

## On the Cutting Edge: Ian Tyson Cutting Records, Cutting Horses, Cutting Crap

by Lisa Mendonça

*“Did they sing all day?  
Did they dance all night?  
Did they ride their spade bit ponies  
Through the golden light?  
Did they find true love?  
Was it all a bunch of lies?  
Quin Sabe, maybe it was paradise.”  
—Ian Tyson, “Jaquima to Freno”*

First, some historical and biographical background. Prior to 1880, the Canadian prairies had been known primarily to Indians, fur traders, Mounties and missionaries. Between 1874 and 1881, however, cattle slowly supplanted bison on the range, and starving Indians, having lost this sole food source, were gradually reduced to reservation life, thereby leaving the rich grasses to cattlemen. The ranching boom, which began in 1881 and peaked in 1895 (see Slatta 26), stimulated the demand for cowboys. Early ranchers hired Indians and ex-mounted policemen, as well as the many cowboys who rode up from the United States, usually bringing with them cattle horses, as well as customs and traditions traceable to Old Mexico and Spain (Dempsey 11). Before long, Alberta became the economic and social hub of cowboy life. Even now, cowboys, although much fewer in numbers, continue ranching in Southern Alberta. Ian Tyson, a Vancouver native residing in Longview, Alberta on his T-Bar-Y ranch, is perhaps the most famous of these cowboys, not, of course, because of his superior ranching, but from his other, though closely related, career: western singer. Tyson has been hailed as the “lyrical biographer of Western culture” (Pynn 1) and proclaims him-

self to be the “Bob Dylan of cowboy music” (*I Never* 69). What Tyson’s great hero, Charles Russell, did with the paintbrush, Tyson does with his songs—brings the West to life in great detail and with an authenticity that comes from first-hand knowledge. Tyson’s ability to convey the real cowboy experience through his music is the most impressive aspect of his craft, and it is sustained by a conscious aesthetic of harsh realism. Tyson seeks to expose the difficult reality of life on the range, along with its accompanying misery; yet, his songs still convey his great affection for this vocation, and particularly for the land. This curious fusion of sentiments is one of several qualities that makes Tyson’s music worthy of examination.

In the 1930s, motion pictures sold a stereotypical image of the cowboy to the public. The American Western’s cowboy was romantic, a hero, free from constraints, living an exciting life of shoot-outs, violence, and Indian battles. In reality, of course, Canadian cowboy culture was much different from this representation. The historian L.G. Thomas notes that the Canadian West’s “body was American, but the spirit was English” (qtd. in Slatta 51). Canadian cowboys shared much with Americans: the same attitude, outfit, costume, lingo—even the same Texan drawl (Slatta 52). Canada’s western frontier, however, had law and order via the Mounties, and was thus relatively peaceful (Dempsey 2); cowboys rarely carried guns, and if they did, their targets were more likely animals than humans. Rather than participate in range wars and gun fights, these cowboys diligently carried out their duties on the ranch. The Pulitzer prize-winning novelist and historian, Wallace Stegner, fittingly says that Canada’s West was a “Mild” as opposed to a Wild West, but only in terms of shoot-outs rather than in terms of ruggedness of life (157). Canadian cowboys were responsible for the safe-keeping and growth of cattle and sheep herds, the preparation and execution of the two yearly round-ups, as well as other necessary labours that they “loathed” (Slatta 51)—including haying, milking, and fencing. Stegner explains: “[Cowboy] life was never romantic. It was hard, killing work for thirty a month. . . . Most cowboys didn’t live very long, as a matter of fact, not because they got shot up in saloons but because they got busted up by horses. . . . It was a rough life” (153).

In 1884, the *Calgary Herald* contrasted Canadian and American cowboys: “The rough and festive cowboy of Texas and Oregon has no counterpart here. Two or three beardless lads wear jingling spurs and ridiculous revolvers and walk with a slouch, [but] the genuine

Alberta cowboy is a gentleman” (qtd. in Slatta 51). Similarly, in 1881, Duncan McEachran, a Canadian rancher, wrote that “never was a more respectable body of men more maligned than the hard-working, manly fellows who are found at work on properly conducted cattle ranches” (qtd. in Slatta 51). The vocation of the Canadian cowboy, however, did not lack excitement. Working cowboys had the opportunity to compete in the rodeo, the purpose of which was to showcase the highly specialized activities—trick roping, horse cutting, wild cow milking contest, and the like—that the cowboys performed while carrying out their normal workdays on the ranch. Although these events incited rivalry between individuals and granges, these competitions were regulated, and rarely, if ever, resulted in violence. The competitors remained gentlemen even during the rodeo. For the most part, Hollywood’s defiant and combative cowboy could not be found on the Canadian frontier.

