

I'll Never Leave These Old Horses

The ballad of Ian Tyson. By Tom Russell

*It's ten below zero,
he lives forty miles outside of town
On a ranch with three old longhorns,
about to give up the ghost and lay down
He's got five head of horses,
not one of 'em much younger than ten
He says, "If I sold off and left 'em,
I wouldn't be much of a man..."*

—“I'll Never Leave These Old Horses”
by Tom Russell

A few years ago my wife and I lived in New Mexico before we moved to Texas. In Santa Fe we'd built an art studio and added a little private bar in the shape of a Zuni Indian tower, with high windows that allowed the mystical sundown to drift in over the tequila bottles. In the winter of 2016 Ian Tyson came down for a visit.

The day he arrived it was a tolerable 60°F in Santa Fe and Ian frowned and remarked it was 10 below zero up on his ranch in Alberta. We asked him why in the hell, at age 83, he didn't sell the place up there and move on down to New Mexico, get a few acres in a warmer terrain. Ian answered, “I can't leave those old horses or longhorns.” Something Charlie Goodnight might have said.

A week later I wrote the song about Ian, “I'll Never Leave These Old Horses.” It's on the record “Folk Hotel.”

What can you say about Ian Tyson, this legendary and gifted singer/songwriter, that has not been said, inferred, lied about, overly poeticized, carved down, magnified, cowboy'd all to hell, and on and on? In Ian's own words, he's a conundrum. A riddle in a cowboy hat. Who really knew Hank Williams?

Ian has been my greatest influence as a singer/songwriter and I've sorta known him for almost 50 years. *Más o menos*. I have sheer

admiration for his art and journey. And for that matchless song catalogue.

I was the kid in the front row in the 1960s at every Ian and Sylvia show that rolled through California. Years later, I ended up co-writing songs with both Ian and Sylvia—my heroes—including at least 10 with Ian. Among these are: “Navajo Rug,” “Claude Dallas,” “The Rose of the San Joaquin,” “The Banks of the Musselshell,” “Ross Knox,” and “When the Wolves No Longer Sing.”

He's still up there on his ranch in Alberta as I write this, walking down that gravel road every morning to play his guitar and contemplate songs. He told me recently the guitar is the center of his universe. And those old horses.

Here's the second verse to the song I wrote for him:

*Every morning past coffee he walks up
that long gravel road
To a stone house where his guitar sits,
waiting for stories to be told
And he stares out the window
at a wild winter running her courses
He says: "I'll bet it's warm down in
Santa Fe,
but I'll never leave these old horses..."*

Much of what I'd say about Ian is in this song. If you've been on the road with him, from Nevada to Switzerland and back, and if you've sat across from him, writing songs in a Rocky Mountain cabin, you'd have to damn well surmise that this man, this artist, is cut from a Shakespearean mold.

I'll conjure a few short vignettes on Ian. If you combine these with the old horse song you might arrive at a few fresh angles on the artist, human being, and cowboy.

Vignette #1: It's 1963. Bob Dylan walks

into the Kettle of Fish in Greenwich Village, N.Y., and bums a cigarette off Ian. Dylan grabs a guitar and sings his new song, “Blowin' in the Wind.” Ian says, “Hell, I can do that,” and goes back to the Earle Hotel and writes “Four Strong Winds,” voted the most popular song ever written by a Canadian. One of the greatest folk songs of all time. The first song Tyson ever wrote!

Vignette #2: It's 1985 and I'm living in a boarded-up storefront in Brooklyn, scratching out a living with my country band. Ian is appearing in town and he takes a taxi over to my bunker from Manhattan. We sit there and swap stories and drink red wine, and he sings “The Castration of the Strawberry Roan.” I talk about a few lyrics I have for a song about a guy and a gal making love on a Navajo rug. I slip the lyrics into his guitar case. We're three-quarters drunk now. We call him a cab back to the city. Two days later he finishes the song in a Super 8 Motel in Dallas. It's a number-one country song in Canada the next year. It's been covered 100 times.

Vignette #3: We're up in his isolated writing cabin in the Rockies working on a few song ideas, but we're stumped. Ian says: “Let's clear our heads and take a hike up the mountain. Tell me a few stories about your brother, Pat. That's always good for a song.”

