



A&E / CULTURE SHOT

Saddle up, partner: The gay cowboy in modern media



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“Cowboys are frequently, secretly fond of each other,” sings Willie Nelson in his famous cover of the 1981 song by Latin country musician Ned Sublette. Despite the long history of machismo and conservatism in rodeo culture, there’s just something about buff men in cowboy hats and leather chaps that seems more than a little queer. From country music to Western films, the figure of the gay cowboy is more common in modern media than meets the eye.

The classic gay cowboy movie is, of course, “Brokeback Mountain,” in which Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger play fellow sheepherders-turned-secret-lovers in 1963 Wyoming. More recently, “The Power of the Dog” explores themes of closeted sexuality among ranch owners in 1925 Montana. But Western films have always toyed with classic ideas of masculinity through intense relationships and homoerotic subtext. The figure of the cowboy is perfect for queer storylines in many ways: the sexual tension of masculine rivalries, the lifetime of isolation from society, not to mention the near absence of women in the Wild West.

However, it’s also a little *too* convenient. The hypermasculinity of the genre often reinforces harmful stereotypes, especially when the line between violence and intimacy is blurred. In “Brokeback Mountain,” a playful bout of wrestling between Jack and Ennis quickly becomes a real fistfight as neither man knows how to properly say goodbye after developing a sexual and emotional relationship. Similarly, “The Power of the Dog” juxtaposes scenes of bloody animal dissection with those of covert masturbation and nude gay magazines.

The constant secrecy of every gay relationship on the frontier is another tiring trope, and it only serves to mask the unmet desire. The gay cowboy can never truly come out. In his 1983 article “Masculinity as a Spectacle,” film historian Steve Neale argues that

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masculine movie genres are “founded upon a repressed homosexual voyeurism.” Because of patriarchy and heteronormativity, the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another man’s gaze. Instead, any homosexual desire must be explained by a more socially acceptable motivation — for example, the loneliness of the American frontier.

Worst of all, though, there’s never a happy ending for a gay cowboy. As Willie Nelson sings, “There’s always somebody who says what the others just whisper/ And mostly that someone’s the first one to get shot down dead.” Ultimately, Jack’s wish for his ashes to be scattered on Brokeback Mountain, where he first fell in love with Ennis, is refused by his father. Even in death, he remains in the closet. Similarly, Phil dies of anthrax in “The Power of the Dog,” infected by rawhide from his stepson Peter and full of unfulfilled desires for his old mentor, Bronco Henry.

Country music is not immune from the tragedy of the gay cowboy either, but it has a tendency towards optimism and confidence in the face of homophobia. While country singer Orville Peck obscures his true identity behind a cowboy hat and fringed mask, he has always been open about being gay. In his 2019 single “Dead of Night,” Peck croons about two lovers traveling through the Nevada desert: “See the boys as they walk on by.” His music videos are celebrations of LGBTQ+ pride, some even featuring stars from “RuPaul’s Drag Race.”

“There’s so many incredible figures in country that gay dudes would die for, because it’s pageantry, almost,” Peck said in an interview with Gay Times Magazine. “With country music, there’s a long legacy of camp-ness, storytelling and flamboyance with costumes, wigs and rhinestones. Just look at Dolly Parton, she’s practically a drag queen.”

Meanwhile, young rap-country star Lil Nas X doesn’t hide any part of his identity from the public eye. He was the first artist to come out as gay while at the same having a number-one record on the Billboard Hot 100. Lil Nas X both embraces and satirizes cowboy culture, even reinventing the country music genre. His 2021 single “Montero (Call Me By Your Name)” is at once a love letter to his former closeted self and a celebration of his open identity in the present. His lyrics are cheeky and full of dry gay wit as he sings about riding horses as well as cowboys.

Both artists have faced backlash on the internet for refusing to hide their queerness. But the gay cowboy isn’t just a mythical figure of the Wild West, nor is it a fetishized image of lassos and leather. They’re a real community of people living (and loving) on the land, and they deserve a happy ending.

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