

2021 HALL OF FAME INDUCTEE



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FRED SCOTT

By O.J. Sikes

Unlike his contemporaries, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry, who were “singing cowboys” before they became movie stars, Fred Scott was an actor before he became a “singing cowboy.” His musical career started in vaudeville in 1919, but he moved to films the following year and landed supporting roles in Mack Sennett comedies. This gave him a chance to work with silent film greats including Al St. John, who was a star in the *Keystone Cops* film series. Scott was seeing his dream as an entertainer come true, but he was a singer, first and foremost, and silent films were not the best vehicle to showcase his main talent.

So he left the film world temporarily, to work in theatrical and radio presentations, but by 1929 he had found a role in a “talking picture,” a musical titled *Rio Rita*. Feeling movies didn’t offer enough opportunity to showcase his singing voice, in 1932, the native Californian moved North from Hollywood to star in a San Francisco Opera Company production. Musical Westerns were still a thing of the future at that point, but by mid-decade, his friend William Boyd was moving from dramatic film roles to star as Hopalong Cassidy, and soon, his enthusiasm for the B-Western rubbed off on Fred Scott.

When Gene Autry established the format for singing cowboy movies late in 1935, it paved the way for Spectrum Studios to launch a series of musical Westerns, but they needed a star. Early in 1936, Scott was given a small, singing role in RKO’s *The Last Outlaw*, starring Harry Carey and Hoot Gibson. In it, Scott sang only one song, “My Heart’s on the Trail,” composed by Nat Shilkret and Frank Luther. The Spectrum executives saw the film and, based on his performance, they chose Scott as their studio’s main cowboy actor. His first starring role was in a film titled *Romance Rides the Range* (1936).

Over the next few years, billed as “The Silvery-Voiced Buckaroo” and usually with his old friend Al “Fuzzy” St. John as his charismatic comic sidekick, Fred Scott starred in a series of B-Western “singing cowboy” films. Afterward, Scott retired from the film world and built a successful career in real estate, while St. John went on to become one of the best-known of all Western “sidekicks.”

Fred Scott was one of the most popular of the cowboys with trained voices, but strangely, his movie contract prohibited him from making commercial recordings. So the only recordings we have of his Western music are from his film soundtracks. Shortly before his death in 1991, seventeen Western songs, including “Ridin’ Down the Trail to Albuquerque” and his movie themes, “In Old Montana,” “Moonlight on the Range” and “Paradise Valley,” were taken from those soundtracks and issued on a cassette. Recently, the British Archive of Country Music included those 17 songs on a CD titled *Operatic Cowboys*, along with 12 tracks by Dick Foran and Smith Ballew, a couple of Scott’s box office competitors.