

Tom Russell – Bio [Short]

Thomas George Russell aka Tom Russell was born on March 5th 1951 in Los Angeles, California and was raised on a ranch in Topanga Canyon near Santa Monica. His older brother introduced him to the music of Tex Ritter and Hank Williams Snr. On a visit to Tijuana, Tom's sibling purchased a gut strung, Spanish classical guitar that they shared while learning to play it.

By the early sixties The Kingston Trio and Dylan were particular favourites, but the music of Ian and Sylvia became Russell's *abiding passion*. Graduated from High School, Tom enrolled at a Santa Barbara College but by the close of the decade he was domiciled, temporarily, on the African continent, teaching school in Nigeria. Returning home in 1970, Tom settled in Vancouver, Canada and worked railroad maintenance. Now married, soon he was a father. Far from solvent, Russell wandered into a bar on *skid row* and discovered the musicians were being paid "*One hundred dollars per man.*" Half a year later, Tom was performing six nights a week in Hasting Street bars. He called his band The Mule Train.

The Mule Train cut one single for Burro-Zero, and also toured the lumber town hostelrys of Northern British Columbia. Rumours of the progressive/cosmic country music scene in Austin, Texas clubs filtered north to Russell in early 1973. In the process of moving his family and possessions to Texas, Tom composed "End of the Trail," and entered it in the first American Song Festival. The song gained first place in the country division. In Austin, Russell met Patricia Hardin, a classically trained pianist. They formed a songwriting and performing partnership that lasted six years yielding the Demo Records albums, "**Ring Of Bone**" and "**Wax Museum.**" "**Ring**" was cut at Odyssey Sound in Austin, a former laundromat. "**Wax Museum**" was recorded in California, where the pair had relocated in order to play the steak and lobster house circuit around San Francisco Bay. They also composed the theme music for the Slim Pickens movie "**Sweet Creek County War**," plus scored the travelogue "**California Image.**"

Road weary, the duo split up in the late seventies and Russell retired from performing music in public for nearly four years, although he continued composing songs. He worked as bartender at the comedy club, Holy City Zoo. In the early eighties, Tom wrote songs with the late Carl Brouse and four collaborations appeared on Brouse's "**American Hotel**" [1983]. A compulsion to leave California, brought Tom, his wife and two daughters to New York City in early 1982.

The early eighties were lean times for the Russell family. Via an old Canadian friend, Tom scored a gig at a carnival in San Jose, Puerto Rico, as a *fictitious* American country music star. Russell's "Road to Bayamon" recalls his two months in Puerto Rico. Prior to leaving for Central America, Tom ran into a young lead guitarist, Andy Hardin. Back in the States, while working as a cab driver, Russell had a chance meeting with Grateful Dead lyricist, Robert Hunter. Sharing songs, Russell later performed with Hunter at The Bitter End and The Lone Star Cafe. Russell then hired Andy Hardin as a sideman. In time, the Tom Russell Band took shape with the arrival of Billy Troiani [bass] and "Fats" Kaplin [accordion/fiddle/pedal steel]. The drum stool was occupied at various times by Richard Crane, Charles Caldarola and Mike Warner.

We've jumped ahead a little. "**Heart on a Sleeve**" Tom's debut solo album had been recorded during his four-year hiatus, in studios in San Francisco, New York and Oslo. From the outset Russell created a lucrative niche for his music in Scandinavia, and he continues to enjoy relative superstardom in that region. Taken from "**Heart On A Sleeve**," *teenage hero* Ian Tyson covered "Gallo de Cielo" on his "**Old Corrals and Sagebrush**" [1983] collection, while Nanci Griffith's "**The Last Of The True Believers**" [1986] included the Oslo, Norway inspired "St. Olav's Gate." Russell spent early June 1986 at Tyson's Alberta ranch. One co-write, "Navajo Rug," scored Tyson a 1987 Canadian hit and earned the pair a Juno, the Canadian equivalent of a CMA Award. The New York Metropolitan Country Music Association voted Tom's band, *Best Local Band of the Year* in 1987. "Outbound Plane" a Tom Russell/Nanci Griffith co-write appeared on the latter's "**Little Love Affairs**" [1988]. The pair had known each other for over a decade having met at the Kerrville Folk Festival. Tom met one another co-writer, Katy Moffatt, when they judged the 1986 Kerrville New Folk songwriting competition. In the last fifteen years they've co-written around thirty songs. Before the band's second official release, "**Road To Bayamon**" appeared in 1987, Russell issued two cassette-only studio recordings, "**As The Crow Flies**" and "**Joshua Tree.**" Russell co-produced the Sylvia Tyson albums "**You Were On My Mind**" [1989] and "**Gypsy Cadillac**" [1992], which featured some of their co-writes. Tyson and Russell later edited a book of songwriter quotes "**And Then I Wrote : The Songwriter Speaks**" [1995]. Following the release of "**Poor Man's Dream**,"

"Hurricane Season" and a *Best of* compilation from Round Tower Records, Tom's band split up. Retaining Andy Hardin, the pair began working as a duo. A *Best of* band collection was released in Scandinavia in Y2K.

