

Bobby Bridger – A Career Overview, Part 2

In last week's episode I related how Bobby Bridger cut a couple of classy, but commercially unsuccessful, folk/country styled albums for RCA in the early seventies. Tired of seemingly endless record company politics, Bobby resolved to become the master of his destiny by producing his own recordings in future. Having penned the first and final segments of his *evolution of a nation* "**A Ballad Of The West**" – respectively, "Seekers Of The Fleece" and "Lakota," a recording of the former piece, featuring The Lost Gonzo Band with narration by Slim Pickens, was made in Colorado during July 1975. The production company involved, subsequently impounded Bobby's master tapes. Following years of complex litigation Bobby finally released "Seekers.....," initially on cassette, in 1988. We've leapt ahead of ourselves a little there.....

During the 1976 inaugural season of **Austin City Limits**, Bobby split a bill with the late B.W. Stevenson, and two years later shared a programme with western swing band, Asleep At The Wheel. In the summer of 1978, during one of his concerts Bridger met David Sleeper *"I had had a lot of wilderness experiences at that point. I was seeking that Indian vision. I played a benefit for dolphins and this guy appeared at the front of the stage and said, "You need to go into the desert with me". I said, "Are you kidding". He said, "For thirty days". I said, "I can't take thirty days off. I need to work". He said, "You're talking about your life. You can't take thirty days of your life". When he said that, it really hit me. I decided to do it. The deal was, we would meet in a border town out in Big Bend. You couldn't know anyone on the trip. Five men and five women then spent thirty days in the desert, facing and aggressively seeking all forms of fear. And meeting them head on. I thought, "That's for me". At that point, I didn't really care whether I lived or died."* According to Bridger the experience changed his outlook on life. Sleeper's organisation was called Desert Dance. *"I quit the music business for two years, worked for Desert Dance and learned about survival skills. How to live on nothing, in the most barren desert. I looked closely at the globe and noticed a good percentage is either desert or water. I thought, "If I can live in the desert, I can live anywhere. And I can do anything. Nothing will knock me down again."*

During 1979, Bobby undertook a further period of isolation in the desert, fasting. *"I only had water. They monitored you. The deal was, you tied a rag at an agreed place. If you didn't tie something, they knew you were in trouble. The summer before - part of the fear thing was, they would put you in a cave. They'd say, "You stay here until we come back. If you move, we've lost you. We won't know where you are. You won't know where you are". They left me three gallons of water and I was there for three days. While I was there, it occurred to me that my greatest fear was business. The music business. It was easy to live in the desert, climb rocks and live like a monkey. In that cave, I concluded I was afraid of New York. When I came out, I said "I'm going back to it, only this time I'm going to do it my way. I'm going to create my own organisation. I'm going to do it the way I want to do it". One thing was, I had to heal with Nashville."* During that second sojourn in the desert Bobby wrote the songs that appeared on his next recording, *"The material on my "Heal In The Wisdom" album is about healing."*

In fact Bridger retains strong views regarding the creative process. *"Music is the communication. I'm no healer. I'm a channel for ideas that come through me. I challenge anyone who says, "I wrote that song." Songwriters have no idea where songs come from. I think that we just have to go through some hardship, to be in the right place for that to come through."*

Bridger's spiritual reawakening culminated in the 1981 release of the aforementioned album, on vinyl, on his own imprint, Golden Egg Records. When I interviewed Bobby in 1989, I asked him about the name of his record company. *"It has absolutely everything to do with the goose [ED NOTE. That laid the golden egg]. To me, the egg is a unisex symbol. It has no sexual connotation, yet is full of portent. A thing about to give birth and emerge. Being into myth, Golden Egg seemed a wonderful parable for music."* The title song from the album was quickly adopted as, and remains, the anthem of the Kerrville Folk Festival.

You'll recall in last week's episode that Bobby's, successful, first brush with stage work came in 1974. During 1982 and into the following year, at the invitation of the author, Bridger undertook the role of "The Drifter" in Dale Wasserman's musical, "**Shakespeare And The Indians**" at the Firehouse Dinner Theatre in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Bridger's reputation as an artist attuned to the interpretation of Native American history was growing, rapidly. *"In the play, the drifter has been driven insane during the American Civil War. He returns to the West to rediscover his past. It was the first play Wasserman wrote. Then he gave up, because he wanted a balladeer that sang about mountain men. This was during the*

fifties.” *The drifter* was modelled on Jim Bridger’s life and in the early eighties, Wasserman found his balladeer.

Meanwhile, the multi-media evolution of Bobby’s masterwork “**A Ballad Of The West**” continued apace. In 1983 a limited, hardback edition featuring “Seekers Of The Fleece” and “Lakota,” was published by Wiyaka Press of Austin, Texas. A decade later, a paperback edition was published. Accompanied by David Carradine and Will Sampson, Bridger took part in the 1984 American Indian Theatre Company’s production of John G. Neihardt’s “**Black Elk Speaks.**” During 1986, the sesquicentennial year of the creation of the Texas state Bridger toured Australia. The following year saw Bobby and a group of Texas musicians that included Butch Hancock, undertake a tour of the Soviet Union, in pursuit of *glasnost*. Backtracking a little, late 1986 witnessed the release by Golden Egg of “**Live At Kerrville**” an eleven song cassette of Bobby’s performance at that year’s festival.

