subtle sketch lines, giving the composition this Western feel.

As time passed on from Frederic Remington into a more modern age, Western film posters became Western Art. Although many of these posters feature modern aspects, like photos and bright colors, they still feature the “grittiness” of traditional Western artwork.

One such poster embodies the funkiness of the emerging 70's mixed with the traditional Western feel. A poster made for *100 Rifles*, a Czech 19th Century Fox Western film, features a gritty monochrome photograph of a woman. The orange tone of the photograph is synonymous with the Western planes. Behind her, bright colored stripes compose the background. Old fashioned text is scattered throughout the image, mimicking old Western wanted posters. Decorative swirls mimicking a dollar bill frame the upper third of the composition, creating a dynamic blend of new and old imagery (see Fig. 3).

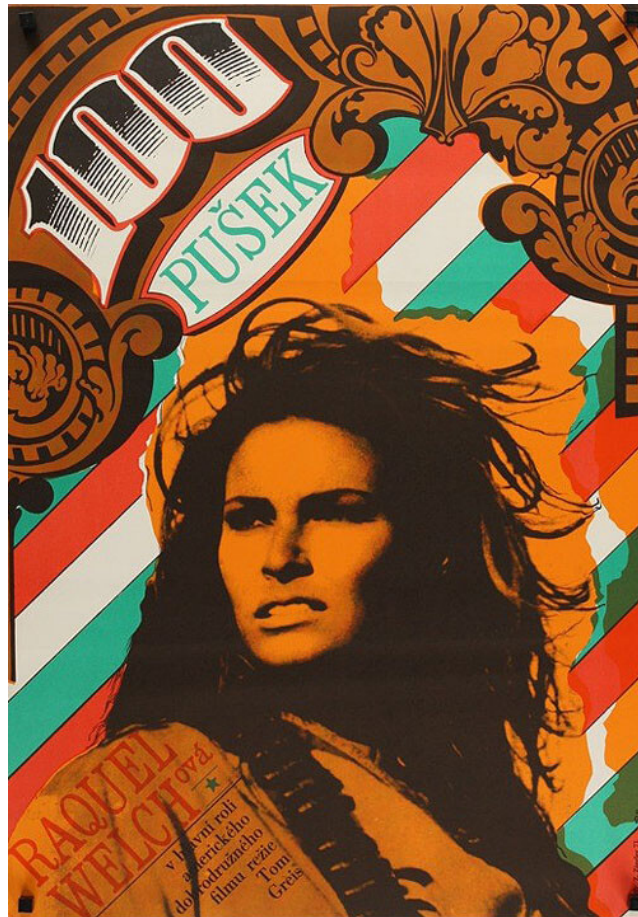


Figure 3. Zdenek Ziegler, *100 Rifles*, 1969

Another poster features the illustrative quality that many of these posters possess. Many Western movie posters seem to be actively telling the story through various images, creating a



balanced, yet chaotic composition. In *Riders of the Deadline*, the main character is featured, with an enlarged close-up portrait taking up half of the poster (See Fig. 4). This is another quality seen across Western film posters. The faces of the characters are often dramatized and enlarged, drawing attention to the poster. This poster also features bold lettering, although different from the lettering shown in the previous poster. This text is more action-oriented, alluding to the events in the film. Mostly subtle colors are used, except for the bright blue of the background and the bright yellow of the text, creating a sense of balance within the piece.

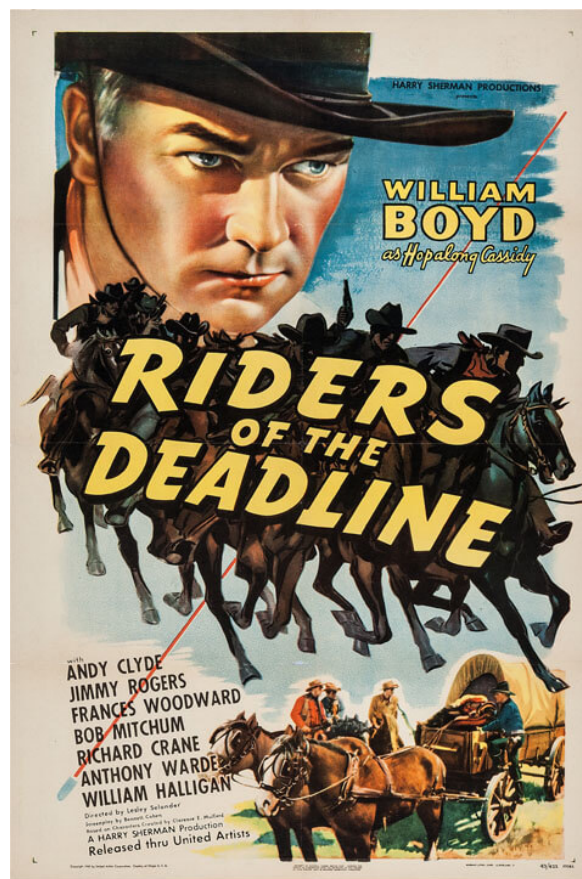


Figure 4. United Artists, *Riders of the Deadline*, 1943

After analyzing various pieces of artwork relating to the Old West, I've comprised a list of certain aesthetics I'll be using in my marketing materials for Rachel Messer and Connor Dale in order to emulate their Western vibe. These features will include bold text, whether it's text

that's bold in color or an Old Western font. I may also make the font look decayed, with slight holes throughout to give off that "gritty" feel. I'll also feature a relatively muted color palette, with bright pops of color mixed in. These bright pops of color will draw attention to important aspects of the asset, such as information about a performance, or certain release dates. I'll also feature the graphic aspect that many of these posters portray. This may involved depicting the artists in a style similar to that of a graphic novel, or featuring sketch lines across their faces, to make it appear as if they are a drawing. Finally, for some of the assets, especially the posters, I'll feature their faces as large elements of the composition, similar to a Western film poster.

The Wild West, although a thing of the past, remains alive and well within many elements of American culture. The longing for freedom and wildness associated with the West is something that will forever remain, whether it be the 1800's or 2023. Artists like Rachel and Connor emulate this sense of longing through the music they play. With every twang, fiddle, and tune, the past is communicating with the present. The Wild West is a cultural phenomenon that will continue to live on through the books, films, and music we indulge in as people, longing for something that's foreign, wild, and free.

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