There is a long and sometimes not so honourable tradition of cowboy poseurs—often called dudes, which exists greatly even now. In the early days, many settlers wanted to portray themselves as citizens of the legendary frontier, and wished to send portraits of themselves in this guise to their friends and family back in the United States, Europe or Eastern Canada. The result was a demand for a distorted or sanitized image of the real cowboy. Studios, equipped with backdrops, costumes, and props, were built in order to cater to—and profit from—this need. In these photographs, however, the cowboys’ faces and hands did not show prolonged exposure to the sun or wind, the boots had no clinging dirt or dung, the shirts and vests were pressed, and the chaps looked far too clean. Obviously, this wardrobe never left the studio (Silversides 145). During the inter-War period and as late as the nineteen-seventies, “guest ranches” were built as well. These holiday destinations, catering to the town folk, were—and continue to be—popular retreats that offered leisure activities like horse-back riding (on extremely obedient horses), camping, bathing in cold mountain streams, hay rides, barn dances, and more recently, snow-mobiling and cross-country skiing (Silversides 146). Furthermore, the cowboy-fashion industry profited from these poseurs, and continues to do so. Brock V. Silversides asserts that these “weekend wranglers could not be more unlike the real cowboy if they deliberately tried” (145). Tyson concurs, noting, in a recent article, that a plethora of cowboys exist in Alberta these days—“doctor-cowboys, lawyer-

cowboys . . . weekend-cowboys in big hats and fancy trailers going down the road, back to the office Monday morning . . . [but] . . . real cowboys [are] working cowboys, custodians of the Spanish horse-back tradition that goes back 400 years in the American West” (“Cowboy Culture” 1). Evidently, a chasm has developed between the real cowboy and the dude, the former not especially favouring these wannabes.

Unlike the weekend wranglers that he despises, Tyson is a real working cowboy. Now in his sixties, he is an actual ranch hand—and has been for the last twenty years—who works twelve-hour work days on his Alberta ranch, sometimes in twenty-below winds (Herton 1). In his 1994 autobiography, *I Never Sold My Saddle*, Tyson claims that he was an “instant cowboy” because his cowboy instinct burned within him from an early age (14). Tyson’s father actually tried to dissuade his son from being a cowboy, an occupation he felt was not reliable and profitable. Although he “pooh-poohed” cowboy life, George Tyson paradoxically fed his son’s imagination with the books of Will James, the French Canadian who went west to become a cowboy, and, after having spent time in a Nevada jail, wrote and drew vivid evocations of cowboy life such as *Lone Cowboy: My Life Story* (1932) and *Smoky, the Cow Horse* (1926) (*I Never* 13). In his 1984 song “Will James,” Tyson admits that he never forgot James’s stories, “the tales of the wild and windy slopes,” that he “memorized those pictures,” and that he idolized their author as the “living” embodiment of the “perfect combination / Of riding high and living free” (*Ian*). Evidently, James’s books transformed Tyson and encouraged his desire to be a cowboy, inciting him to learn horse riding and to participate in amateur rodeos.

As he freely admits, Tyson “forgot all about the West [for] many years” (*I Never* 7). After graduating from the Vancouver School of Art, Tyson did not “go west”—or east in his case—to the prairies, but instead, grabbed his beloved guitar (which he did not learn to play until in his twenties) and ventured further east to Toronto. Arriving just in time for the folk boom of the late fifties and early sixties, he became half of the popular folk duo, Ian and Sylvia, and toured North America, playing the music circuits. Even during this fame-filled and lucrative period, Tyson was, by his own account, most interested in songs which had “some bluegrass picking in them or if they were Western-flavoured” (*I Never* 25). He also continued to attend rodeos, and with his earnings, bought a big cattle

farm east of Toronto and retreated there whenever he could, saying it “was a substitute for being out west” (*I Never* 43). Yet, the desire to be a cowboy still flowed through Tyson’s veins. After his folk duo died, Tyson tried his luck with another band and even did a stint as a television host for a country music program on CTV, “The Ian Tyson Show,” but these endeavors were not fruitful. Fulfillment laid elsewhere for Tyson, for, again by his own account, he was most happy when seated on a horse or “perched on a bale of hay in the manure and straw-laden confines of the old barn on his ranch” (*I Never* 43). Toronto was obviously not his niche; as he puts it, “I get too crazy when I’m in the city . . . I get claustrophobic and have to split” (*I Never* 43). Tyson articulates this very sentiment in his 1991 “Non Pro Song,” which is about a weekend cowboy who wishes he were a working cowboy. Like Tyson driving east from Toronto to his Newtonville ranch, this cowboy “can hardly wait” to “turn on [to] the gravel” from the paved interstate, to “leave the downtown core behind.” Dreaming about the “magic in the horses’ feet,” he is most eager to “saddle them ponies, open the gate” and “gather them cattle.” According to the “Non Pro Song,” cowboy life is an “addiction”: when a “man gets hooked he[’s] never the same” for “all he wants to do is ride and hunt a cow” (*And Stood*).

