

Pass Me the Gun, Billy

The Russell brothers...dealers in livestock and song. By Tom Russell

Heard you left the Chimeneas
And that makes me kind of sad
She's a great old Spanish Land Grant
And you're the best she ever had...

—“Cowboy Pride” by Ian Tyson

When he was 16 years old my brother Pat built a bucking barrel in the backyard of our Inglewood, Calif., home, a 40-gallon oil drum suspended on ropes between four telephone poles. The rig was powered by heavy-gauge garage-door springs tied to the end of the ropes. Pat was gearing up for riding real bulls in weekend rodeos on film ranches in the San Fernando Valley. He'd recruit neighborhood boys, instruct them in the ways of a bull rope, and tell them they needed a gate-opening password—like “Let's dance!” or “Ride a bull!” or “Outside!”—famous last words before Pat launched them into outer space.

Bull-riding dreams faded fast as the kid flew over chicken coops and doghouses, landing facedown in Mrs. Zeelsdorf's manure pile. But nobody could buck my brother off that damn oil drum. He was set for life. Centered. He went on to the real thing, and he's still in the rodeo game.

Next Pat ran off to the Sierra Nevada, still in his teens, and worked as a mule packer for a summer in Mineral King. One of his mentors was an old Arkansas mule man named Rayburn Crane. I wrote one of my first songs about him. “Rayburn Crane he rode these mountains, like the streams he rode 'em through...” Pat returned with dozens of old cowboy songs, Irish folk songs, and poems he'd learned up in the wilderness. Everyone was required to sing or recite something around the mountain campfires. We've been swapping songs ever since.

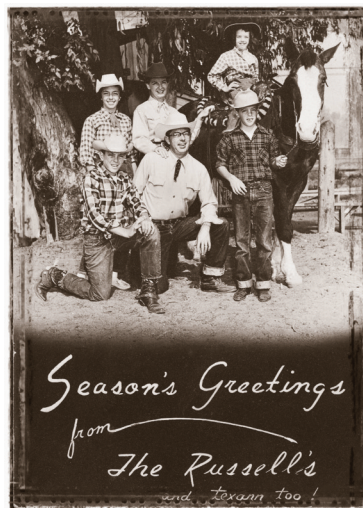
Los Angeles, believe it or not, was cowboy country. My brother is still obsessed with the sheer volume of horses that have come through Los Angeles in the last two or three hundred years. We grew up on the



PHOTOS COURTESY TOM AND PAT RUSSELL



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Tom stands next to brother Pat. ▶ Andy Warhol, George Jones, and Tom, somewhere in the East in 1981. ▶ Russell Christmas card in 1956. Top row: Nan Russell, mother Marge and Mary Clare on Texanne (Texas cow horse bought at the L.A. Horse and Mule Auction). Bottom row: Pat, father A. Charles Russell and Tom (Hotwalker). ▶ Pat, chomping at the bit to ride.



backside of Hollywood Park Racetrack, where my dad played poker with William Boyd (aka Hopalong Cassidy) and dabbled in the buying and selling of racehorses. It was in my father's blood. His father had traded horses in Iowa.

Horses in L.A.? There was the western movie business, of course, and all that went with it—including the bars along the backside of Griffith Park, where stuntmen, movie extras, rodeo cowboys, and livestock contractors drank, fought, and enacted daily business. Then there was the L.A. Horse and Mule Auction where we bought our pleasure horses—most of them cowponies that came from Texas via train.

I'll let my brother tell about the Los Angeles auction scene back in the '50s. He has a better slant on the lingo.

Here's Pat:

“In L.A., there was a horse auction twice a week. They had a trader sale on Wednesday afternoon. Bob Scott, who was half-Indian and half-black, rode the horses through the ring. They'd come in by the hundreds. He'd never seen 'em before, but could make 'em do anything.

“He worked with a lot of the movie horses. He could make a horse lay down and roll over. With a halter rope. He had the knack. And a guy named Red Foster was trying to start the American Model Quarter Horse

Association, and he'd ship horses from New Mexico and Arizona.

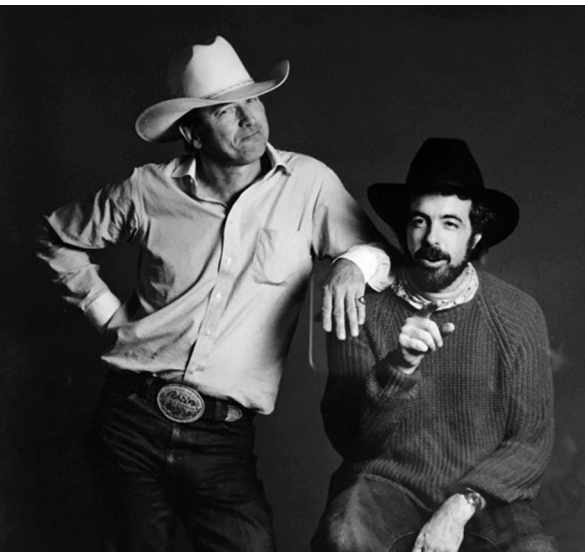
“The trader's sale was just for horse traders. There'd be three or four hundred horses in there and they wrote out the horses' names and held them up. They'd shave their tails down each side so their butts would look bigger and their neck would look stouter.

