



The Painted West, Sung Up

Dealing with the muse and the magic. Words & paintings by Tom Russell.

"As a painter active today, I am generally unknown. I live remote from groups, from associations, from schools, from colonies, even from any colleague—totally apart from the latest movement, any recent trend, any current fashion, any market stir in what is termed 'The Art World,' here or abroad."—Tom Lea, "The Southwest: It's Where I Live"

1971 The renowned Native American actor Chief Dan George is sitting directly in front of me in a skid row honky-tonk in Vancouver. Dan George co-starred in "Little Big Man" in 1970 and was nominated for an Academy Award. I'm onstage, singing his request, "The Ballad of Ira Hayes," by Peter La Farge. The song was made famous by Johnny Cash. It's a song about a Pima Indian, the Marine who helps raise the flag on Iwo Jima. Ira Hayes returns home to Arizona to die drunk and unknown. A truthful protest song about how we often neglect our veterans.

Back then Chief Dan George came into the club twice a week and requested "Ira Hayes." He'd listen deeply to the song, his eyes would water, and then he'd nod his thanks, and walk out onto East Hastings Street, one of the most savage skid row streets in North America.

My band was called The Mule Train. "Skid Row's Finest Band," so it said on the club marquee. We played "country and western," as they called it back then, six nights per week, eight hours a night.

Paying our dues.

Remember when *western* was part of *country*? On any given night I could sing Marty Robbins' "El Paso," or the traditional "The Streets of Laredo," and also mix in Johnny Cash, George Jones, Merle Haggard, Creedence Clearwater, The Rolling Stones—and it was an edgy cowboy stew of classic songs. The drunks would dance to anything.

The first songs I attempted to write, and got recognition for, were western—about the Native American scene I witnessed out on the mean streets. I was learning my singer-songwriter *chops* in these dives, and western music was at the heart of it. Story songs.

Prior to Vancouver I was teaching criminology in Nigeria for a year during the Biafran War (*Western* Nigeria!) and I wanted to write songs. Academia bored me. I had my 1946 Martin D-18 guitar with me and I hung out with Nigerian *juju* musicians. I returned to America, drifted up to visit friends in Vancouver, and started at the very bottom in those same dive bars Ian Tyson came out of 10 or 15 years before me.

In Los Angeles, in the 1950s, I was raised on a variety of music: Frank Sinatra, Broadway musicals, classical, folk, and cowboy songs. My brother Pat mounted up at age 14 and never got off his horse. He left his guitar behind. He became a bull rider, steer wrestler, and disappeared into the Sierra Nevada one summer to work as a packer. The muleteers and cowboys were required to sing and recite cowboy lore to entertain the dudes, and Pat returned with a



horde of folk material. I was all ears.

In 1978, I wrote the *corrido* in English, “Gallo del Cielo.” This seven-minute saga about a fighting rooster was influenced by Marty Robbins’ “El Paso” and notes I’d made from a trip to the Copper Canyon in Mexico in 1975. I’d heard stories of Pancho Villa threatening ranchers that if he could not have their daughters he’d take their land. He had a lot of wives. This seeped into the song.

Western music led me into painting, though it took awhile to reach for the brush. My grandmother, Malloy, was a fine painter. When I was very young she took me along to her painting classes in L.A., where a bunch of women chatted, sang, and painted flow-

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ers and Indians and such. She gave me her painting of Sitting Bull, and also the triumphant Muhammad Ali standing over the fallen Sonny Liston. These two paintings now hang in our private bar.

In 2003 I had moved to El Paso, to a remote adobe on the edge of town. The former occupant was a painter and I found discarded canvases in her studio and tubes of acrylic paint. I put the guitar down one afternoon and went in and painted a horse that looked more like a dog. I was off and running. They called me a folk artist early on and a gallery in Austin began to sell my stuff.

I also got to meet the great western artist and writer Tom Lea just before he died. He had a vast knowledge of the West—its terrain, history, livestock—especially the history of fighting bulls in America. He wrote “The Brave Bulls” and “The Wonderful Country,” which was made into a film starring Robert Mitchum. Tom encouraged me.