But, as Tyson explains, “you can’t be a cowboy down in Ontario. If you’re gonna be a cowboy you’d better do it in Alberta or Montana or Wyoming” (qtd. in Mitchell 1), or as Tyson’s biographer, Colin Escott, puts it, if you decide to be a cowboy out east, “people don’t accept it. They think you’re an idiot or a phony. That’s why Will James went West. That’s why Ian Tyson went West” (29). Indeed, in 1976, after his divorce from Sylvia and a short and unenjoyable sojourn in Nashville, Tyson finally headed west to Alberta, where, in the words of “Chasin’ the Moon,” “God’s eye lights up the night sky” (*Eighteen* 1994). Finding his way to a ranch near Pincher Creek, he worked as a ranch hand and played rodeos, and, as Escott remarks, became most interested in “cutting horses—not cutting records” (*I Never* 51). “In a lot of ways,” says Tyson, reflecting on this period, “[it] was the happiest time of my life” (*I Never* 43). In 1978, Neil Young recorded Tyson’s “Four Strong Winds,” and Tyson used the royalties to purchase the first part of his T-Bar-Y ranch in the foothills of the Rockies south-west of Calgary, an abode that was to become his permanent western address. He had finally discovered his niche—the southern Alberta foothills. For Tyson, “this [*would*]

be the year he puts it all together / This [*would*] be the year he finally gets it right" ("Non-Pro Song," *And Stood*).

In 1978, after a four-year hiatus, Tyson released another album, *One Jump Ahead of the Devil*. Although it did not soar up the music charts, this album helped Tyson to rediscover his musical talent and to realize that his voice was in better shape than ever. Escott notes that during his years with Ian and Sylvia, Tyson had strained his vocal chords, wrestling with sub-par sound systems and trying for that elusive popular sound; now, as he explored his voice's true highs and lows and its natural warm contours, he found that it had aged well (*I Never* 54). In the early eighties, Tyson discovered his calling: he began recording traditional cowboy songs and Irish ballads, and before long started to compose his own original cowboy music and lyrics. Tyson explains that this new music was "coming from some wellspring within him, bubbling to the surface in a process that he didn't altogether understand" (*I Never* 54). In "The Gift," a hymn to Charles Russell, Tyson writes about the painter's gift—the "magic" that "God put . . . in young Charlie's hand." Tyson proceeds, "[God] saved His greatest gift for Charlie," and told him to "get her all down"—that is, to record the life of the West in realistic detail (*Cowboyography* 1986). Similarly, Tyson recalls that when he started writing western music, "it was like the gods of music came down and said to me, 'It's yours.' It was a gift. I had the craft to get it all down. You need the craft to receive the inspiration" (Stern 6). By doing more than simply recording old songs, by writing his own western music, Tyson became the first new Western singer in several decades, and helped to revitalize what seemed to be a dying genre of music.

## II

Now some musical and poetic background. In 1949, *Billboard Magazine*, one of the music industry's biggest magazines, combined the sub-genres, western and country, together under one category, "country and western." These two types of composition are actually quite distinct, for while country music originates in the Appalachians; western's habitat is the flat prairie, surrounded by howling wind instead of the solid-rock mountains. Moreover, the United States' western settlers, those who would make their way to Alberta, learned guitar from the Spanish vaqueros south of the bor-

der, finding the instrument the perfect accompaniment to their cattle calls on lonely prairie nights (Green 10). By the time Tyson made his second entrance onto the scene, this time with his cowboy hat, western music, which emerged from the prairie tradition, had been overshadowed by country; it was the silent partner in *Billboard's* "shotgun wedding" (*I Never* 54). Some critics have called Tyson "unhyphenated Western" (Stern 2) and his songs, the "antithesis of 'new country'" (Herton 1). For the most part, Tyson refrains from recording in Nashville, country music capital, because he feels that it does not provide a voice for the working cowboys, the group he wishes to represent. In a recent interview, Tyson remarks, "[i]n Nashville, they work very, very hard to let the world know they're urbanized. They don't want that rural image" (Pynn 2), and elsewhere he has said that "those people in Nashville aren't writing songs about cowboys. They're writing about rural people who have been screwed up by city life" (*I Never* 62). During his brief stay in Nashville in 1975, Tyson recalls that he felt out of place playing the music game, which, he explains, is a "big part of this business"—a part he does not only want to refrain from participating in but also disagrees with. "I could never do that industry schmooze," he says, "Industry awards—I hate them. I get claustrophobic. I want out of there. I don't see the connection between going to a cocktail party in Nashville and getting my records played in Omaha, Nebraska" (*I Never* 47). Reporters, Jane and Michael Stern, add that Tyson does not "fit the mold of platinum-record Nashville 'hat acts' like Garth Brooks and Dwight Yoakam who wear showy cowboy duds and put on concerts as gaudy as any rock star" (3). For Tyson, cities like Nashville are far too distant—both geographically and spiritually—from his ranch; instead, he signs with Stony Plain, an Edmonton-based, Canadian independent "roots music" label ("Stony Plain" 2). Far from Nashville and close to the range, Tyson vows that he writes music for and about "the 700 working cowboys in North America" (Herton 1).

