

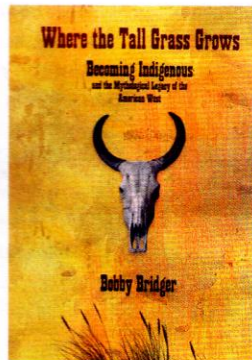
WHERE THE TALL GRASS GROWS by Bobby Bridger

Fulcrum Publishing, soft cover,
408 pp., ISBN 978-1-55591-454-7

Bridger's latest book bears the sub-title: *Becoming Indigenous and the Mythological Legacy of the American West*. In the 21 page Introduction: *Becoming Indigenous*, this Texas-bred musician, actor, author, and descendent of legendary mountain man Jim Bridger, relates his life story so far, and recalls following the publication of (his) *Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull: Inventing the Wild West* (2002) that he began asking friends and acquaintances if they considered themselves indigenous to North America. Invariably their reply ran to: 'Only Indians as indigenous!'

On November 13, 2005, Vine Deloria Jr., Bridger's friend of some forty years passed away. Deloria, a Standing Rock Sioux, was an author, theologian, historian, and activist. Beginning with *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (1969), among many lifetime achievements relative to Indian affairs, Deloria authored twenty books and contributed numerous articles to publications. Vine also edited two tribute anthologies, and relative to Bridger's indigenous proposition, the titles are *A Sender of Words: Essays in Memory of John G. Neihardt* (1984) and *Frank Waters: Man and Mystic* (1993). It had been Deloria's intention to pay tribute to Dee Brown (d. 2002) the author of, among many titles, *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970). Nebraska-bred Neihardt (d. 1973), the United States official Prairie Poet Laureate, authored the classic Indian work *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), while Waters (d. 1995) penned novels and historical works about the American Southwest. Founded in his name the Frank Waters Foundation cultivates literary and artistic achievement in that region. Waters' father was part Cheyenne, while Neihardt and Brown were of European extraction. In Bridger's mind, the latter partly gave rise to his 'indigenous' quandary.

Crucial to Bridger's search for an answer are the words of Luther Standing Bear (d. 1939), like *Black Elk*, a Lakota Sioux—'non-Indians remain strangers in a land they do not understand' and 'In the Indian the spirit of the land is vested; and it will be so until other men are able to divine and meet its rhythm.' *Playing Indian* (1998), the debut book and a historically-based analysis, by Vine's eldest son, Philip, set Bridger back



on his heels, particularly so, since the musician had made a living for decades dressed in buckskins and wearing moccasins. Analysed through reference to countless artistic endeavours, fictional and fact, it was Deloria's opinion that a purely mythological portrait of the west had resulted (and, thereby, of its indigenous people).

In June 2006 Bridger attended the annual Western Writers of America convention, 'Writing about Buffalo Bill' being the focus of the panel on which he sat and spoke. Noting that ten Buffalo Bill Cody books had been published since the dawn of the new millennium, a century after Cody legitimately rose to become the first global personality and hero, Bridger suggested to the convention audience that Cody's metaphorical grandson, John Wayne, by dint of mythology, was an illegitimate American hero. While giving cognisance to the words of Luther Standing Bear and Philip Deloria, books I've mentioned, as well as his WWA speech, *Where The Tall Grass Grows* is an exposition of Bridger's yearning to find a solution to his indigenous question.

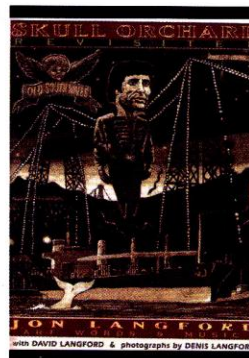
Across nineteen chapters and Epilogue, *Where The Tall Grass Grows* is structured in three parts. Part I opens with *Flaming Rainbow*, the Word Sender an exposition of the increasing influence of Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* as well as of this holy man's life, and begins with the writer's imperative 1971 appearance on the Dick Cavett Show. Bridger moves on to witness how subsequent books by Deloria and Brown were lit by *Black Elk* and Neihardt. *Black Elk* (d. 1950) joined Cody's show, travelled to Europe with him, and subsequently converted to Catholicism. At the close, Bridger debates whether Neihardt's book solely expounds *Black Elk*'s faith and vision, or is coloured by the writer's socialist leanings. Richly detailed, subsequent chapters focus on the gradual and historic displacement of most of the 500 Indian nations from the land they tended, their confinement in reservations, as America's immigrants drifted west of the original thirteen colonies by wagon and, subsequently, rail.

Part II paints a portrait of America from the

closing decades of the nineteenth century to midway through the ensuing one, a period that witnessed the shift from a rural agrarian to an urban industrial society. Part III journeys from midway through the twentieth century and into the new millennium, acknowledges the influence of technological advances such as telegraphy, photography and the phonograph, their subsequent combination/incorporation in movies and television, and contemporaneously quotes examples of the growing relevance and influence of *Black Elk*'s ethos. In the penultimate chapter *The Trail of Broken Treaties* embraces references to the Woodstock Nation, 1973's *Wounded Knee II*, the rise of AIM (American Indian Movement) and even includes a, short, side trip allusion to Michael Martin Murphey's *Cosmic Cowboy*—and for me, classic indigenous themed songwriting—period that spanned his debut *GERONIMO'S CADILLAC* (1972) through his sixth outing *SWANS AGAINST THE SUN* (1976).

In the final chapter Bridger highlights *Dances With Wolves* departure from previous western norms, compares it with the thematically similar, futuristic *Avatar*, wherein the conventional roles of villain and hero were reversed as well as their shared exploration of the captivity narrative. The foregoing finds the author predict that 3-D movies will, given the technology, be supplanted by holography, and the conclusion that the World Wide Web has opened up a Pandora's Box that finds mankind, today, standing on the cusp of a new realm—one that is gradually beginning to embrace nature as well as technology. For four decades, until the Cavett interview, Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* had been published and not much more. Four decades later, portions of mankind can claim to be informed though not yet fully integrated and indigenous. **Arthur Wood**

www.fulcrumbooks.com



Jon Langford SKULL ORCHARD REVISITED BOOK/CD

Verse Chorus Press

Punk pioneer Jon Langford is probably best known for his band the Mekons and later the Waco Brothers but he has also been garnering praise for his visual art. Nashville Radio was his first book + CD that included writing, music and paintings released in 2005 and this new release is

a personal portrait of Wales where Jon was born and grew up. The book has grown from