“And a lot of those horses had their manes rubbed out, and they'd sell the mane and tail hair. They'd keep the horsehair separate. Load

after load of it. The horses would come off the trains and trucks, and also carloads of hair. The hair was sold to guys who would use junk hair in furniture. Ottomans and cushions. And the rest would go to making hair ropes.”

Brother Pat went from bull riding to bareback horses. He learned his trade at the auction. Here’s Pat again:

“Behind the L.A. Horse and Mule Auction on Bandini Road was Snowdon Brothers. A horse killin’ plant. They’d kill like 80 to 500



FROM TOP: Ian Tyson and Tom in 1987. Times were good. ► Toddler Tom, always looking up to hot-rodder Pat.

horses a day. For dog food. And Alvin Deal and I would go over to the horse killin’ plant when the sale was going on back at the auction. We’d get these killer horses in the alley, and we’d rope one, put a bareback riggin’ on ’em, and that’s where we’d practice. And we’d have to catch him to get our riggin’ off.

“Over in the hay barns, behind the auction, there was always a crap game going on. One Friday night they shot a guy.”

There’s your cowboy movie. All I have to do for new cowboy song material is hang around brother for a day or two, and then reach for the rhymes.

In that regard, Ian Tyson and I were working on songs one afternoon in a remote cabin in the Canadian Rockies. We went for a hike to clear our heads and Ian stopped, turned to me, and said: “What’s up with your brother? He’s always good for some colorful material.”

So I told the story of one of my brother’s latest romantic escapades and his getting kicked off the Chimeneas Ranch in Cuyama, Calif., for stating, in an *LA Times* story, some-

thing to the effect that a cowboy could do anything he damn well wanted—including going into town to drink, run wild, and chase the ladies. You get the drift.

The corporate owner of the ranch read the article and took offense. Political correctness reared its wimpy skull. Based on this, Tyson wrote the song “Cowboy Pride,” which was a semihit for Ian, as well as Michael Martin Murphey. We also later wrote one called “Heartaches Are Stealin’,” recorded by Ian, and recently by Mike Beck. My brother’s identity was thinly veiled in both songs. Some relatives weren’t thrilled.

With Pat it was always the horses. He’s gone on to become one of the most respected California horsemen and a major livestock provider for rodeos and cutting-horse events. He’s on the backside. Always horseback. I became the songwriter. I stole his Tijuana gut-string guitar when I was 14, and I listened to his great record collection: Johnny Cash, Marty Robbins, Tex Ritter, the music of the bullring...all of it. A music education. To this day he’s deep into old Irish folk songs and Mexican Ranchera music by folks like Vicente



Fernandez. These are the musical roots of what I later put into melodies and lyrics. Songs like “Gallo del Cielo” and “The Sky Above, The Mud Below.”

If I had time here I could tell a few dozen brotherly “western action” stories—maybe about the time my brother, Billy Mello, and I were in Pat’s truck chasing cattle poachers down an isolated back road near San Luis Obispo at 80 miles an hour. In front of us

was a lowered Mercury filled with guys who appeared as if they’d stepped out of the film “Deliverance.” Inbred-looking weasels.

When they got to an isolated spot they pulled their car over. We pulled over behind. Two of ’em stepped out and faced us with shotguns raised.

My brother yells at Billy Mello, “Pass me the gun, Billy!”

Billy frowns. “Pat...we ain’t got no gun!”

That last phrase still rings in my ears. I dove for the floor, bashing my head into the radio. I’ll leave the rest of the story for now. Ask Pat or Billy next time they ride through your territory.

It’s always been colorful. And western. Horses, cows, guns, women, songs. My brother Pat is of a different era. Think Slim Pickens, Ben Johnson, or the song “Tyin’ a Knot in the Devil’s Tail.” I’m sure Pat would have roped the devil’s hind feet and cut off the bastard’s horns. But these are now tepid times, eh? We get away with what we can. He rides ’em. I write about ’em. We both love a good song.

The Russell brothers, dealers in livestock and tall tales. We came out of L.A. and the backside of the track, the horse auctions, slaughterhouses, and those San Fernando Valley film ranches. And Pat’s still murmuring about the sheer number of horses that came across the irrigated desert.

A while back I flew into Los Angeles, directly over the old Hollywood Park Race-track, near where we grew up. The bulldozers were demolishing the last portion of the grandstand. The old stables were gone. They can tear it all down, sir, but they can’t bulldoze our memories.

Pass me the guitar. Tonight we ride! ■

Singer/songwriter/painter/essayist Tom Russell has recorded 35 highly acclaimed records and published five books. His songs have been recorded by Johnny Cash, Doug Sahm, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, Ian Tyson, Iris Dement, Joe Ely, and a hundred others. In 2015, he released a 52-track “folk opera” on the West, “The Rose of Roscræ,” which was deemed maybe the most important Americana record of all time by UK Folk and hailed in Top Ten lists in three dozen publications, including the *Los Angeles Times*. He appeared on “The Late Show With David Letterman” five times. In 2015, he won the top ASCAP award for music journalism. Contact: www.tomrussell.com, www.tomrussellart.com, and www.fronterarecords.com.