No doubt inspired by Bridger’s work, on the afternoon of Saturday 3rd June 1989, Rod Kennedy, the producer of the Kerrville Folk Festival, presented a two-hour musical event titled, *Native American Tribute*. The performers included Floyd Westerman, Carolyn Hester, Bobby Bridger, the late Roxy Gordon, David Amram, Gayle Ross and Bill Miller. Kerrville hosted further *Native American* events in the ensuing years. I’d offer the personal insight that the inaugural event was one of the most stimulating and satisfying musical experiences of my life.

Further nurturing of “**A Ballad Of The West**” occurred in 1988, when Bobby began what proved to be six consecutive summer seasons of performances, of the two completed parts of the trilogy, at the Old Trail Town in Cody, Wyoming. 1994 saw the show relocate to Green River, Wyoming for a couple of years, and in 1996, the sesquicentennial of Buffalo Bill Cody’s birth, Bridger debuted the final part of the trilogy, “Pahaska,” at Buffalo Bill Historical Centre in Cody. That Bridger would achieve his life’s dream had never been blessed with a cast-iron guarantee. Seven years earlier, when we talked, a degree of uncertainty hung in the air. *“I have written two versions of “Pahaska” and scrapped them. The idea was to write about the relationship between Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull and carry it into modern times. To create an epic narrative that started in 1822, set West of the Mississippi and North of the Missouri River. I had written a great deal of it when I discovered Arthur Copeland’s play “Indians.” He beat me to the punch, and it almost exactly said what I was trying to say. Then I had another idea which was to take one indian man who was born in 1890 after Wounded Knee, and carry him up to modern times; because I know a man whose life I could tell that way. His name is Godfrey Brokenrope, and he is a dear sweet friend of mine, and, perhaps, the best speaker of the Lakota tongue still living. I don’t know if I’ll ever complete “Pahaska”.*”

In celebrating the twentieth anniversary of writing the song “Heal In The Wisdom,” a CD version of the album of the same name was reissued 1998. Last year Bridger returned to Old Trail Town for a three-month season that featured performances of all three parts of his trilogy, “**A Ballad Of The West.**” As the first year of the new millennium drew to a close, Golden Egg released a four CD recording of “**A Ballad Of The West.**” An extensive review of the collection appears elsewhere in this publication. It’s suffice to say here that the 1975 version of “Seeker...” reappears, alongside recordings of “Pahaska” and “Lakota” made in Austin during the spring of last year.

Rather than deflect from Bobby’s crowning achievement “**A Ballad Of The West,**” so far, I have deliberately omitted mention of a number of his other career achievements, such as the multi-media works “**The Canyon,**” “**Coyote Daydreaming**” and “**Aldebaran And The Falling Star.**” Segments of the latter work are featured on the 1986 Kerrville cassette. In addition, during the latter half of the seventies Bridger scored the music for some forty films and penned two screenplays. He published a newspaper titled **Hoka Hey!** for eight years, commencing in the mid-eighties. With a background in Art Education it seems totally natural that Bridger is a painter. During his 1986 Australian tour he studied Aboriginal dot art and upon his return home produced a series of over one hundred works. *“Ironically, most people do other things, so they can retire and paint. I paint, and tell people that is the way I pay for my folk music habit.”*

Let’s close by focusing on another occurrence in the evolution of “**A Ballad Of The West.**” A few years back, Bobby was invited to perform “Seekers of the Fleece” for Robert Redford. *“It was a great meeting and probably the worst performance of “Seekers...,” I’ve ever done. I had been on the road for three weeks. I got a call on Thursday, to fly on Friday to Sundance. I was up all night. I flew from sea level to*

twelve thousand feet and was wiped out. I had no energy at all. They moved the location of the performance from Redford's ranch, to a local cafeteria. Every studio head in Hollywood was there. The bus boys carried on going between the audience, myself and Redford. Redford bless his heart, an amazing man, tried everything to push that energy over towards me. But every eye was on Redford. I was drained of energy, and he was trying to focus them on me. After it was over, I spent fifteen minutes with him. He is deeply concerned with the mountain men era. I had a great chat with him. Redford is deeply committed to regional film making and stories that spring from the Earth."

While "**A Ballad Of The West**" appears to have attained conclusion following the completion of "Pahaska," I feel that it is only a milestone on a journey that is destined for still greater achievement. One day, not that far away, anywhere on this planet, we may be able to purchase the movie ticket that allows us to see the ultimate multi-media presentation of Bridger's *epic chronicle of young America*. After all, what else are dreams, but mere visions that through the application of sustained human effort, through times that are either arduous or unhindered, are moulded into tangible realities. If anyone has learned that lesson over the last forty years, it's Bobby Bridger.

Arthur Wood

Kerrville Kronikles 05/01, 06/01 & 07/01.

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