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Five cowboy poets invite us into their world

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Ray Fitzgerald's poems shift from comical to spiritual, but they're always about cowboying.

Cowboy poetry? Is that an oxymoron? Not at all, says poet **Dana Gioia**, chairman of the **National Endowment for the Arts** and a BBC commentator. "I think it's terrific."

Gioia, author of the controversial book *Can Poetry Matter?*, contends that cowboy poetry — along with hip-hop and poetry slams — propels poetry into mainstream culture, out of the musty world of academics.

"That's not to say (best-selling cowboy poet and **National Public Radio** commentator) Baxter Black is W.B. Yeats," Gioia said. But he notes approvingly that cowboy poetry typically includes rhyme, meter and narrative — traditional poetic devices out of fashion in other literary circles.

But those traditions were squarely in evidence at the recent Texas Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Alpine, where cowpunchers recited poems, played music and told far-fetched stories. This year's gathering attracted an estimated 1,000 people, a record for the event.

The Alpine festival is only one of an estimated 200 U.S. cowboy poetry gatherings held each year. For such a traditional-seeming form, the gatherings are relatively new: The first was held in 1985, when the **Western Folklife Center** in Elko, Nev., launched the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering.

Can only cowboy poets write cowboy poetry? Organizers of the Alpine event strive to invite only poets and musicians who have worked as cowboys or who have strong connections to cattle culture, such as ranch wives.

"We don't have Hollywood cowboys," said **Mike Stevens**, president of the volunteer committee that organizes the event, the nation's second-oldest. "When you are around these guys you just know," he said. "They're the real deal," said **Betty Tanksley**, another committee member.

But **Andy Wilkinson**, a cowboy musician, poet and historian, doesn't think such credentials matter. An artist-in-residence at **Texas Tech University**, he makes no bones about never having been a cowboy: "The worse horse wreck I got into was pushing a shopping cart with a bad wheel at the Piggly Wiggly," he likes to say. Still, he has strong family ties to the culture: His distant uncle was **Charles Goodnight** of the famous Goodnight-Loving Trail.

Joel Nelson

Unofficial host and poet laureate of the Alpine gathering, Joel Nelson, 61, spent most of his career as a full-time working ranch cowboy, mostly on the 140,000 06 Ranch near Alpine.

Nelson grew up in Seymour, northwest of Fort Worth. His father was a cowboy briefly before becoming a deputy sheriff. Nelson's mother read poetry to him, and he was enthralled with authors such as Rudyard Kipling, Robert Frost, Edgar Allan Poe and Stephen Vincent Benet.

"Poetry is poetry to me, regardless if it's free verse or cowboy poetry," he said.

In 1971, Nelson returned from Vietnam after serving in the Army's 101st Airborne. He found work as a cowboy in Alpine. Cowboying, he says, is more compatible with poetry than most other professions. Cowboys live and work in solitude and have a lot of time for self-reflection. Besides, riding horses is rhythmic, he said, and so lends itself to verse.

Nelson makes his living as a horse trainer, part-time welder and performer at cowboy poetry events. His poetry CD *The Breaker in the Pen* was nominated for a Grammy in the spoken-word category in 2000.

In 2002, Nelson wrote *Equus Caballus*, which traces the horse's history:

*I have run on middle fingernail through
Eolithic morning,
And I've thundered down the coach road
with the Revolution's warning.*

*I have carried countless errant knights who never found the grail.
I have strained before the caissons and moved the nation's mail. ...
I am roguish — I am flighty — I am inbred — I am lowly.*

*I'm a nightmare — I am wild — I am the horse.
I am gallant and exalted — I am stately — I am noble.
I'm impressive — I am grand — I am the horse.*

Oscar Auker

Oscar Auker, 15, looks the part of a boy cowboy. He shaped his cowboy hat into a "taco" style with the sides squeezed tight, a turkey feather in the band.

He hooks a thumb into his jeans' waistband as he recites a poem. He lives with his parents and 11-year-old sister on a ranch in Goodnight, a Texas Panhandle town. His dad is a working ranch cowboy, and so, for that matter, is Auker, who rides colts and performs ranch chores.

Home-schooled, Auker began reciting cowboy poetry in 2002 when his mother, Amy, gave him a speech assignment and he performed it at a youth cowboy poetry event. "

Yes sir, no sir," Auker responds to questions, before his mother encourages him to elaborate. "I recite classics," Auker said. "I don't write any of my own poetry."

