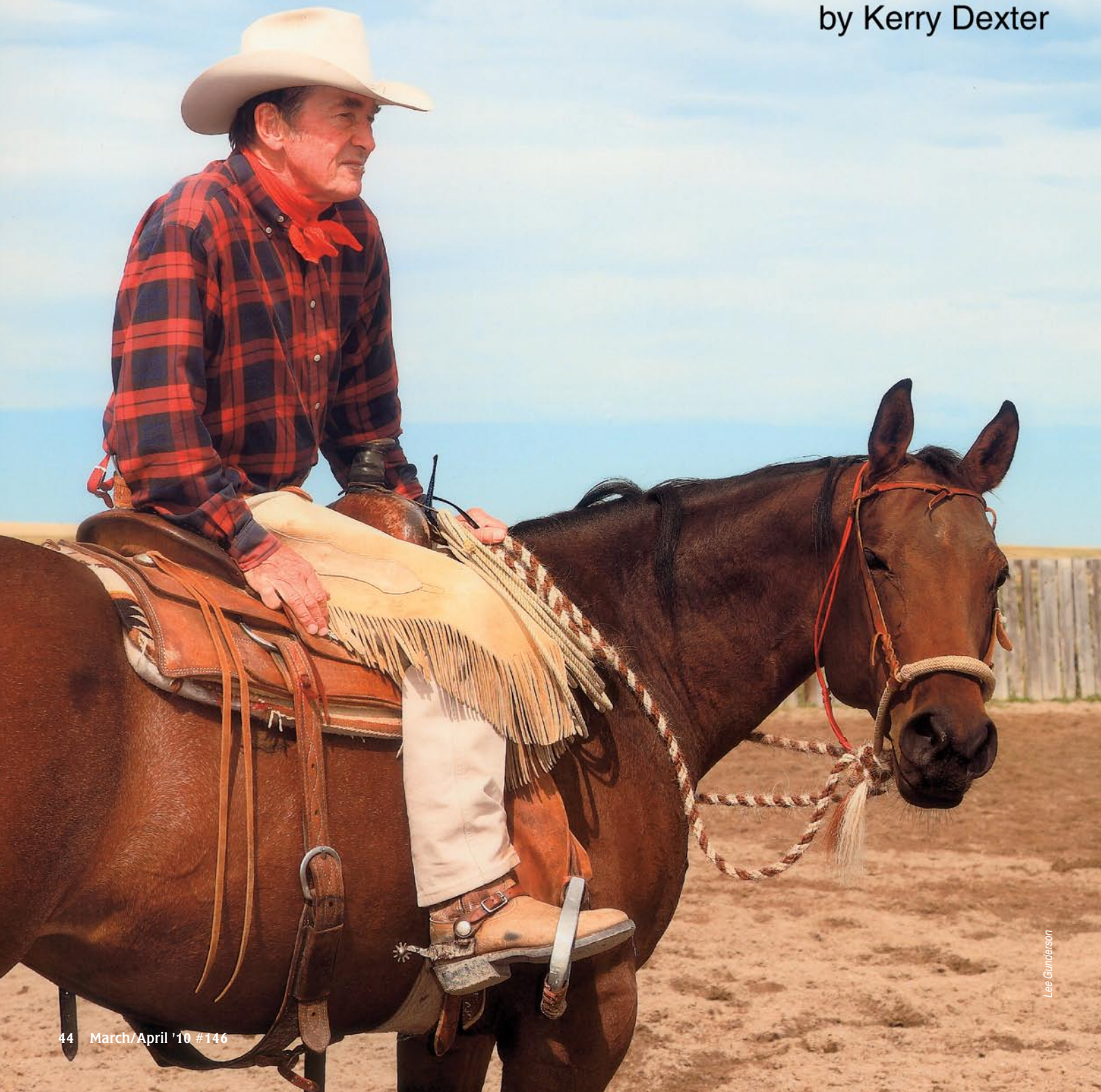


Ian Tyson

At Home on the Range

by Kerry Dexter



Lee Gunderson

For the last four decades or so, Ian Tyson has lived on the eastern slope of the Canadian Rockies in Alberta. It's ranch country, mountain and prairie, and although it is changing, still a place where those who live there both wrest their livings out of the land and know they have to work with land and weather to survive. "It's just a mosaic of Western values and emblems," Tyson said.

