

The Cowboy Poets.

The Cowboy Poets are in a mean mood. The long journey from Cambridge by minibus combined with a tricky television interview has turned their spirits as black as the clouds hanging over Cardiff Bay. A polite petition from the photographer to Randy Rieman requesting that he slip a dark jacket or jumper over his white shirt for the pictures meets with the rebuke "I don't have one, and even if I did I wouldn't put it on."

My pardners, but we're off to a good start.

The four poets: sometime bronc rider Paul Zarzyski, ranchers Sue Wallis and Rod McQueary and horse-breaker Randy Rieman are in the throes of their first British tour, a stint which includes two appearances in Wales as part of the U.K Year of Literature and Writing hosted by Swansea. An hour before the start of their first Welsh date at Cardiff's Norwegian Church Arts Centre, they are mooching around the sea front, grumpy and incongruous on a slate-grey evening. At the first hint of an interview they scatter and retrieving them is as challenging as mustering cattle on the plains of Montana. Eventually a pained Paul Zarzyski is collared and he recovers his good grace sufficiently to reveal a few details about his life and work.

A professional rodeo rider for many years, he specialised in "riding the strongest, rankest horses to win a little money to buy some gas and a few groceries and get on to the next rodeo." By the age of forty the knocks had taken their toll and he decided to quit while he was ahead.

"You get hurt pretty bad every once in a while and I had a couple of friends who got killed in a rodeo arena, then finally your body kinda wears out and I decided to hang up my spurs, as they say."

"But I missed it so much. It left a kinda void in my life, so I blew the dust off my rodeo gear and started to ride on the 'old timers' circuit. I could still ride pretty fair but I couldn't walk for a week after, so I finally decided once and for all to quit."

Zarzyski was lucky. His having to let go of bronc riding coincided with a rekindling of interest in the epic poetry of the pioneers and a thirst for the offerings of contemporary cowboys. He found that he had the knack of stringing words together and reciting them.

Poetry gatherings replaced the camaraderie of the rodeo circuit.

"Cowboy poetry is as much about friendship as about folk art, or tradition or entertainment," he claims.

For Randy Rieman the poetry is a chance to rectify the erroneous picture of the cowboy psyche as put about by Hollywood. Machismo is an element of a tough, physical, outdoor life, but it's only part of the picture.

“My work expresses emotions which run through all humanity, and, contrary to the image most people have, cowboys experience those emotions too,” he explains. “Joy, passion, elation, humour, tragedy, romance, it all comes out in cowboy verse. We live a life that’s very free of the bangles and baubles of society and we have the time and space to feel and express intense emotions.” Rieman’s day-to-day life isn’t so very different to that of his forebears during the last century, which is why much of his repertoire consists of the works of the old masters such as Charles Badger Clarke and Bruce Kiskaddon.

Any modern stockman can readily identify with the timeless cadences of Kiskaddon’s ‘When They’ve Finished Shipping Cattle in the Fall’:

**Only two men left a standin’
On the job for winter brandin’
And your pardner he’s a loafin’ at your side.
With a bran’ new saddle creakin’,
Neither one of you is speakin’,
And you feel it’s goin’ to be a silent ride.
But you savvy one another,
For you know him like a brother,
He is friendly but he’s quiet, that it all.**

Cowboy poetry does have a tendency to veer into the hick and mawkish. Sue Wallis, however, disengages herself from cliché. Hers is the most evocative voice of the touring poets, both in terms of her written work and her ability to recite. Poems like A Thousand Pretty Ponies conjure up the space and freedom of the open range without wallowing in sentiment.

Over yonder, see them coming, there’s your Daddy and he’s running

**With a thousand head of horses out of grassy Garvin Basin
They are rippling like a river with their manes and tails flying
Flashing, glinting colors - proudest thing I’ve ever seen
And see his hat it’s waving as he comes riding hard and spurring
Leading all those pretty ponies pouring down off Garvin’s Rim.**

Wallis’s work has been described as “a strong Western woman’s vision pronounced in a strong Western woman’s voice”, but there is more to it than that. The poems in her book Another Green Grass Lover have a bold, sassy edge; she tells it as it is from the woman’s standpoint, a factor which is missing from the traditional verse whose depiction of the female sex is stereotypical - something which is perpetuated to a degree by the modern male poet.

This poem is called Mamie.

**Mamie hasn’t been out with a feller in two or three years.
The sons-sa-bitches(sic) use her - and leave her in tears
way too often, and far too long
ago**

**Mamie figures that maybe it isn’t so healthy to be alone so long,
but her heart is spooked when she think of it - going wrong**

**way too often, and far too long
ago.**

**Mamie thinks perhaps she'll open her eyes and start looking at
men**

**but her soul stops and her skin clams,
her tongue thickens and her mind jams,
and Mamie be damned she can't begin
again.**

**But she thinks about it
way too often
and far too long**

y' know.

Rod McQueary, the most taciturn of the four, specialises in the dry, deadpan delivery of wryly humorous works. Persuaded to get on the road with his poetry in order to supplement the family income, he takes a sceptical look at city society and its attendant fads and health crazes. In 'Dangerous Beef' he mocks the cholesterol-fixated generation, adopting an understatedly comic tone reminiscent of Garrison Keillor's style in *Lake Woebegone Days*.

It isn't possible to categorise cowboy poetry under one all-encompassing banner. But the enthusiasm these bards feel for their art is conveyed in Paul Zarzyski's observation when asked to define the genre.

"...it's the ring and ricochet of that jumping, rock and roll cowboy lingo which heads straight for the stirrup bone of your middle ear."