Tyson has undoubtedly spoken eloquently and movingly for this subculture, particularly in his nine western albums. In the Introduction to the 1984 compilation album, *Ian Tyson*, Jay Dusard declares that Tyson's music "damn sure underscores, boldfaces and capitalizes the WESTERN component of the country-western genre" (1). Tyson's lyrics are replete with western allusions and cowboy terminology, references that only the cowboy subculture could easily

identify. In “Claude Dallas,” for example, Tyson actually identifies his intended audience, exclaiming, “Come gather round me buckeroos” (*Cowboyography*), a “buckeroo,” of course, being a cowboy. Arguably, Tyson discovered his potential audience when he performed at Elko’s 1984 Cowboy Poetry Gathering, an event that aimed to preserve the art of cowboy poetry. The audience, made up of working cowboys and ranchers, understood Tyson’s rare western tunes, and responded immediately and enthusiastically (Mullins 5). For Tyson, Elko was a sign, an event that “gave a focus to the whole cowboy subculture,” an “epiphanous thing that brought all these subculture Westerners together” (Flynn 2). Yet, Tyson’s music has managed to reach far more people than a subculture: in 1986 alone, his seminal album, *Cowboyography*, was bought by well over 100,000 people—“mostly . . . people who don’t know which end of a horse gets up first” (Escott, *All the Good ’Uns* 1). Moreover, Tyson has gained the music establishment’s respect and recognition, and has won a plethora of awards, including top honours such as the Canadian Country Music Academy’s Album of the Year and Male Country Vocalist of the Year; in 1995, he was inducted into the Order of Canada. Tyson is now hailed as the “Stetson-crowned god in Alberta” (Herton 1).

### III

Despite his success, Tyson remains firmly grounded in the West. Even when writing albums—which he does in a cabin thirty miles from his ranch—he still works on the range and trains horses. Jay Dusard, in his Introduction to *Old Corals and Sagebrush* (1983), says that Tyson would arrive at his cabin early every morning and work till early afternoon, then return to his ranch to train cutting horses, occasionally spending the night up in the shack (1). Tyson also does about sixty show dates a year, but is sure to block out roundup time in the fall and calving in the spring (Hackett 2). In a 1996 interview, he remarked, “I’m out there calving these poor old heifers at 27 below in March so I don’t have to worry about drifting too far from that life” (Herton 1). Even his business cards, which he keeps tucked inside the sweatband of his cowboy hat, read “Ian Tyson, Cutting Horses” (Herton 1), and list not only his address and phone and fax numbers, but also the brand of his ranch, the name of his stud horse and the names of the stud’s sire and dam (Stern 2). Tyson is no ama-

