

Murphey, Michael Martin [entry from Slatta, *The Cowboy Encyclopedia*, 1990, 1994)

Singer, songwriter, promoter of cowboy culture.

With his highly successful 1990 album, "Cowboy Songs," Michael Martin Murphey became the country's leading evangelist for western music. It is, he says, the "music of my people, of my land." Murphey has won millions of converts who agree with his choice. "This is not the hot new country. This is the great old western."

Murphey grew up hearing and singing cowboy songs around campfires at Sky Ranch, near Lewisville, Texas. He left Texas to attend UCLA in the late sixties. "I went out there to study Greek and Latin and Roman history and medieval history. I was interested in the classical world, the ancient world, and the medieval world. And I'll tell you my reasoning for that. I feel like I was the wandering minstrel of today, and I really wanted to study the wandering minstrel of the ancient times, and so, I got into all that because I was interested in actually digging up more stuff on the early, early singer-songwriters and minstrels. And I had a great time doing that." At UCLA Murphey set his studies to song with a folk-rock group called the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Murphey's love for and knowledge of history continues. He often gives audiences intriguing glimpses into the musical and social history behind his songs. In 1971 Murphey returned to Texas, just in time for the great outlaw music rebellion.

Like Willie Nelson, Jerry Jeff Walker, and Waylon Jennings, Murphey shunned Nashville's constraints and conservatism in favor of the West's wide-open spaces. His 1973 tune, "Cosmic Cowboy," became a counterculture cowboy anthem:

*I just wanna be a Cosmic Cowboy.
I just wanna ride and rope and hoot.
I just wanna be a Cosmic Cowboy.
A supernatural country rockin' galoot.*

*Lone Star sippin' and skinny dippin'
and steel guitars and stars
Are just as good as Hollywood
and them bullshit disco bars.*

During the seventies Murphey enjoyed great commercial success with beautiful ballads, still much requested. Audiences continue to thrill to his great melodies, like "Wildfire," "Carolina in the Pines," and "What's Forever For." Of the latter song, Murphey jokes, "It was hard for me to write about romantic love since I was raised a southern Baptist."

Murphey's music blends western images, old and new. Like many old-time cowboy songs, his lyrics often belie a nostalgia for times past. "Texas Morning," "Another Cheap Western," and "Geronimo's Cadillac" all evoke powerful images from western myth and history. In 1978 Murphey left Texas for Taos, New Mexico. He still writes his music and ranches there.

Cowboy Songs

In the mid-1980s, the rise of cowboy poetry festivals signaled a major western cultural revival. The joyful enthusiasm of crowds for cowboy poetry and music "got me so fired up you can't believe it." Murphey decided that he would join in the fun. "I wanted to revive this cowboy spirit, and I found myself almost operating like an evangelist." He began performing old cowboy standards, like "Red River Valley." Audiences, young and old, loved the traditional songs.

Does Murphey have an old-time favorite? "Absolute number one favorite is 'When the Works All Done This Fall.' I'm fascinated with the man who wrote it, D. J. O'Malley. Not very much is known about him. . . . It deals with the true danger of being a cowboy. The real risk involved is with the animals themselves and the possibility of getting hurt just in an accident. So much focus was put for so many years on getting shot in a duel or a stagecoach robbery or a train robbery or something like that. People missed out on the real message of the cowboy. . . . It's a tragedy of a death in a stampede and symbolically, I think, represents all that danger that a cowboy takes on. And plus it's a wonderful melody."

The revival of authentic cowboy culture prompted Murphey to take a new direction. One night a few years ago, he spent all night listening to his more than twenty albums. "I discovered that there was a thread that tied the whole thing together that I'd been missing." That thread, he says, "was that I am absolutely rooted in the American West." At that point, he conceived his "Cowboy Songs" album.

Besides his strong voice and captivating songs, Murphey's warm stage presence delights fans. Ever gracious, he has a wonderful self-deprecating sense of humor. Murphey switches guitars between virtually ever number, so that the instruments can be kept closely tuned. He explains the practice this way: "I saw Eric Clapton do it," he says wryly, "so I thought it might work for me."

Like many westerners, Murphey traces his roots to the South. His great-great-great grandfather, Archibald Murphey (1777-1832) was a prominent North Carolinian. "He was a statesmen, lawyer and sort of a public transportation engineer. He also founded the public school system of North Carolina," says Murphey, with understandable pride. Murphey Hall at the University of North Carolina campus in Chapel Hill stands as a tribute to Archibald.

