



Episode 8, 2012: Tumbling Tumbleweeds

Gene: I'm Gene Newberry and I just love everything Western. I love everything Western so much that I've created my own little town. I have a stage stop, the mercantile store, the cattle company. And my favorite is the Longhorn Saloon. I got this up in the Gold Rush Country. And the reason I bought it was because it is Tumbling Tumbleweeds and has to do with the Sons of the Pioneers. Cowboy music it...it just fit right in with me. They just don't do songs like that anymore. The inscription says: "To Fred, This was the second song that I wrote in 1932. It has been both bad and good to me. Bob Nolan." What I would like to know about it, what's puzzled me, is why it says it was good and bad for Bob Nolan.

Eduardo: When I was a teen I used to work at a ranch. So I'm really looking forward to getting back into some familiar surroundings. Hey, there goes a Tumbleweed. Watch out!

Gene tells me that Tumbling Tumbleweeds, was written by Bob Nolan in 1932 and first recorded by the sons of the pioneers in 1934.

Eduardo: It's been sung by everyone from Elvis to the Supremes. Nolan's song was gene's favorite while growing up in Oklahoma.

Gene: So there it is!

Eduardo: Well, what can you tell me about that? When did you get that?

Gene: Well, I got that at a store that was going out of business up in the foothills, at Placerville.

Eduardo: Gene spotted it at a second hand store, and as a fan of Tumbling Tumbleweeds , he just had to have it—regardless of whether it was worth anything. There was no label, but he says inside the frame appears to be a sheet music cover and a 45 of the classic song.

Gene: It's my prized possession.

Eduardo: It says "To Fred:" Do you have any idea who Fred was?

Gene: Well, the only thing I can think, it might have been Fred Rose, because he's from Nashville and he had a lot to do with music.

Eduardo: Gene says Fred rose was a music producer and songwriter.

"To Fred. This was the second song I wrote in 1932. It has been both bad and good to me." Signed by Bob Nolan. What do you think he meant by both bad and good to me?

Gene: I don't know. Because that record sold so many copies, so many people recorded it, and Bob had to make a lot of money off of it. So if we could find out why it was bad for him, I would like to know.

Eduardo: The Canadian-born Nolan was no cowboy. When he wrote tumbling tumbleweeds he was bouncing around jobs, which included being a California lifeguard and a golf caddy.

But his gentle melodies and majestic lyricism captured the spirit of the west for a growing number of fans.

During the deepest part of The Depression he came together with another guy by the name of Leonard Slye. He's better known by his stage name Roy Rogers.

Bob Nolan [film]: "Roy, what chance do we have?"

Roy: "He said we were good enough for the radio, didn't he?"

Eduardo: Along with musician Tim Spencer, they became the sons of the pioneers in 1933, and hit it big on radio and in Hollywood.

[MUSIC/TUMBLING TUMBLEWEEDS from "Don't Fence Me In" film]: "I know when night has gone, that a new world's born at dawn..."

Eduardo: Their inverted harmonies and poetic approach to western music broke new ground. Tumbling Tumbleweeds was the sons' first big hit—it launched them. I'm not finding any clues in here about any downside of this iconic song.

So what we really need to do is we really need to find people who knew Bob that might be able to give us some more insight into his character. Let me see what I can find.

Gene's hunch was that the Fred who the note is addressed to was producer Fred Rose. He wrote an early song for the sons of the pioneers.

It looks like Fred Rose died in 1954.

The University of North Carolina seems to have a Bob Nolan lyric archive – but it's restricted. The History Detectives office is checking out the archive and trying to get in touch with Bob Nolan's family. In the meantime, they've tracked down Rusty Richards. Rusty joined the band after Bob retired.

Rusty [singing]: Drifting along with the Tumbling Tumblewee-eeds.

Eduardo: Fantastic. Fantastic.

Eduardo: He says this song has been both bad and good to me. What do you think he meant by that?

Rusty: I have no idea what he meant by being bad for him. Because the song was so good for him. Billboard Magazine called it one of the fifty most successful songs in American history. So it made a lot of money for Bob. That's good. The bad part is a little harder to answer. That's kind of up to Bob. My best guess is that Bob really didn't enjoy the limelight that much. He liked to be a private guy where nobody knew him out in the mountains. Maybe that's what Bob thought was—that it kept me from living the quiet life that I always wanted to live.

Eduardo: Rusty says Bob Nolan's lyrics were influenced by his philosophical side and earned him the nickname "Poet Laureate of the West."

Rusty: You know, I talk to him sometimes about religion and philosophy and stuff like that. He called himself a 'song poet.'

Eduardo: Bob's most famous song began as a poem.

Rusty: He wrote it originally as Tumbling Leaves. And if you think about the lyrics, the opening lines, "see them tumbling down---

Eduardo: Yeah.

Rusty: ---pledging their love to the ground."

Eduardo: That's right. Yeah.

Rusty: He's talking about leaves falling

Eduardo: Yeah. Yeah.

Rusty: And the recycling of life, and all that kind of thing.

Eduardo: An early publisher actually changed a verse to make it more commercial. Maybe that was the bad? Rusty isn't sure, but one look at the inscription and he knows that Fred wasn't Fred Rose.