My brother Pat, legendary California horseman, was having a rough ride with a few women back then, and Ian decided to write Pat a song in the form of a letter. It starts: “Friend, I'm writin' you this letter...and it's damn sure overdue...” The song is “Cowboy Pride,” a cowboy hit for Ian and also for Michael Martin Murphey.

That night he leaves me there with a bottle of wine and Teddy Blue Abbott's book, “We Pointed Them North,” and I scribble lyric ideas. The next day we co-write “The Banks of the Musselshell.” That night Ian toasts me, “Russell, you're the king of the whore-and-



knife ballads.”

Vignette #4: Ian was our best man in Elko 12 years ago when I married Nadine. Ian sang “What Does She See (in this Old Cowboy)?” and Ramblin’ Jack Elliott sang “Rake and a Ramblin’ Boy.” A folkloric cowboy wedding!

Ian at that time was having love-affair problems as his second marriage was fading away. Here’s the chorus in my song about him:

*Love comes and it goes, boys, it rocks
and it rolls
And it spins you around and around*

*When you reach the sad edge of love,
sometimes you jump off
And build new wings on your way
back down*

*After 84 years, kid, it’s too late
to second-guess your choices*

*That’s the way it played out,
Me, I’ll never leave these old horses.*

Last vignette: I was performing in Calgary several months ago to a sold-out crowd. I called Ian. He says he might not make it into

Ian, left, and Tom in David Gahr’s studio in Brooklyn, 1987. “We were on our way to Switzerland for a festival,” Tom says. “Gahr was a famous photographer of musicians—including Bob Dylan. Gahr is passed on now. He got us to laugh by saying: ‘Come on boys, what if Emmylou Harris was sitting on your lap!’ Of course we smiled. May have been some wine involved.” Ian called Tom, “The king of the whore-and-knife ballads.”

town—he’s 40 miles out. He’s been under the weather. I open my show with a medley that includes his classic, “Summer Wages.”

Then I hear the audience gasping and looking over to my right. Ian has stumbled in from the back alley parking lot, confused as to



Tom and Ian onstage in Calgary, Alberta, 40 miles from Ian's outfit. BELOW: The Nevada wedding of Nadine and Tom, where Rambling Jack Elliott sang "Rake and a Ramblin' Boy" and best man Ian Tyson sang "What Does She See (in this Old Cowboy)?"



whether he's in the right joint. In fact, he's now onstage with me four feet away. Trying to find his bearings. Peering out at the spotlights and the audience. The soundman shoves a microphone in front of him and we finish out the song together and later do "Navajo Rug" to a two-minute standing ovation.

That night he gives me his highest compliment and tells the crowd: "Russell's show blew me away. They're never gonna duplicate writers like Russell and me."

I think the old man finally be-knighted me. I worked 50 years for that. It's been a great ride so far, and I've learned plenty from the master.

As I was finishing this essay I called him. It's Feb. 15, 2020. "Is this *El Viejo*?" I say. I call him that—the old man. "The wise old man." I've called him that for years.

"Heh, man," he growls. "You back in Texas? Gonna come down there one of these days."

"How are those old horses?"

"Those old horses are doing better than I

am. There's a blizzard outside. It's blowin' like a son of a bitch out there. My wrists hurt. But I'm still playing guitar every day."

He always says that I'm a lucky son of a bitch to have a wife like Nadine. I agree. Nadine and I surmise that Ian is still hanging on because he's up there fighting the northern elements, surrounded by the creatures he loves—those old horses, three longhorns, the odd grizzly wandering through, the hawks circling above. A cowboy far better off up in his wild country than on a retirement rancho in New Mexico.

Here's the last verse to the song:

*Now that Santa Fe sundown
sheds a warm, red, mystical light
And he's froze to the bone in Alberta,
but he won't quit the fight
One old rough-legged hawk
circles lower
and the old man hears voices
He says, "I may be crazy as hell, kid,
but I'll never leave these old horses."*

Amen. ■

Go to www.tomrussell.com to check Tom's records, paintings and new book of art, "The Ballad of Western Expressionism."