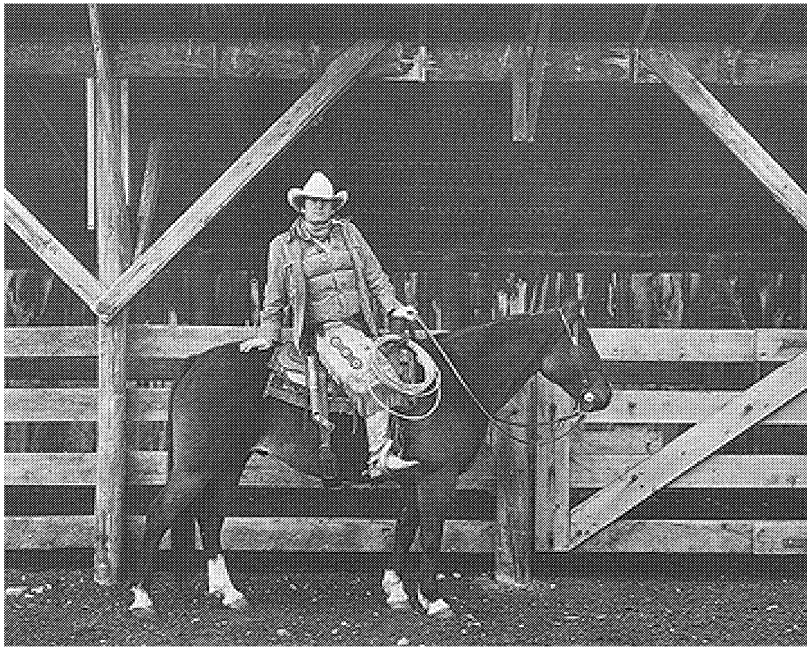


teur horse rider, as evinced by the fact that he participated in the Calgary Stampede and was a finalist in the 1989 Fort Worth National Cutting Horse Association Futurity. The cowboy poet, Wallace McRae, recalls the time when Tyson, along with his fierce crop-eared horse, visited his Montana ranch: “that son-of-a-buck just blew up. Well, I had always thought that Ian was just a cowboy-come-lately . . . [but] he really put on a ride”, and although the horse tried its best to dislodge its rider, “Ian turned his toes and rode that horse” (Mullins 6). Tyson’s cowboy image is no “affectation,” and, as Escott points out, “he has [a] horseman’s gait to prove it” (*I Never* 8).

Many reporters include physical descriptions of Tyson in their articles, probably because he fits the cowboy archetype so well—and so effortlessly. For example, Alanna Mitchell notes of him in a *Globe and Mail* article: “He has not shaved. He does not smile. Still lanky, he wears a faded jeans shirt, left sleeve unbuttoned, dark jeans that bag at the ankle, hiking boots and a well-broken-in white cowboy hat. He has the strong, good smell of a man who has been working outside in the sun all morning” (1-2). An earlier article, published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, reports that “Tyson is head-turning handsome in a purely cowboy way: tall and lean, with a rugged face etched by wind and sun and a fair amount of whisky . . . his gaze is rock-steady; it is a look that calms a skittish horse . . . his hands are tough and strong” (Stern 4). Another reporter notes Tyson’s entrance into an Elko restaurant: he walks “in a cowboy hat and winter ranch coat; he cuts a classic Western figure silhouetted by the noon light” (Christensen 1). Such articles reinforce Tyson’s cowboy authenticity and durability, qualities that he wishes to stress himself.

Tyson’s compact disks offer his audience more than music; the CD jackets, as well as the photographs found in the attached leaflets, are an integral part of Tyson’s product. On most of his CD covers, Tyson appears to be frozen in time—in the golden age of the cowboy, the 1800s and early 1900s. Escott points out that the cover photo of *Cowboyography* (1986) has an “immutable stillness that echoe[s] back to the time when people would stand motionless for seconds to have their image engraved” (*I Never* 68). The sectioned monochromatic colours of the cover of the photograph do indeed suggest that it comes from a bygone age, and could very well have been included in a historical study of the West. The covers of *Ian*

*Tyson* (1984) and *Old Corrals and Sagebrush* (1983) have a similar effect. In fact, the latter bears a striking resemblance to a 1905 photo of Hugh McNaughton, the foreman of a Bow River Ranch, which is reproduced in *Silverside's* photographic history book. In both pictures, each man is seated on his dark horse, leaning his body's weight onto his right arm that is stretched back, resting on the horse's rump; their left hands hold the reigns. They are also dressed similarly—white hat, neckerchief, jacket, and scuffed chaps—and both wear a half-smile as they boldly face the camera straight on.



Ian Tyson, cover: *Old Corrals and Sagebrush*, Stony Plains Records. Photograph by Jay Dusard, copyright 1982.

Tyson usually also includes some “in action” shots in his CD jacket. *Eighteen Inches of Rain* (1994) and *All the Good 'Uns* (1996) contain pictures of Tyson rounding up cattle, and the latter also includes a photograph of Tyson riding a moving horse, indicating that Tyson does not only pose with horses, but can ride them too. Significantly, most—if not all—of the photo sessions took place, not at a studio or ranch that was rented out for the day, but at Tyson's own T-Bar-Y ranch. Often, the photographers even shot photos of Tyson as he carried out his typical daily chores. The pho-

tographers for these albums, namely Jay Dusard and Karl Markus, apparently share Tyson's realist aesthetic; indeed, as Escott notes, in their photographs, they wished to "separate the spurious from the authentic and capture what was real before it was gone" (*I Never* 68). Tyson's 1994 autobiography, *I Never Sold My Saddle*, is the icing on the cake: packed with candid photographs of Tyson and his horses, the Tyson family ranch and the horse-riding Tyson family, the book clearly aims to dispel any further doubt about Tyson's cowboy authenticity. Tyson's lyrics are also, as Escott says, "tempered with a stiff dose of reality" (*I Never* 56) that he articulates as an aesthetic in his 1986 song "Claude Dallas." Tyson recounts the true story of a fugitive survivalist who shot two Idaho game wardens in the early eighties, and does so with meticulous detail, from



Hugh McNaughton, foreman, BowRiver Ranch, west of Calgary, AB, 1905. Photographer unknown. Provincial Archives of Alberta (A.1598).