Family ties are very important to Murphey. The "Tonight We Ride" album includes several dedications-- "Innocent Hearts" for daughter Laura Lynn's christening, "Close to my Heart" for wife Mary. Murphey dedicated his entire "Americana" album to Mary.

At WestFest 1993 Murphey dedicated several songs to his parents P. L. and Lois. They have been married for more than fifty years. He dedicated another song to his step-grandfather, Ed Gross. Love for family, friends, and the land--Murphey embodies the basic values of the Old West.

Family ties now reach into music. Murphey and his oldest son Ryan have become musical collaborators. They sang a humorous duet, "Talkin' to the Wrong Man," on the 1988 "River of Time" album. In 1993 Ryan took over fulltime as lead guitar in

Murphey's Rio Grande Band (along with David Cole, fiddle; Gary Roller, bass; Joey Miskulin, keyboards; LeRoy Featherston, drums).

The talented young musician also plays soprano and tenor sax and writes songs. "I graduated from College of Santa Fe in May 1992. It's been a year of living in the real world now." Ryan majored in creative writing, a fitting focus for his poetic soul. "I try to write a story or a poem or a song every week. Doesn't usually happen. I can write poems and stories a lot faster than songs. Songs are hard because you have to think about an audience more. Poetry and fiction is more like therapy for me. I can sort of write whatever I feel, you know."

Asked which musicians have influenced him most, Ryan replies immediately, "My dad is always the first. I think he's a great musician and a great song writer and most of all he's a great composer. I remember when I was four years old. . . watching my dad play his banjo and his guitar. I can remember feeling good about his music."

Other musicians draw praise from Ryan, ranging from Miles Davis, Paul Simon and Sting to Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard. "We played a show with Merle. He came on after us and just sitting there watching him I realized I'm watching a living legend. I got chills. Really big time. He was singing "Silver Wings," and I heard that one when I was three or four. Now I'm watching him singing this. Let's stop the clock!"

Musical and family bonds are strong between Ryan and Michael. Murphey says that his son has "supported me heart and soul ever since he's been a little bitty boy." He calls Ryan "my teacher" and "co-band leader."

Like his father, Ryan has far-ranging interests. "I'm just a city guy and, I like to write about people, and I like to be around a lot of people. And my mom has horses, and I love horses. When I was a teenager I was into horse judging and horse showing. I won the World Championship in horse judging in the 1986 show."

Ryan draws creative inspiration from his own life, of course. But Michael remains a prime inspiration as well. "I think 'Blue Night, Night Thunder' is one of the greatest albums ever made. I listen to it over and over. I go, 'Wow does he come up with some of that stuff?' And not just the famous ones like 'Wildfire' and 'Carolina in the Pines.' I love 'Rings of Life.' 'Desert Rat' I think is a classic. Whenever I'm thinking about writing a song I go back to those things. How can I make the music and the words click like that and still tell a story? I mean it's amazing stuff."

Spokesman for Western Culture

Murphey has taken a leading role in many aspects of western culture. He often appears at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, which honored "Cowboy Songs" with its prestigious Western Heritage Wrangler Award in 1991. He serves on the board for the Elko Cowboy Poetry Gathering.

WestFest, which Murphey began at Copper Mountain, Colorado, in 1987, is the ultimate western celebration-- a cowboy Woodstock with music, poetry, literature, and horses. Red Steagall, Don Edwards, Bill Miller, Sons of the San Joaquin, Baxter Black, and many, many other western stars have performed. Many of the artists perform for the Warner Western label which Warner Brothers formed after the success of Murphey's "Cowboys Songs."

But there's much more, including an American Indian village, complete with tepees, dancers, artists, and musicians. Adjacent to the Indian Village is a mountain man settlement, recreating another colorful piece of western history. Hundreds of vendors offer a bounty of western arts, crafts, food, and clothing.

Composer, singer, musicologist, rancher, Murphey wears lots of hats. At WestFest, his big black Stetson seems the perfect fit. He loves "standing on a stage singing a Western-style song. That's what makes me happy," he says. "It's what I do best." Audiences at WestFest couldn't agree more. They stamp, clap, howl, and whistle their delight after every song.