In the ensuing ten years, Russell went on to release eight albums, including a pair of cowboy song collections [undoubtedly inspired by his mentor Ian Tyson], a live disc, a suite of songs tracing his Scano-Celtic ancestry, **"The Man From God Knows Where,"** and a compilation of Mule Train, Band and solo rarities **"Museum Of Memories 1972-2002."** In the early nineties he cut a couple of country/soul discs with Barrence Whitfield and co-produced with Dave Alvin the Merle Haggard tribute disc **"Tulare Dust"** [1994]. **"Modern Art"** was issued by the Hightone label in the late spring of 2003. As a writer, he has collaborated with Steve Young, David Buskin, Tom Pacheco, Greg Trooper, Pat Alger, Peter Case, Bob Neuwirth, Dave Alvin and not least, Andrew Hardin. Russell released a third collection of cowboy songs, **"Indians Cowboys Horses Dogs,"** in early 2004, and a year later followed with the *beat era* tribute **"Hotwalker."** In the summer of 2005 Hightone issued the DVD **"Hearts On The Line"** which commemorated the 2004 edition of Tom's annual trans-Canada musical rail trip, and a few months later during the early Fall, Rounder/Philo issued the CD retrospective **"Raw Vision : The Tom Russell Band : 1984 - 1994"** which featured three previously unreleased songs. Hightone Records released the studio collection **"Love And Fear"** during mid March 2006.

Soon after the release of the **"Modern Art," "Indians Cowboys Horses Dogs"** and **"Love And Fear"** albums, Russell followed up with EP's featuring album tracks and out-takes from the recording sessions. In late 2006 Tom released the **"Who's Gonna Build Your Wall"** EP that featured further **"Love And Fear"** out-takes, plus the three song 'Immigration Suite.' The album **"Wounded Heart Of America"** teamed covers of fourteen Tom Russell compositions performed by artists such as Johnny Cash, Iris DeMent, Suzy Bogguss, Eliza Gilkyson and poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, plus four studio tracks that featured Russell. The latter included the 1993 Russell/Whitfield **"Hillbilly Voodoo"** duet "The Cuban Sandwich," a new recording of the 1980's classic "Home Before Dark," plus the recent "Who's Gonna Build Your Wall" and the new "The Death Of Jimmy Martin."

"Lost Angels Of Lyon: Live 1989 Lyon, France" [2007] was a live collection featuring the Tom Russell Band, while **"Veteran's Day: The Tom Russell Anthology"** was a two disc, thirty-seven song career retrospective, chosen by Tom, that included a pair of previously unreleased tracks. The **"Mano A Mano"** DVD was released in late 2008. Spread over two days at last January's annual Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, Ian Tyson and Tom Russell gave a songwriting workshop. Eighty minutes of their music and narrative presentation is captured on the DVD, plus there's a ten minute long interview with Tyson.

Recorded in Austin, Texas over four days in June 2008, the album **"One To The Heart, One To The Head"** featuring Gretchen Peters with Tom Russell was released in early February 2009. In her January 2009 Newsletter, Peters' described the fourteen track collection as a *"western mood piece,"* and featured Russell's new composition "Guadalupe."

Discography :

with Patricia Hardin as Hardin & Russell : **"Ring Of Bone"** vinyl only [1976] ; **"Wax Museum"** vinyl only [1978] ; **"The Early Years"** CD only [1994] :

with Tom Russell Band **"Heart On A Sleeve"** [1984] ; **"As The Crow Flies"** cassette only [1984] ; **"Joshua Tree"** cassette only [1986] ; **"Road To Bayamon"** [1987] ; **"Poor Man's Dream"** [1989] ; **"Hurricane Season"** [1991] ; **"Beyond St. Olav's Gate"** UK compilation [1992] ; **"All Around These Northern Towns"** Scandinavian compilation [2000] ; **"Heart On A Sleeve"** UK expanded [2000] ; **"Raw Vision : The Tom Russell Band : 1984 - 1994"** [2005] ; **"Lost Angels Of Lyon: Live 1989 Lyon, France"** [2007] :

with Barrence Whitfield : **"Hillbilly Voodoo"** [1993] ; **"Cowboy Mambo"** [1994] :

with Gretchen Peters : **"One To The Heart, One To The Head"** [2009] :

Solo : **"Cowboy Real"** [1992] ; **"Box Of Visions"** [1993] ; **"The Rose Of The San Joaquin"** [1995] ; **"The Long Way Around"** [1996] ; **"Song Of The West : The Cowboy Collection"** [1997] ; **"The Man From God Knows Where"** [1999] ; **"Borderland"** [2001] ; **"Museum Of Memories 1972-2002"** limited edition US compilation [2002] ; **"Modern Art"** [2003] ; **"Indians Cowboys Horses Dogs"** [2004] ; **"Hotwalker"** [2005] ; **"Love And Fear"** [2006] ; **"Wounded Heart Of America"** [2007] ; **"Veteran's Day: The Tom Russell Anthology"** [2008] :

DVD **“Hearts On The Line”** [2005] ; **“Mano A Mano”** [2008] :

Arthur Wood

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