He should know. Some years ago, he had a hand in re-inventing the image of the West and rewriting the history of cowboy music. He was invited to come to the Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, in the early 1980s. "That's a huge cultural event. Back then it was really the beginning of a whole renaissance of the cowboy movement, everything from silversmithing to saddlemaking, to poetry, and then subsequently, to music," he said.

"When I went down there, those people just said hey, there's this Canadian guy from up in Alberta, he sings pretty good, he's got a good band, he's a cowboy, he's good and we're gonna go hear him. They didn't know anything about 'Four Strong Winds,' they didn't know anything about Ian and Sylvia, they just knew this guy's a cowboy and he sings good. Which was fantastic. And we blew them away, just blew them away. And I slowly came to the realization that I could change this music."

Tyson was not at all new to music. He grew up in western Canada, always around horses, and while he was laid up from a rodeo accident he picked up a guitar and started to teach himself to play. "It was 1957, I think. 'I Walk the Line' was the big song. That's what I learned, or tried to. Had lots of modulations in it, Johnny Cash and the Tennessee Three, and he had me whilin' away the hours tryin' to figure out what was going on. That was the beginning, pretty much." He was drawn to pick up the guitar because of rockabilly music. "Rockabilly hit western Canada then — it was a big deal, a really big deal," he recalled. "I just loved that stuff. I was in art college in Vancouver, and I had an opportunity to join a funky little band, and it was just a lot of fun.

"Then a couple of years later the folk thing happened. The big folk scare arrived, and 'Tom Dooley' was the huge song. I liked that, too. I didn't consider myself an authentic backwoods folksinger, never thought of that at all. I just went along with the flow." He moved to Toronto, with periodic stays back in the west, and was building a reputation as a singer in the city's clubs and looking for a duo partner. "Then I met Sylvia, and we were good at it; we had a gift. We certainly had a gift for a strange blending of our voices," Tyson said.

Sylvia was Sylvia Fricker, a young musician from Chatham in southwest Ontario who was planning to make the move up to Toronto for her music career. Tyson's interest at the time ran toward the bluesier side of folk,

while Fricker leaned toward English ballads. Though their musical tastes were somewhat different, they found common ground in the blend of their voices and in songs that ranged from ballads to blues, and soon included songs by other rising stars of the folk community, among them Joni Mitchell, Gordon Lightfoot, and Phil Ochs. "We soon became sort of the Kansas City Stars of Toronto," Sylvia recalled in an earlier conversation, describing their popularity back then, "so we thought it was time to hit the big time." They auditioned for and were signed by Albert Grossman, a New York-based music manager who at the time had just signed Peter, Paul and Mary and would also manage Bob Dylan, Gordon Lightfoot, and Janis Joplin, among others. Grossman told them he wasn't sure how much time he'd have, "but he took us on anyway. I think he decided we were fairly low maintenance," Sylvia said. "Canadians, you know," she added, laughing.

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Low maintenance the pair may have been, but the high quality of their music soon saw them playing top clubs, headlining at Newport and other major festivals, and selling out Carnegie Hall. Their first record, called *Ian & Sylvia*, came out in 1962 and comprised English and Canadian folksongs, along with a dash of blues and gospel. It became a calling card to introduce their distinctive sound to wider audiences. "Most of the recordings were taken right off the floor, no overdubs, or anything like that. We just opened up the mics," Ian recalled for the CBC in 1992.

Each of them had also begun to write songs. "It just so happened that the first song I wrote was 'You Were on My Mind,' and the first song Ian wrote was 'Four Strong Winds,'" Sylvia said. Both of those would become classics, crossing several genres and being recorded by many other artists.

Their next record was called *Four Strong Winds*. While he respects the fact that it's one

of his best-known and most-loved songs, Ian sometimes has found that a burden over the years. "I've written a lot of other songs since then," he said recently.

With a mix of their own songs, covers of other contemporary songwriters, and traditional music with imaginative arrangements, the couple, who married in 1964, kept on forging their own path through the folk-music scene. Keeping the energy they'd shown on folk songs such as "Nova Scotia Farewell" and "Jesus Met the Woman at the Well," they added country-flavored music, including "Twenty Four Hours from Tulsa" and enigmatic pieces such as Dylan's "The Mighty Quinn" to their set lists, along with a rockabilly take on the traditional song "When I Was a Cowboy" and a bluesy version of "Every Night When the Sun Goes In." They continued to write their own material, as well. On record, they experimented with adding horns and strings to the instrumentation.

