

Tonight We Ride

The ballad of J.P.S. Brown. Words & art by Tom Russell.

"I write about cowboys because I think people should know the real animals, men, and women who make their living with horses and cattle, and the artful life they create for themselves, with no audience, no background music and no ticket sale."

—J.P.S. BROWN'S "INTRODUCTION: THE OUTFIT"

There was a pot of beans waiting for us on Joe Brown's kitchen stove down in southern Arizona. We were driving west from El Paso, across the back roads of New Mexico, aiming for Patagonia and an afternoon with the cowboy legend and novelist J.P.S. Brown. Full name: Joseph Paul Summers Brown. We'd been exchanging letters for a year, Joe and I.

I was traveling with my wife, Nadine. We

stopped in Columbus, N.M., for gas. This was the town Pancho Villa raided back in 1916 and the U.S. Army sent Black Jack Pershing after Pancho, chasing him deep into Mexico. He got away.

Soon we drove on into Arizona, past the canyon where Geronimo surrendered. Driving through western history. Driving to meet a novelist who had an untamed-cowboy past of his own. *Tonight we ride, boys.*

I remarked to my wife that this author, Joe Brown, was a character who could have ridden with Villa, Pershing, Geronimo, or any number of iconic western characters. He could ride right into a number of my songs. Joe was the man Lee Marvin called "the wildest son of a bitch I've ever met." Lee Marvin would have known.

If I were to attempt a ballad or *corrido* about J.P.S. Brown it might run to 100 verses. His outrageous history, his deep cowboy knowledge, his novels, and the true gen from the letters we'd exchanged. Soon we'd meet in the flesh.

Joe was a fifth-generation cattlemen whose father was half-Irish and half-Choctaw, and the old man was "wild as a wolf" according to Joe. Joe's mother was part Irish, Cherokee, and French Basque.

After a cowboy childhood in Nogales, Ariz., Joe graduated from Notre Dame University and served in the Marine Corps in Japan. He coached the Marine boxing team. He boxed pro in Mexico and broke his hand 17 times. He sparred with Rocky Marciano. He ran horses from Mexico into Texas. He smuggled whiskey.

Later Joe was a movie wrangler and stuntman and knew Slim Pickens, Casey Tibbs, Paul Newman, Lee Marvin, and Steve McQueen. It goes on and on. I was filling my wife in as we drove towards Patagonia.

Meeting the Maestro

Friend Tom:

I'm proud of the land and people I chose to record, so I ain't sorry about anything... I went all out and it is what it is. Remember, I'll always keep coffee and a pot of beans hot for you and your lady.

Hold fast, Joe

—LETTER, J.P.S. BROWN TO TOM, 2014

We drove into town and called Joe from the local phone booth, tucked next to the post office. In a few minutes a pickup truck circled into the parking lot and out stepped Joe Brown. He walked up to our truck window, ducked down, looked in and tipped his hat to Nadine. Then he reared back and smiled and said to follow his truck and he'd lead us to his house.

That first impression of Joe? I could sense the mixed Indian blood and felt a kinship with that curved, Irish-whiskey grin. Descriptions are a tough call. That mysterious *thing* that captures a person's soul in a rhyme, or a flash of paint. That raised eyebrow. A broken nose. The all-knowing grin. A truth beyond the photo on the back of a novel.

We arrived at his house on the hill, met up with his horse and dog, and he led us into the kitchen. Joe lived alone now; his wife had passed on a few years back.

There was the promised pot of beans on the stove and the Notre Dame football game



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was playing on the television in the front room. The volume was turned off as the players moved up and down the field. Maybe a field Joe had once played on.

Joe eventually showed us the study where he wrote every afternoon. There was a short stack of his books on the shelf which he signed to us. He always wrote "Hold fast" before he signed his name.

Over the course of an afternoon Joe spelled out more of his life. I shared anecdotes of the music trail and writing cowboy songs with folks like Ian Tyson.