Dallas's defiant gaze to the direction of the warden's fall after being shot. Tyson admits, however, that, after the wardens and Dallas "stared each other down," it is "hard to say what happened next / Perhaps we'll never know . . . [because] . . . it's hard to say who'd drawn his [gun] first" (*Cowboyography*). Rather than attempt to fancifully fill in the gaps of his story, Tyson strives to represent the event as honestly and accurately as possible—his general aim when writing songs. Charles Russell, Tyson's hero, subscribed to a similar aesthetic as he painted the landscape, animals, and individuals that he beheld everyday. With Russell, as Tyson puts it in "The Gift," "all was seen and all remembered," whether it was "the light on horsehide shining," a "cowcamp on a rainy morning," or the "twisting wrist of the Houlihan throw" (*Cowboyography*). Considering that Tyson, like Russell before him, belongs to the subculture that he represents, he may confidently claim, as he so often does, that his "music is . . . real," that he writes "musical history" (qtd. in Cockburn 1).

For the most part, Tyson, who is very familiar with the hardships on the range, does not romanticize the cowboy experience, but, on the contrary, reflects his view that, when cowboy reality is revealed, "country life doesn't sound very romantic at all" ("Cowboy Culture" 1). In his Introduction to *Ian Tyson* (1984), Jay Dusard remarks that Tyson, along with his fellow working cowboys, toils "out there in the hardest and driest, the rockiest and brushiest of it, the back-of-beyond where the wind might just tear off your skin" (3). Tyson often refers to what he calls Alberta's "violent mood-swings" (*Equinox* 1), an inconstant climate that makes ranching more difficult and, as he says in "Alberta's Child," "drive[s] them ol' northern boys flat wild" (*Old* 1983). Alberta's winter, he proceeds, is characterized by "twenty below" weather and "too much wind," while in the spring, he informs us in "Colorado Trail," the winds continue to "wail" and the rains begin to "weep" (*Ian*). Philip Ashton Rollins, cowboy historian, fittingly remarks that the nature of the West is rarely gentle—that it asks no favours and gives no quarters—and each western man is forced to constantly hear the various intimidating and inconvenient roars of nature (67).

Alberta's moody weather, however, only adds to an already demanding vocation. In a recent article, Tyson described ranch life on the northern plains: "the reality of ranching on the Northern plains is the thankless job of putting up enough winter feed . . . stock

raising . . . and the manufacture of winter feed—more and more winter feed. . . . Hard work, endless winter feeding, and the stress of spring calving” (*Equinox* 1-2). Just as Tyson repeatedly refers to winter-feeding in this article, he often employs repetition in his songs, and, in both cases, suggests that, at times, ranch life can be extremely monotonous and uninteresting. In “Springtime,” for example, he repeatedly sings the same phrase, so that everybody seems to be “pulling calves”—Gary, Lonnie, Waddie, Larry, Jean, and himself. This repetitive activity not only ties these scattered individuals together in the midst of a vast landscape, signaling their solidarity, but also intimates the monotony and unexciting nature of their work: “pulling calves,” not horse races and shoot-outs. Similarly, in “Colorado Trail,” Tyson repeats the words “Ride,” “Movin’ on,” and “Along” (*Ian*). Although these words all suggest motion, no sense of destination, let alone gusto, is evident: the ride along the Colorado Trail not only appears aimless, but dull as well. As depicted by Tyson, cowboys lead lives of routine and hard work; his songs thus tend to debunk notions of an exciting and romantic cowboy culture.

Far from idyllic, Tyson’s 1989 ballad, “The Banks of the Musselshell,” chillingly recounts a young man’s regrettable run with a diabolic cow boss, Bill Ducharme. The song evokes Satan with a fine sense of archetype, from Ducharme’s “devilish red” face to his “one bad eye.” The various references to Hell reinforce the connection between Ducharme and the devil. From the outset, Tyson identifies Ducharme with the “heat of the Texas sun,” and later reveals that this cow boss had formerly survived a bygone prairie fire, or more specifically, “crawled back from the dead.” The setting, moreover, is an “empty land . . . so wild and hard,” which, like Hell, is not only found “below,” but is also a place of torment and misery. As if making a deal with the devil, the youth, unaware of the cow boss’s “darker side,” hires on with Ducharme, making a “solemn promise to ride with him through hell.” Like Satan, Ducharme, the tempting “one-eyed Lucifer,” introduces his new hand to sinful pleasures—to strong liquor and to his troop of “angels and their soft forbidden charms.” The youth becomes particularly “stuck” on Annie, and, consequently, “indentured” to his sinister cow boss, destined to forever “stay one jump ahead of the guns of Bill Ducharme,” a line that recalls Tyson’s 1978 album, *One Jump Ahead of the Devil*. Just as the youth, despite the risk and ensuing torment, continues to pursue

“blue-eyed” Annie, Tyson is drawn—addicted—to his uncertain and often brutally tough, or, perhaps more suitably, hellish vocation (*I Outgrew*).