Looking back, it's clear that Ian and Sylvia helped create the transition from folk to folk-rock, and pave the way for what is now known as Americana music. A folk-rock infused band project called *The Great Speckled Bird* left their folk fans puzzled and rock fans not quite ready to cross the folk divide, though, and an unfortunate record company situation left many copies of that disc in the warehouse. Two more duo albums followed, again with high-quality songwriting and singing, but personally and professionally, the couple had come to a parting of the ways. "Ian and I had very different musical tastes, always had, and that brought good tension and energy to the music," Sylvia said. "But when we split up, aside from any personal stuff, the musical split was becoming more obvious."

"We went into different worlds," Ian said. "Sylvia and I are very good friends, and we have a son, of course. She still does music, too. When I was trying to re-invent my career, though — the Ian and Sylvia thing, people just wouldn't let it alone. And I'm sure that happened for her, too. It was hard. People just wouldn't let it alone."

After the couple divorced, Ian spent some time in the Nashville music scene. "I got a couple of good demos out of it, really good demos, but they never went anywhere," he recalled. So he decided to head back to western Canada.

"I went up to Alberta, started working on a ranch for a friend of mine, and then bought a little ranch, and kept learning about that. It was a steep learning curve, but I kept at it," he said. "Music and horses, they've been my two loves all my life." So he also got together a band and played around the West. Then came the invitation to the Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko.

"That changed my life," he said. "That really changed my life. It was fresh, it was new, it was exciting, and here I was in my 40s. And



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I realized that I could take the old Saturday afternoon Western movie music and leave that behind, and make a new music. Forge a new music out of my writing, and I did. It changed my life, basically, and gave me a whole new career. It enabled me to sell records on my own terms." The songs he'd written while with Sylvia, including "Four Strong Winds," "Someday Soon," and "Summer Wages," often embodied Western philosophies, but this was whole new challenge. "It was the life that inspired, me, just the cowboy life. I was raised on Will James books as a kid on Vancouver Island, which is west of the West, and I cowboied around, but until I went to Elko, I didn't know that world existed," Tyson said. "It was still there in the 1980s, if you went the extra mile to find it, it was still there, though it's just about gone now."

He understood the life of the working cowboy, and of the people and lands of the

Rockies and the West, "and they accepted me completely," he said. "And I did write about it."

Tyson's Western and cowboy songs include character pieces about people who have shaped the West, clearly drawn descriptions of what it's like to ride the range, to be out in the weather, to make a life in an often unforgiving land, stories of the beauty of that land, and stories of working out the joys and sorrows of love, framed in that life and those landscapes. In "Irving Berlin (Is 100 Years Old Today)" he weaves that bit of a news report into the concerns of a rancher's day; in "Magpie" he takes the habits of that sometimes unwelcome bird into a metaphor for Western life and freedom. "Silver Bell" is a song of Christmas and being distant from well-loved places and people, framed in a Western image. That's the kind of mix that has sustained a loyal fan base internationally and kept people turning out to see Tyson's live gigs. "If you draw a line up and down the Rockies, that's

about where I play," he said. "People come out and fill up six and seven hundred-seat rooms. Some of them are my age, and some are in their 30s and 40s, and when I go out to sign CDs afterwards, there are always some young kids, too, which is great to see."

Not all of them are cowboys, either. His third Western album, *Cowboyography*, "was so big that it crossed over. It crossed over to the civilian population. It went double platinum in Canada. I just couldn't believe my good fortune," he said. "Here I was, writing far-out cowboy songs, pushing the envelope. Songs like 'Jaquima to Freno' and 'M.C. Horses' — those are hard-core songs about a subculture, real subculture stuff, no different than if you were writing about inside NHL hockey." While it's true that those songs and others like them will appeal most readily to working cowboys, Tyson has a gift of connecting with people outside that community through the details of that life and landscape.

