



Tom Russell “Indians Cowboys Horses Dogs” Hightone Records

There are inexorable links between Tom Russell, Tex/Mex music and [characters from] American history. They're as inexorable as the reality that night must follow day. It was there, respectively, in 1984 on Tom's debut solo recording “**Heart On A Sleeve**” in the form of “Gallo De Cielo,” and in “William Faulkner In Hollywood” [#] on the 1986 cassette only “**Joshua Tree.**” Those connections have resurfaced repeatedly in melody and lyric on Tom's succeeding, fifteen odd, *original* albums.

Those *ancients* among the Folkwax readership may recall those halcyon days when the record deck stylus picked up sufficient material [fluff/hairs/dust] that when it eventually hit the edge of the next 12” vinyl platter it skated across the surface of the disc with a crash followed by a *whooshing* noise. And so it is with the opening of “**Indians Cowboys Horses Dogs,**” there's that initial explosion of noise, in this instance the sound of a mariachi bull ring band, that plays for the ensuing twenty seconds, and then, to the sound of a mandolin, this Los Angelino launches into the tale of John Joseph “Black Jack” Pershing's unsuccessful pursuit of Francisco “Pancho” Villa [*]. “Tonight We Ride,” in terms of its *fabric*, presents a double whammy – Mexican music and a historical tale. In March 1916, Villa crossed the U.S./Mexico border and in the town of Columbus, New Mexico killed eight soldiers and wounded nine civilians before melting back across the border into the vastness of the Chihuahuan Desert. At the behest of President Woodrow Wilson, Pershing accompanied by 12,000 men led an incursion into Mexico, but were recalled ten months later having wounded, but failed to capture, Villa. America's imminent engagement in World War I hastened “Black Jack's” return to the United States.

Thematically this is Russell's third cowboy song collection and it follows in the wake of “**Cowboy Real**” [1992] and “**Songs Of The West – The Cowboy Collection**” [1997]. Those collections were a mix of Russell originals, co-writes and genre covers, and this new disc pursues the same formula. Except that, in this instance, there are no collaborations or compositions by Russell's teenage musical hero, Ian Tyson. Russell has been a resident of El Paso since 1997, and I don't know if he turned up in his researches the fact that Pershing established a field camp near the Texas border town in 1916. Whatever, one of the cover songs is Marty Robbins November 1959 # 1 Country Single, and gunfighter ballad/love song, “El Paso.” As faithful a fan of the music of Dylan and Springsteen as he is a working musician, from the Bobster's extensive catalogue, Russell covers the obscure tale of deception and death “Seven Curses” [“**The Bootleg Series – Volumes I To 3**” (1991) although the song dates from 1963], while “Lily, Rosemary, and the Jack of Hearts” [“**Blood On The Tracks**” (1975)] features considerable vocal contributions from Russell, Eliza Gilkyson and Joe Ely. The latter track is a nearly ten minute long cinematic epic. “No Telling” is a Linda Thompson composition and features Gilkyson on harmony vocals, “East Texas Red” was penned by Woodrow Wilson “Woody” Guthrie, and maintaining the thread of mid- twentieth century pioneers in the field of American folk music, Russell's own Native American narratives “Bacon Rind” [an Osage chief] and “Chief Seattle” [the Suquamish leader] merge seamlessly with Peter LaFarge's “The Ballad Of Ira Hayes.” The latter relates the story of the WWII [Native] American soldier hero who died an alcoholic, while LaFarge, also a Native American, died mysteriously in late 1965. Dylan was undoubtedly familiar with LaFarge's song during his Greenwich Village days and eventually included it on his *covers* album “**Dylan**” [1973]. Although not noted on the liner as a cover, Russell's set includes the *canine classic* “Old Blue.” My take is that the song is traditional in terms of source, and I guess this version is Tom's arrangement of the same.

A twelve-track collection, “**Indians Cowboys Horses Dogs**” is completed by “All This Way For The Short Ride” and “Bucking Horse Moon” which were co-written with former bareback rider and award

winning cowboy poet, Paul Zarzyski. In the former, based on Zarzyski's poem of the same name taken from his "**Roughstock Sonnets 1971-1996**," *the short ride*, refers to the time rodeo bull riders spend in the saddle. As the lyric unfolds a bull rider's dies in the arena, and his passing is witnessed by his pregnant wife. Zarzyski's poem "The Bucking Horse Moon" appeared in the book "**Buckaroo: Visions and Voices of the American Cowboy**," and Russell's redrafted lyric relates the tale of an old bronco rider "*long past high noon.*" Since becoming an El Paso resident, Tom and his immediate neighbours managed to reroute power lines that planners wanted to cross their property. Russell's "The Ballad of Edward Abbey" employs references to the author [d. 1989], conservationist and environmental campaigner, in relation to greedy developers who are currently constructing sub-standard properties in El Paso. The closing cut, and Russell original, is by way of a lullaby. "Little Blue Horse" contains mention of the English nursery rhyme "Ride A Cock-Horse," plus the fact that the horse has "*a Navajo brand on his hip*" and "*got a made in Japan brand beneath his lip.*" Finally, the environmentally friendly card liner features Tom's primitive styled western artwork. In addition, Russell produced the collection, while mastering and mixing was adeptly executed by Mark Hallman.

Note.

[#] – I know that the song originally appeared as "Mr. Faulkner In Hollywood" on the 1978 Hardin/Russell duo album "**Wax Museum.**"

[*] – There may have been two Pancho Villa's. According to one story when the first Villa was killed circa 1909, Doroteo Arango, the guerrilla bandit in Russell's song, adopted the name.

Folkwax Rating 8 out of 10

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