

Riding the Cowboy Poetry Trail

Attempting to be “atmosphere.” By Bill Jones

Baxter Black, esteemed cowboy poet, entertainer and bard to the agriculture masses, once remarked that cowboy poetry is “somewhere between ‘good taste’ and ‘throwing up in your hat.’” How, may I ask, could anyone not like poetry with that kind of criteria? Personally, I got involved in the cowboy poetry deal kind of by accident. Like running out of gas. It is not anything you plan on, but is just one of those unfortunate things that happen. At one time I was wrangling dudes (Admittedly the lowest form of cowboyin’—in 1914 Gail Gardner’s poem “The Dude Wrangler” ends with: “But when a feller turns dude wrangler, He ain’t no good no more at all.”) and I began reciting some of the old classic cowboy poems around the fire. Like the ill-fated dude wrangler in the poem, I couldn’t quit it if I tried....

Later, I wrote some of my own poems—most of which were in the “throwin’ up in your hat” class. Later, I got a little better and started getting invites here and there all around the country. (I was extremely popular at fertilizer conventions. I don’t know why.) Usually they paid for gas, a meal or two, and let me peddle the couple of books I cobbled together. Sometimes I broke even, other times I made a little money. I almost always had a good time.

One fall I get a phone call from a guy in Aspen, Colo. Aspen, you may recall, is the place rich people believe they go when they die. He is the manager of a big exclusive hotel there. I won’t tell you the name, but I suspect the owner is the same guy who invented those round little crackers served at parties. Figure it out. This next part is true—although I know some of you will think I am making this whole thing up. Well, I *ain’t* making it up.

“Bill” the manager says, “we are having a little western-theme cocktail party next week and would like you to be with us.”

“Should I do a few cowboy poems, a story or two?” I ask.

“No,” he says, “that will not be necessary.”

“Well,” I counter, “I know four cowboy tunes with my guitar and two harmonica songs, would that be okay?”

“That will not be required either, Bill. Really, we are hosting a cocktail party for a

bunch of New York stockbrokers and we want you to just stand around and be atmosphere.”

I have never been “atmosphere” before, but it doesn’t sound like it would be too hard. Nevertheless, I just don’t feel comfortable with the whole thing. “Thanks, sir, for the invitation, but maybe some other time.”

“Did I mention we pay \$1,000 plus expenses?” I almost choke on my Dr. Pepper.

“What time should I be there?” (I already said you would think I was making this up. This was over 30 years ago when \$1,000 was, well, \$1,000.)

At the reception desk of the Same Name

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As A Cracker Hotel the nice little clerk gal wants to see my credit card. I explain to her that I don’t have a credit card. In fact, I don’t even have a real job. Plus, I don’t see why you need a credit card in the first place—everything is paid for by the Same Name As A Cracker Hotel. The credit card, she politely explains, is for “incidentals.” I politely explain that I never do anything “incidentally. Everything I do, at least at my age, is pretty much done on purpose.” She makes an exception.

I like women. Married one over 42 years ago, as a matter of fact. Like this one. But this nice little receptionist gal does not shave her armpits and I find that a tad distracting. She has the most hairy armpits of any woman I have ever seen—in my whole life. At first glance I mistakenly think she has Buckwheat in a headlock.... (Politically incorrect? Still funny? Mildly humorous? Don’t care? Will

never read my column again?)

The Same Name As A Cracker Hotel manager floats over and introduces himself. Super nice guy. Very stylishly dressed, I might add. Brando—that is his name—gives me a tour of the hotel. I suspect Brando may be engaged in an “alternative lifestyle,” not that I give a fat rodent’s hindquarters. I don’t care. Neither should you. The only person’s romantic life I have any interest in is...my own. Unfortunately, I am becoming less and less interested in that one, too. By the way, those of you who think this is some sort of subtle “slur”—I will have you know I checked with all my gay friends. He said it was fine.

Brando shows me a beautiful old antique table in the lobby. Prettiest dern table I ever saw. “That table,” Brando announces proudly, “goes back to Louis the 14th!” I tell my new friend Brando not to worry about it. I have a refrigerator at home that goes back to Sears on the 15th.

It is only early afternoon and I thought I would have a beer in the hotel saloon. Once inside I find out it isn’t a saloon at all, but a “salon.” A fancy haircut joint. They work me in as a walk-in. Somewhat of a special occasion for me: a walk-in and atmosphere, both the very same day.

Did I want the “works”? Shampoo, cut, style and a manicure? Of course! Especially since I am sending the bill over to the Same Name As A Cracker Hotel. Besides, I never had a manicure before. The manicurist is a pretty little 20-something young woman who is cute as a baby mule. She sits me down at a little table and commences to work on my fingernails. Kind of like a farrier trimming hooves. Pretty soon she gets all scrunched around and her little knee inadvertently gets between my two knees.

“Sir,” she says, looking up sweetly, “do you want your cuticles pushed back?”

You are going to have to write this next line yourself. I know what you are thinking. Get your mind out of the gutter. ■

Bill Jones was successful as “atmosphere” at the cocktail party, drank two glasses of expensive white wine, sold two cowboy poetry books and listened to a lot of discussions about things he knows nothing about. (They were fresh out of Coors Light.) He is a regular contributor to RANGE. He says it is cheaper than psychotherapy and generates a lot of interesting mail. A Vietnam veteran, his memoir, “Body Burning Detail,” is available through RANGE, with all proceeds benefitting the Range Conservation Foundation. Incidentally, he was never invited back to the Ritz Hotel.