Joe told us he now wrote in the afternoon when, as Hemingway stated, a writer "faces eternity or the lack of it every day." Joe said, "I sit down with three fingers of Bourbon and write two hours or 1,000 words every afternoon at four."

He added as he peered out towards the corral where his lone horse stood: "I don't cowboy or wrangle much anymore. I sure as hell wish I could."

It was a damn fine afternoon. But Nadine and I had to make it to my concert in Tucson and Joe needed to write, so we made our farewells and carted the stack of treasured novels to our truck.

The J.P.S. Brown Novels/ The True Gen

"The Outfit" is the best contemporary western novel yet written.—Ian Tyson

When we got back to El Paso I jotted down notes from our visit mixed with a few more notes on Joe's life as a writer, some of it culled from our letters.

Joe began to write stories that became his first novel, "Jim Kane," in 1960. He admitted to the influence of Hemingway, William Saroyan, and Mickey Spillane. The protagonist of "Jim Kane" buys cattle and horses in Mexico and sells them in the United States. Joe Brown's ability to write up the rugged Mexican Sierra Madre equals the scenery in B. Traven's classic, "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre."

"Jim Kane" was made into the movie "Pocket Money" with Paul Newman and Lee Marvin in 1972. Joe taught Paul how to rope. The script was eventually hacked up by the rewrite boys. Much of Joe Brown's hard-edged knowledge of Mexico and the cattle business was lost in a sea of lightweight humor and one-liners. Welcome to Hollywood.

"Jim Kane" was followed by "The Outfit"



Woodcut by Tom Russell, "Tonight We Ride." For more art check www.tomrussell.com. OPPOSITE: J.P.S. Brown and his novels: "Tonight We Ride."

praise from the man who reinvented the cowboy song.

Coda

This is a portion of the first letter I received from Joe Brown in 2014, before we met in person:

Friend Tom:

I've been reading and enjoying your songs and stories. They hit square at home with me. You are in a position I always wanted to be in. I'm 85 now and may not ever do it. But I sure like what you are doing with your knowledge of many of the people and places that I would have liked to write about.

and "The Forests of the Night." The latter is the story of a man trailing a renegade jaguar through Mexico and was hailed by director Sam Peckinpah as the best novel ever written. A film script never surfaced. Joe wrote "The Forests of the Night" in 30 days. He wrote it in longhand in Mexico, fueling himself with doses of *Lechuguilla*, a raw cousin of mescal.

Joe's most highly praised novel must be "The Outfit," which concerns the time he spent cowboying on the 1,300 square mile Nevada ranch owned by TV personality Art Linkletter. Linkletter bought the ranch thinking there were 1,400 cows out there, but Joe and his crew gathered 5,000. Four months later, the ranch was sold with the additional 3,600 cattle as part of the deal. Linkletter did well.

In Joe Brown's world, the word "outfit" is defined as a group of men, or an entire ranch, equipped to husband a herd of cattle from birth to market. The novel's format is distinctive. Chapters are headed with a western term or concept which is explained and chewed on for a paragraph, then the action and the plot are carried forward. This is a Western primer melting into a novel.

A few years ago Ian Tyson saw the novel on my desk and proclaimed it "the best contemporary western novel yet written." High

Joe knew the history and the feel of the dust-blown western landscape. He'd ridden it. He knew how to carve the dialogue. You cannot have false lingo coming out of the mouths of working cowboys and ranchers. He wrote

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plainly and truthfully from the wise impulses of his cowboy heart. I treasure his letters and our short visit with the master.

Joe Brown passed away on Jan. 9, 2021. Now he's riding with the big outfit up yonder. His work is eternal.

Hold fast, Joe. We're honored to have met you. And the pot of beans on your stove was damn good. ■

Tom Russell's songs have been covered by Johnny Cash, Ian Tyson, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, and a hundred others. He has published books of essays and art, and a recent western novel, "Against the Blood," available from www.fronterarecords.com.