

Bobby Bridger – A Career Overview, Part 1

Bobby Durham [known as Bobby Bridger these days] was raised in Columbia, North Louisiana, and initially recorded for the Monument, Nugget and RCA imprints during the late sixties and early seventies. Later he set up his own label, Golden Egg, which has, to date, issued four of his recordings. Bridger spent a significant part of the closing third of the twentieth century writing and developing a trilogy of *narrative ballads* that capture the spirit and present the truth about the coming of the white man to the lands of the Native American a century earlier. Throughout those final decades he performed his trilogy, in numerous theatrical formats, for audiences in America, Canada, Europe, Australia and Russia. Bridger completed the final segment of the trilogy, "Pahaska" [the Lakota Sioux nickname for William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, meaning "long hair"] some five years ago, and recently issued a four CD performance of the full trilogy titled, **"A Ballad Of The West."** What follows is the story of a man who embarked on a search, and who never wavered from his creative dream.....

In early 1963, Bobby Durham was eighteen years of age when Archie Bridger, his maternal uncle, regaled him with tales of their [famous] ancestor, the mountain man and explorer, Jim Bridger. It was the first in a series of epiphanies that determined the subsequent course of Durham's life.

1963, it transpired, was an eventful year in young Bobby's life. *"I finally picked a guitar up in May that year. I'd never touched one before. My dad's people, the Durhams, were musicians. My dad's from East Texas - the Big Thicket. My grandfather was a fiddle playing judge in Texas. "Grandpa" on the "Merging Of Our Minds" album is about him. He had no political experience, but he played marvellous fiddle and they loved him, so they elected him judge. His two brothers, my great uncles, were guitar players. They played dances all over the Thicket. We spent our summers in Texas, sitting on the porch, playing music. I was always too shy to join in. I learned how to play guitar by practising all that summer"*

A couple of months later, Bridger was appearing regularly on a local television talent show in Monroe, Louisiana, *"It was one of those where, if you gained the largest number of postcard votes, they'd call you back."* During his freshman year at North East Louisiana University, where he studied Art Education, Bridger won another talent competition. Offered several recording deals by talent scouts, Bridger did eventually sign with Fred Carter Jr. A trio of singles for Fred Foster's Monument label followed during Bobby's final year of University. Post graduation, a further pair of singles followed on the Nugget label.

Bobby recalled his first time in Nashville, *"Fred brought me to Nashville. We cut three songs. Johnny Duncan was there and basically held my hand, while I was in the booth. I was a kid and scared to death. I didn't know what I was doing. Pugler Harris, John Hartford, Lloyd Green, Roy Huskey - were the session players. I was crazy about John Hartford. No one knew who John Hartford was. I begged Fred Carter to get John on the record, and he did. We cut the record and sold it in two weeks to Monument. Foster was looking for a new voice. That's how the whole thing started."*

Let's backtrack a little, to a significant event that occurred during Bobby's University days. *"We had two English professors, O. Phillip James and Quincy Wolf. Wolf collected folk songs, by making field recordings, and he discovered Jimmy Driftwood in Arkansas. Phillip James invited me to travel with him to Arkansas. They still sing in Elizabethan English there. I heard this woman sing the Judas Tale from the Canterbury Tales, in Elizabethan English. I was blown away with the power of ballads. I thought maybe, I would find a song about Jim Bridger. Maybe someone had written about him. While I was still in school, I kept looking for ballads about Bridger. I couldn't find any material about the American mountain men, so I started writing about them myself."*

While still working in Nashville with Carter, Bobby met Paul Simon who had come to discuss, with prominent local musicians, the traditional folk song album that he and Art Garfunkel were planning to make following the phenomenal success of **"Bridge Over Troubled Water."** The project fell apart, as did the duo's recording partnership, but Simon taught Bridger a valuable lesson about songwriting. *"Paul is the reason I left Nashville and quit working with Fred for a while. Fred let me go to the airport with him and Chet Atkins to pick up Paul. Chet asked Paul right off, "On your first couple of albums you used a producer. Then you started producing yourself. Why did you do that?" Paul said, "Well, an artist should produce himself. He's the only one who knows what to do with his work". That triggered something in me. I was writing these epic songs. I had envisioned long intricate, sequenced narrative tales. That was unheard of in those days. Anyway, we all went*

fishing. On the fishing trip, I cornered Paul and played him two or three of my songs. I'd sing the first two lines and before I got to the chorus, he started humming the melody. He told me, "I know exactly where you're going with that melody. It's too predictable". That was what they wanted in Nashville at that time. I thought, "Now I know what's going on". He really didn't want to talk. I kept saying, "What's your formula". Finally he said, "My formula is not your formula. You have to find your own formula". I accepted that but kept pressuring him, "But what is yours". He said, "I pay the price". I said, "What do you mean by that". He said, "I spent \$30,000 remixing Mrs Robinson." Everyone told me, "You're getting too close to it. You're pushing it too far". My attitude was, if I am, I pay the price". He paid the price and "Mrs Robinson" sent them into the stratosphere."