Murphey uses WestFest to show people that western "tradition and heritage is fun and it's alive. I think much like many people who have put living history into museums. We try to do that at WestFest. We also really try to showcase the contemporary, which is going to be tradition."

He has narrated several documentaries about ranch life. In 1989 he hosted visits to four "Great Ranches of the West" for a PBS film documentary. In 1993, he narrated "Cowboys of the Americas," a sweeping look at ranch life from Tierra del Fuego to Alberta.

As if song-writing weren't enough, Murphey is also writing a book. "I've been working on a book about the western way of life, which is something I've lived and had a chance to learn about an awful lot since WestFest started, by meeting all these people who are here. And it's going to be an in-depth book on what it really means to be a westerner. What it means to participate in cowboy life and ranch life. How it's truly connected to the land, and there'll be a good segment in there supportive of the actual laboring part of being a rancher."

Murphey's more than two decades in popular and western music have already left a large legacy. "I used to be a history buff," he jokes, "now I'm history myself!" Not quite.

Murphey delivers great shows with unflagging energy. On the first day of WestFest 1993, he opened the show at 11AM. He danced, sang, and talked his way through the day. From 10 to 11:30PM, he and the Rio Grande Band played nonstop. They did all the songs from his hard-driving 1993 album, "Cowboy Songs III-Rhymes of the Renegades." Murphey spent several years researching the history and folklore of famous bandits, Jesse James, Cole, Younger, Sam Bass, Bell Star, and more. Like his earlier "Geronimo's Cadillac," the title song carries a strong theme of social criticism.

Murphey's "Cowboy Songs" series skillfully blends history, myth, and melody. His music reflects many influences in his life. He's a fan of Buffalo Bill Cody and wears a long buff-colored buckskin jacket reminiscent of the great wild west showman. "Rhymes of the Renegades" includes two Marty Robbins hits, "Big Iron" and "El Paso." Robbins, says Murphey, "is one of my heroes" and "El Paso" is "the greatest song of my life." Through multi-track technology, Murphey sings "Big Iron" as a duet with Robbins, "probably the greatest honor I've been afforded in my life."

His 1994 album, "A Night in the American West," combines two of his favorite types of music--symphonic and cowboy. "We going to go back and reprise a lot of the western albums. Boil it down. It's going to be like a best of the cowboy songs album done with the symphony." He often performs his cowboy songs accompanied by symphonic orchestras.

Who enjoys western music today? "Probably ten percent have a real tie to ranching and cowboying and the actual lifestyle day-to-day. Ninety percent of the rest are people who are interested in it to participate in some way, or they are just vicarious."

Fans old and new will keep Murphey center stage for a long time to come. True to his roots, Murphey's music of choice remains cowboy. He's been a cosmic, urban, and outlaw cowboy. "From now on," he says, "it's just COWBOY!"

And for the future? "Give me a good steel-string guitar, a good pony, nights under western stars, and a 'home on the range' when I'm too old to ride."

Discography:

1973 *Cosmic Cowboy Souvenir*

1974 *Michael Murphey*

1975 *Blue Sky, Night Thunder* ["*Carolina in the Pines*" "*Wildfire*"]

1975 *Swans Against the Sky*

1976 *Flowing Free Forever*

1978 *Lone Wolf*

1979 *Peaks, Valleys, Honky-Tonks & Alleys* [includes five live performances]

1982 *Michael Martin Murphey* ["*What's Forever For?*" "*Still Taking Chances*" "*Ring of Truth*"]

1984 *Best of Michael Martin Murphey*

1986 *Tonight We Ride* ["*Innocent Hearts*" "*Fiddlin' Man*"]

1987 *Americana* ["*A Face in the Crowd*," sung with Holly Dunn; "*Almost Free*"]

1988 *River of Time*

1989 *Land of Enchantment* ["*The Heart Knows the Truth*" "*Desperation Road*"]

1990 *Cowboy Songs*

1990 *The Best of Country* [greatest hits collection]

1991 *Cowboy Songs II: Cowboy Christmas*

1993 *Cowboy Songs III: Rhymes of the Renegades*

1994 *A Night in the West*

Narrator of videotape documentaries:

"Great Ranches of the West" Atlas Video, Inc., 1992.

"Cowboys of the Americas," Warner-Western, 1993.