Rusty: I think it's probably Fred Goodwin. Fred is a historian on the Sons of The Pioneers. He's done a lot of research work on it.

Eduardo: Rusty tells me Fred Goodwin also sells the sons of the pioneers' collectibles. Which means I know just who to call...my colleague Elyse Luray appraises entertainment memorabilia.

Elyse: I'm here in Denver and I'm going to a Western show. I'm meeting a man who I think might have made Gene's piece.

Elyse: Fred.

Fred: Elyse!

Elyse: Nice to meet you.

Fred: All right.

Elyse: Let me show you my photo. So this is you, right? You're the "To Fred?"

Fred: That's me. That's me.

Elyse: Fred explains he made a dozen of the framed collectibles to sell as reproductions and has one here...

This is our piece! Exactly like that.
Fred says he has the original sheet music at home.

Fred: And this is something that Bob Nolan autographed for me.

Elyse: Okay.

Fred: So I went to see him, out in California, in December, 1979. And I got to spend about two weeks with him, off and on for two weeks. And, he would tell me all these stories about different things.

Elyse: You know, the inscription says the good and the bad.

Wes: Fred says in the middle of the great depression bob and tumbling tumbleweeds helped enshrine the myth of the romantic American west.

Fred: You sit down, on your sofa, and listen to the Sons of The Pioneers, it's... beautiful. You could just fantasize yourself being a cowboy out on the range... herding cattle. I mean, all you gotta do is just listen to the Sons of The Pioneers music and just doze off.

[Music playing]

Elyse: but Fred says he does remember Bob talking about the bad.

Fred: He lost money on it. He was not paid right, by the publisher back then. They didn't pay him.

Eduardo: Just how much did Nolan lose on his most famous song, and exactly how did it happen? The office didn't have luck finding a family member to speak with, but they found perhaps the next best thing. Bob's friend, Lawrence Zwisohn.

You must be Lawrence.

Lawrence: Call me Larry. Nice to meet you, Eduardo. How are you?

Eduardo: Oh, it's so nice to meet you. Let's have a seat. I want to show you what I've been carrying around.

Lawrence: Oh look at that...and what an interesting...comment he's written there.

Eduardo: Yeah.

Lawrence: The song was an enormously successful song, ah, almost from the day it was first heard on radio. Unfortunately, not all that Bob was entitled to financially actually came his way.

Eduardo: Well how did this happen?

Larry tells me that soon after recording tumbling tumbleweeds, bob sold the publishing rights to sunset music—it was standard practice at the time. But as the song became more popular, the rights continued to change hands. In 1946, a new company entered the picture...

Lawrence: Williamson Music, which was the company owned by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein.

Eduardo: Whoa!

Lawrence: Yes.

Lawrence: One thing that they were known for, to many people, was their integrity. Unfortunately, when it came to their company paying out the royalties to Bob Nolan, some of that integrity somehow didn't transfer to uh the people making the payments.

Eduardo: Eventually, Bob took Williamson music to court to recover the money he was owed, and to win back the rights to his song.

Lawrence: This is the uh transcript from the court case that Bob had to bring in the 1960s. He won. The publisher, uh, appealed the case. They lost once again. They lost soundly each time. They didn't have a leg to stand on. He had been underpaid.

Eduardo: But even then, the law only allowed bob to recover seven years worth of lost income. He was owed much more.

A good twenty, twenty-five years of lost revenue.

Lawrence: Easily. Easily.

Eduardo: Yeah. Well, give me a sense of the scale then, of...what we're talking about.

Lawrence: It would be in the six figures.

Eduardo: Not only that, he could not get back his song. Williamson kept tumbling tumbleweeds. But then Larry tells me something I didn't expect...

Eduardo: Gene, I've got to tell you it's been a fun investigation. Um and it's been a very different kind of investigation, too. I tell Gene about Bob Nolan going to court.

Gene: This document is where he was trying to sue for his royalties.

Eduardo: Yes, for his royalties. Yeah.

Gene: For those...thirty years that he didn't get it.

Eduardo: Yeah. Yeah. That's right. And, in fact, when he died he didn't even own the rights to his own song.

But then things took one final twist.

Lawrence: So in 1990, Bob's first song, Tumbling Tumbleweeds, was coming up for its, uh, renewal, for its extension.

Eduardo: Larry says copyright laws had changed since Bob's nineteen sixties courtcase.

Lawrence: Ever since Bob had passed on, I had stayed in touch with his widow and I kept encouraging her to...get the song back so she decided she was gonna take her song back. Which she did. And Bob's grandson, uh, is...is now the holder of the copyrights.

Eduardo: It sounds like you were a very good friend to Bob Nolan, even after his passing.

Lawrence: Eduardo, that's nice of you to say that. I have such enormous regard for Bob. And his music has meant so much to me. It's the least I could do.

Gene: And all this time I was saying how much money he made off of that song. But he didn't then. Alright.

Eduardo: Here's to Bob.

Gene: Here's to Bob. Ahhh.

Eduardo: Smooth.

Gene: Good.