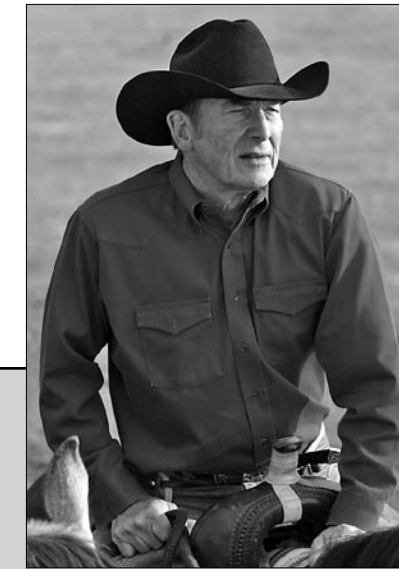
"They were selling. My wife, Tywlla, and I, we were ridin' high there for a while, really riding high, makin' a lot of money, had a lot of good horses and a big ranch." Tyson made several more albums, which were well received, but not the big sellers that *Cowboyography* had been. He continued to tour, as he still does, and to work with horses, as he still does. His marriage failed, though, and so did a subsequent love affair, and for a time he was estranged from his daughter with Tywlla.

All of those experiences formed the background to the songs on his most recent album, *Yellowhead to Yellowstone and Other Love Stories*. "It's sort of where I'm at right now with my writing," he said. "It's kind of a dark album. But you have to write about what you have. If life's not fun, then you're not writing fun songs."

The album opens with the title track, a song about change, loss, aging, what to keep and what to let go, and handling all that, told in the voice of a wolf who is relocated from western Canada to Montana. "Ross Knox" is a song set in the history of the West, about people living with change and distance; so is the more personal song "Lioness." Themes of loss and change, connection and disconnection, regret and pondering what's next make their way through 10 songs. Tyson ends on a note of hope in a song with the unlikely title of "Love Never Comes at All." "That's a declaration of continuance, you know. After the end of a love affair, it's continuance," he said. "Love will continue."

Yellowhead to Yellowstone also finds Tyson with a different singing voice. "A couple of years ago, I played a big outdoor show in Ontario. I fought the sound system and I lost," Tyson said. "I knew I'd hurt my voice, and it was recovering slowly when I was hit with a bad virus, which seemed to last forever. My old voice isn't coming back, the doctors told me, so I've had to get used to this new one. My guys, my trio, are really adaptable guys, and they've been great about changing keys around and all that. I don't have the bottom end any more, and I miss that. I was apprehensive about doing this record, but my friend Corb Lund, who's a fantastic musician, told me, 'Your old voice was getting boring anyway. Go ahead and do it!'" It's still Ian Tyson's voice, but more weathered now, with some rasp to it. "I think it may make people listen to the lyrics more," he said.

At the time of this conversation, Tyson was considering making some changes, possibly a move away from Alberta, possibly doing other sorts of writing. "I've been doing music a long, long time, and I think the perception is 'He's just been around forever,'" he said. "I'm trying to plan the next few years of my life. I'd like to do some writing before I tip over. I'd like to do some more good writing.



Maybe a novel of some kind, or a biography, or short stories."

He was looking out the window of his ranch house at a young horse, playing in the rain. "It hasn't rained here in a long time," he said, "and she's just running up to the fence and back, enjoying it. She's just beautiful." Later in the day, he planned to go down to the small stone building on the ranch where he often works on his music. "I'll play for a few hours," he said, "just to keep the chops choppin'."



Selected Discography

with Sylvia Tyson
Ian & Sylvia

[Visionaries Series] Vanguard (2007)

The Complete Vanguard Studio Recordings

Vanguard (2001), 4-CD

Live at Newport

Vanguard (1996)

You Were on My Mind

Columbia (1972)

Ian and Sylvia

Columbia (1971)

Great Speckled Bird

Ampex (1969)

Full Circle

MGM (1968)/Nashville Vanguard (1967)

Lovin' Sound

MGM (1967)

So Much for Dreaming

Vanguard (1967)

Play One More

Vanguard (1966)

Early Morning Rain

Vanguard (1965)

Northern Journey

Vanguard (1964)

Four Strong Winds

Vanguard (1964)

Ian & Sylvia

Vanguard (1962)



Books
La Primera: Story of the Wild Mustangs

[children's book — illustrated lyrics to the song]
Tundra Books (2009)

with Colin Escott

I Never Sold My Saddle

Greystone (1994, paperback 1997)

www.iantyson.com