Although Tyson’s lyrics often explore the harsh reality of cowboy culture, he remains attached to his vocation, as well as to the often hostile landscape. In *Topophilia*, Yi-fu Tuan explains that, at times, an individual’s affective ties to a place may indeed be a source of misery (93). Consistent with Tuan’s theory, many of Tyson’s songs, like “The Banks of the Musselshell,” take despondency and loneliness as their subject matter. In “Colorado Trail,” for example, a solitary cowboy rides through the storm, “all the lonely night,” thinking about his sweetheart in Abilene, where it is “nice and warm and dry” (*Ian*). Tyson also sings about “a cowboy standin’ out near the fence line” who “wishe[s] he didn’t feel so alone,” a cow boss who is “all broke up inside,” and a “lonesome” rancher, who has “seen better days” and is “waiting for a change” (“Heartaches are Stealin,” *Eighteen*; “Cowboy Pride,” *Cowboyography*; “Eighteen Inches of Rain,” *Eighteen*). These cowboys seem as flat as the land they work on, and many of them turn to the bottle in order to cope with their difficult vocation. One of Tyson’s cowboys admits, “I drink before I ride [because the] bottle brings me courage,” while another spends his time at the old Longview Saloon, getting “high on a bottle of rye” (“Old Cheyenne,” *Cowboyography*; “The Coyote and the Cowboy,” *Cowboyography*).

Nonetheless, Tyson also sings about cowboys who demonstrate self-reliance and resilience in the face of hardships. Rollins reminds us that “courage was an earmark of the cowboy’s trade . . . [and] bravery was a prerequisite both to entering and pursuing the vocation” (65). Despite occasional regrets, cowboys rarely complained because, as Rollins explains, they associated complaints with quitting, and the cowboy was no quitter; each western man “had no wish to listen to whimpering from mere humans like himself . . . the West demands you smile and swallow your troubles like your food. Nobody wants to hear about other men’s half-digested problems” (67). “The Canadian cowboy,” Hugh Dempsey adds, “as a rule, was tough [and] hardy” (1). In “Cowboy Pride,” Tyson explains that, besides other things, cowboy pride involves not wanting or asking for help and a “mind your own damn business” mentality (*Cowboyography*). Even when a cowboy finds himself on the “poverty line with a working cowboy’s wage,” runs the lyric of “The Coyote and

the Cowboy,” he insists that “he’s doing fine” and vows to surmount his situation (*Cowboyography*). In “Eighteen Inches of Rain,” Tyson also emphasizes “lack”: “Not a broke horse on the place / Pickup truck won’t go, / Tractor lost a wheel ’bout a week ago.” Yet, he asserts, “I’ll make do with what I got” (*Eighteen*). Not surprisingly, Tyson, like a typical cowboy, fiercely believes in self-reliance, and is not impressed with Canada’s social policies, particularly those that tend to spoon-feed citizens as though they are victims requiring handouts. Considering that Tyson believes there is no longer a need to strive for anything “because the state will pick you up every time you fall down” (*I Never* 77), it is ironic that Canada’s Reform Party, which advocates “less government, less handouts, less immigration,” tried—but without success—to recruit Tyson for the 1993 federal election. Although he declined their offer, Tyson does sympathize with this party’s platform, because, as he says, he wants “less of all the things that have sapped cowboy pride” (*I Never* 77).

In part, ranchers endure the various difficulties of life on the range in order to assert their cowboy pride. In “Springtime,” Tyson, Gary, Lonnie, George and company seem to derive a certain amount of pride in saying, “We made it through another on the northern range,” a mantra which echoes throughout the entire song (*Cowboyography*). Tyson repeatedly emphasizes that he and his fellow ranchers—“we”—triumph over their obstacles without any external assistance. This sentiment is also evident in “The Coyote and the Cowboy,” in which Tyson conflates himself with the coyote, a “survivor” who endures, among other things, extreme temperatures (*Cowboyography*). In “Alberta’s Child,” he even argues that Canadian cowboys, those who toil daily on the ranch, regardless of temperature, are tougher than their American counterparts—the “old boys down in Texas” who seem to sit around, chewing Copenhagen and drinking Coors, talking about their lovers and adventures (*Old*). Tyson, along with his fellow ranchers, appears most proud of his ability to sustain himself in the face of nature’s hardships and, as Tuan further argues, such pride is another manifestation of topophilia—that is, a love of place (97). Accordingly, Tyson vows that, despite the many difficulties, “he’ll always be Alberta’s child” (“Alberta’s Child,” *Old*).