Bobby returned to Louisiana determined to "pay the price" from then on. He taught school, wrote unpredictable melodies and learned how to raise money. Returning to Nashville he cut the tracks for the self-produced, **"Merging Of The Minds"** album in Fred's studio. *"I told Fred, "I don't want you there, until I call you". Fred knew I had made that break and respected it. Then I brought him in and he played overdubs on the tracks."*

It took Bobby eighteen months to sell the album to a label. To achieve that result, as well as Nashville, Bobby spent time pursuing record company executives in New York and, eventually, Los Angeles. *"I was living on the beach in Malibu and fell in with a bunch of actors. One of them, Max Evans, wrote the screenplay for the movie, **"The Wheel."** He wanted to premiere the movie, either in Denver or Austin. He said, "I'll give you \$500 if you move to Austin and scout the scene for me." Slim Pickens' daughter, Darryl Ann, was the lead in, **"The Wheel."** They'd have me over to parties and I'd play my songs. They were crazy about the mountain men. Darryl Ann introduced me to her father. Slim was one of the best friends I ever had in my life. I miss him every day."*

Bobby subsequently relocated to Austin, Texas, and remains a resident of the Lone Star State to this day. He was soon working regularly with local musicians, including members of The Lost Gonzo Band. Although best known for their association with Jerry Jeff Walker, the Gonzo's were also, from time to time, Michael [Martin] Murphey's road band. Bridger wanted the Gonzo's to help him cut his second solo album for RCA. As it transpired the resulting album, **"And I Wanted To Sing For The People"** produced by Ron Kramer, was recorded in Hollywood using West Coast players. *"We argued for a year about cutting it in quad, and then they released it in stereo. It was heartbreaking, and just one disappointment after another. Then RCA refused to release "The Call" as a single, even though everybody at the label thought it was a smash."*

Tired of industry politics, Bobby decided to make his own way as a performer and recording artist from that point onward. As for "The Call," the song was a turning point for Bridger. *"I was heavily into Black Elk, because I was writing "Lakota" at the time. The original song title was "The coyote who lived in the city". I was in Los Angeles and in the midst of all that RCA fight. That song was a real breakthrough and the direction in which I wanted to go."* You'll recall that while attending University, Bobby had searched unsuccessfully for songs about his relative. In the ensuing years Bobby discovered John G. Neihardt's 60,000 line epic poem **"A Cycle Of The West,"** and subsequently that author's Native American history **"Black Elk Speaks."** Their significance in Bobby's quest to create his own masterwork about the "real west" cannot be understated. By the mid-seventies, Bobby had completed writing, "Seekers Of The Fleece" and "Lakota," respectively the first and final parts of his intended trilogy.

Jan Reid's eponymous, but flawed, 1974 [documentary] book about Austin's singer/songwriter scene, **"The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock,"** featured a chapter on Bridger titled *"The Golden Fleece."* While the analogy of Jason's search for the fleece, and Bobby's fascination with the fur trapping mountain men is not lost on this scribe, Reid appeared sceptical regarding the longevity of Bridger's musical career. With the exception of B.W. Stevenson, who is no longer with us, the other participants in Reid's book continued, in the main, to concentrate on their musical careers. During 1974 Bridger began the process of evolving into a multi-media artist. *"My first theatre work happened soon after I completed the "Ballad of the West". Jim Inmon told me about a wonderful little theatre on Sixth Street, called The Creek Theatre. They specialised in original shows. Jim said, "There's a guy down there, wrote a thing about Woody Guthrie. Why don't you take the show down there and see if you could get them to do it". I always wanted to cast "Ballad.." as a big production, like we're doing nowadays. I went to the theatre and asked the director if they would cast this piece of mine. He said, "No. We'd be more interested if you would act it and do a one man show". I said, "You've got to be crazy. I'm not an actor". He said, "Well, you wrote it didn't you". I said "Yea", so he said, "Well, you can act it". That was*

*almost the Paul Simon theory - "Do it yourself". I said "I will". He spent six months working with me, one on one. A brilliant theatre guy. We opened and it ran for fifteen weeks, standing room only. I had a huge hit with it. About that time, we recorded the "**Seekers Of The Fleece**" tape, but I got into trouble over that recording."*

Although Bobby was still tied to RCA, he remembered with much fondness recording the "**Seekers...**" tape. *"That was the first chance I had to do things my way, when some backers came along."* Slim Pickens had told Bobby years earlier, *"You bet. I'll narrate that thing"*. Anyway, back to Bobby's recollection. *"We went to Denver, the closest we could get to the mountains and still have access to a studio. We put a teepee up, out in the Rockies. Took a Volkswagon van with a generator, and ran a half mile of chord out to the teepee. We ringed the teepee in condenser mikes. At the same time, the Russians and Americans were rendezvousing in space. We were rendezvousing in the teepee, underneath them. We spent two days there, got some great tapes of Slim Pickens telling stories. Slim did a real folklorist thing with it. I paid the musicians in beaver pelts. We all dressed up in furs, skins and everything. Made a real experience of it. Then we went into the studio at Denver Sound, and cut the tape in seven days."*

As we'll see next week, thirteen years of Bobby's life elapsed before he was able to release the "**Seekers Of The Fleece**" recording. Unbowed, before that momentous event took place, in 1981, he formed his own record label, Golden Egg, and immediately began self-releasing his own recordings.

to be continued.....

Arthur Wood
Kerrville Kronikles 05/01, 06/01 & 07/01.
[2100 words]

See "**A Ballad Of The West**" Live

Just in case any of your readers live in Wyoming, or will be on holiday there this summer, Bobby Bridger is performing nightly, except Sunday, at Old Trail Town in Cody, Wyoming at 7.00pm each evening, from June 4th - August 24th, 2001.

The weekly performances of the trilogy "A Ballad Of The West" take place as follows :

Seekers of the Fleece (Mon and Thurs)

Pahaska (Tues and Fri)

Lakota (Wed. and Sat)