Songwriting and painting melt together. In both pursuits you deal with *the muse, the magic*. Stories and feelings that summon up the landscape and characters. Those few moments when you step out of time and *art* comes into focus. It’s a dance. You paint or write songs and the good ones last forever. Some you paint over. You start again.

My biggest influence as a songwriter has been Ian Tyson. He revitalized western music and he writes like a painter. In fact, Ian was trained as a graphic artist in the 1950s and he can paint damn good realistic western art, but he’s too hard on himself and hasn’t pursued it. Tyson writes painterly lyrics, like this verse from “Stories He’d Tell.” The scene is the early 1950s and Ian is sitting by a lake with his father:

*All along the shoreline, Arbutus trees do grow
And watching from their red limbs, kingfishers come and go
And their secrets of hidden coves, as they called cross the bay
Late in the afternoon, on salt rocks where we lay
And the water turned to gold, and the day was through
Going home he’s asked me then what it was I hoped to do...*

I studied those Tyson lyrics like Hemingway studied Cézanne in Paris in the 1920s. Hemingway tried to *write* like Cézanne *Painted*.

A few months ago I played a concert at the Booth Western Art Museum in Cartersville, Ga., one of the largest western art collec-



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Ian Tyson, Tom Russell’s biggest influence. “He revitalized western music,” Tom says, “and he writes like a painter.” ► The Strawberry Roan. ► Chief Dan George on East Hastings Street in Vancouver, Canada, listening to “The Ballad of Ira Hayes” by Peter La Farge. ► Coyote.



tions in the world. We were given a tour, and my wife, Nadine, and I stood beneath a giant painting by Harry Jackson titled “The Stampede.” Jackson wove a curious artistic journey through life. He was a combat artist in the Marines, a cowboy singer for a spell, an *abstract expressionist* and friend of Jackson Pollock, then a Western *realist*



painter, and finally ended up as a sculptor in Italy.

I was on a train with Ian Tyson and Ramblin' Jack Elliott years ago and they began talking about Harry Jackson. He was one of the “cowboys” who arrived in Greenwich Village in the late 1950s. In 1962 on any magic night you might have Harry Jackson, Ian Tyson, Ramblin' Jack, and bronc-rider, songwriter Peter La Farge sitting at a bar on Bleecker Street. Maybe Bob Dylan would drop by. Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning were hanging out a few blocks away in the Cedar Tavern.

That's where my heart lies, back in the early days of the folk music renaissance in Greenwich Village with these cowboys, songwriters, and painters. I showed up there 20 years too late. My new record “Folk Hotel” has a book that features my paintings of The Village and folksingers, and stories of Harry Jackson, Ramblin' Jack, Bob Dylan, and others. They all reside in the folk hotel in my mind, and I attempt to write and paint it up.

We now live part time in Santa Fe, and part time in a farm town in Switzerland. *Western Switzerland*. I see workhorses and cattle from my window. We don't own a television or read newspapers. Art is the news. In a nod to Tom Lea I figure it's best to live “remote” and bring your songs and canvases to town on occasion. Share your art, then



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: James Joyce and Ramblin' Jack. ► *Evening Offering*. ► *Gallo del Cielo*. ► *Self-portrait, Red Bandana*. ► *Cubist Guitar*. ► *Santa Fe*. ► *Simmental Calf*.

catch the next train out. Now I have paintings in a dozen galleries around the world and in the El Paso Museum of Art, which also houses Tom Lea's paintings. I also tour the folk clubs of the world and sing my songs. It's a good life.

I'll leave you with this: I was down and out in New York in 1981, driving a taxi. Late one night I picked up Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter, who has also written with Bob Dylan. I sang Robert my western saga “Gallo del Cielo” and he demanded a tape of it, then hired me a month later to open shows for him in The Village. I was back in the music business.

Western songs and art have saved my life. ■

For more information on Tom Russell, check www.tomrussell.com, www.tomrussellart.com, www.rainbowman.com and for the Folk Hotel Film go to <https://youtu.be/himY3jb3Ipg>.