One of Auker's favorite poets is Bruce Kiskaddon (1878-1950), who worked as a cowboy until 1926, when he moved to Los Angeles and found a job as a bellhop.

Among the 25 poems Auker has memorized is *Forgotten*, a Kiskaddon poem "about an old, poor horse, and nobody wants to put him down."

"I've known a few horses like that," Auker said. The closing stanza:

*He stands still. He ain't none worried,
fer he knows he's played the game.
He's got nothin' to back up from.
He's been square and ain't ashamed.
Fer no matter where they put him he was game to do his share
Well, I think more of the pony than the folks that left him there.*

Ray Fitzgerald

Ray Fitzgerald, 75, a former U.S. Border Patrol agent, writes stories about his cowboy life. Some of his poems are comical, some spiritual. Many include detailed accounts of cowboying, such as his preference for riding the "outside circle" on trail rides.

Asked why cowboy poets recite from memory, Fitzgerald made a sharp distinction between cowboy poetry and poetry readings, which he said "leave me cold."

Another cowboy poet, Randy Rieman, joined the conversation. Rieman, a cowboy and horse trainer from Lamy, N.M., is known as one of the best reciters of classic cowboy poetry. Like Fitzgerald and other cowboy performers here, Rieman said he would never read a work aloud unless he memorized it.

"The Western tradition is a storytelling tradition," said Rieman, who has committed 125 works to memory. In a traditional cow camp there wasn't enough light to read; cowboys could only recite what they had memorized.

Mike Beck

Mike Beck seems different from other cowboy musicians. His jeans are relaxed-fit, not the tight boot-cut kind. He wears comfortable "cow shoes" that lace up instead of cowboy boots. He wears his hair in a long braid.

"I'm the token Californian," Beck said.

Back home Beck often plays with his band, named Mike Beck and the Bohemian Saints. He said his songwriting is influenced as much by Bob Dylan, bluegrass and the Byrds as by traditional cowboy tunes.

Beck, 52, lives on a horse ranch in Salinas, Calif. At one time, he made his living as a full-time cowboy, including working on a 2 million-acre spread in Nevada. He offers horsemanship clinics in the U.S. and throughout Europe.

At a private show for about two dozen people late one night, Beck played an expanded selection of tunes, including one song with this line: "Ain't no yuppies here; it's damn near yuppie-free."

Jerry "Brooksie" Brooks

Jerry Brooks, 52, said she detests her given name. She prefers "Brooksie," the name she has printed on her business cards. She's among the top reciters of cowboy poetry.

Brooks, a preacher's daughter, was born and raised in New England. She remembers memorizing poetry for recitals when she was 7 or 8. Before graduating from high school, she moved out of her parents' house, lived in Chicago and eventually made her way to Utah. She worked in underground coal mines for 24 years before suffering injuries to her hip, back and neck.

Today she lives on 85 acres west of Sevier, Utah, where she cares for horses and the land.

She discovered cowboy poetry in the early 1990s. While visiting a friend, she noticed volumes of poetry by Robert W. Service, the Scottish-born Canadian poet known for writing on the Yukon gold rush.

"You like cowboy poetry?" her friend asked. Brooks said, "What's that?"

She left with volumes of poetry and cowboy songs, including *Songs of the Sage* by Curley Fletcher and *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, an anthology by John A. Lomax.

She began reciting cowboy poems publicly in 2000 when, she said, "I got the guts to do an open mic." While she agreed that "cowboy" is a nongender term, she said she isn't one. "I don't write cowboy poetry. I write mining poetry and other poetry. I'm not a cowboy poet."

Still, she said, "These fellows have accepted me in the tribe. There's no feeling like the acceptance these men and women have given me."

These days, Brooks performs six to eight shows a year, often driving to the remote locations in her Jeep with her dog Trooper. One evening, Brooks recited *Anthem*, a poem by Texan Buck Ramsey:

*And in the morning I was riding
Out through the breaks of that long plain,
And leather creaking in the quieting
Would sound with trot and trot again.*

*I lived in time with horse hoof falling,
I listened well and heard the calling
The earth, my mother, bade to me,
Though I would still ride wild and free.*

*And as I flew out on the morning
Before the bird, before the dawn.
I was the poem, I was the song.
My heart would beat the world a warning —
Those horsemen now rode all with me,
And we were good, and we were free.*