Throughout his music, Tyson’s great love for and kinship with Alberta’s nature and wildlife is evident. At times, he even relishes

Alberta's temperamental weather—the storms that come out of a clear blue sky without warning, bringing snow, ice, and plunging temperatures. In "Springtime in Alberta," he compares Alberta's weather to a moody lover—her "love comes and goes . . . just like the weather." As the song proceeds, he continues to conjoin an inconstant lover with the unstable weather, so much so that when he remarks, "So lost in love was I," the listener may be hard-pressed to determine whether he is intimating his feelings for nature or for a woman (*And Stood*). Tyson also compares nature to a lover in "Summer's Gone," where days are "as warm as a lover's kiss before she says goodbye" (*Lost* 1999), and in "Colorado Trail," where his lover has "eyes like the morning star / cheeks like a rose" (*Ian*). Intimating his kinship with animals, Tyson writes in "Smuggler's Cove," that, while walking on the trails, "little wolves [walk] beside [him]" (*Lost*). Borrowing Dr. Brewster Higley's lyrics, he further declares that, for him, home is where "the buffalo roam" and "the deer and the antelope play" ("Home on the Range," *And Stood*). Stephen R. Kellert argues that humans are particularly drawn to creatures that remind them of themselves—that is, creatures that appear to endure an "analogous experience"(7). Such is the case with Tyson who, in his lyrics, has a tendency to conflate human beings with animals. Over the course of the "Coyote and the Cowboy," Tyson blurs the distinction between the animal and the human. Initially, the cowpuncher "get[s] high on a bottle of rye" while the "coyote gets drunk on the moon." By the song's close, however, the cowpuncher distinguishes himself from a "cowboy [who] got high on a bottle of rye," and identifies himself, or more accurately "mate[s] for life," with a "bushy tail coyote queen," singing of himself and his "coyote wife," "We got drunk on the moon" (*Cowboyography*). Tyson compares humans to other animals as well: the hawk, crow, and white gull "must make their way home" the "best way that they know," he remarks, a journey that is "no different for you and for me" ("Til the Circle is Through," *Eighteen*). In his 1991 song, "Magpie," he exclaims, "Holy Moses magpie / I am you—you are me," for just as the magpie rises early and traverses the hills, searching for sustenance, particularly meat, so too does the cowboy, who works on the range in order to earn a living. Their shared desire "to be free" also connects them, as well as incites both of them to build a "big house" with a "front and a back door" (*And Stood*). More than almost any other Tyson song, "Magpie" affirms an



affinity between Alberta's ranchers and the wildlife that surrounds them.

For ranchers, much of their affection for the natural world stems from the fact that they depend on nature as well as animals to make a living; their vocation demands that they remain close to the land and that they cooperate with the elements. As Tuan points out in *Topophilia*, physical intimacy with nature elicits a sensual response, which in turn cultivates an emotional attachment with the environment (96). Tyson is fascinated and delighted by the natural world—the “blood red” sun, the touch of horse hair or a coyote's bushy tail, the coyote's howl, galloping horse feet, as well as the sound of “springtime sighing all along the creek” (“Lost Herd,” *Lost*; “Springtime,” *Cowboyography*). These sights and sounds remind Tyson that he is at *home*, and consequently foster his well being.

Tyson, however, does not appreciate all the sights and sounds he experiences on the ranch: the incessant cell phone beep, barbed wire, the roar of all-terrain vehicles, the buzz of a helicopter's rotating wings. In particular, he is quite disheartened by the growth of agribusiness, and admires men “on horseback” who are “still keeping on,” or those on “the wagon, working cattle in the old cowboy way” (“Legends of Cutting,” *Lost*). He asserts that “Easterners—the citified stockholders and lawyers and their ilk who control the increasingly mechanized cattle industry—haven't got a clue about the deep traditions that have existed in cattle country for over a century” (Flynn 1). For example, he notes that Cargrill, a multinational agricultural conglomerate, kills five-thousand head of cattle a day (Flynn 3). In “Summer's Gone,” Tyson, emphasizing the pathos of the old-fashioned cowboy such as himself, laments, “all the snow boots way too small / left behind, goodbye” (*Lost*). As agribusiness expands, devising more modern and easier ways of raising cattle, ranchers are outgrowing their once indispensable snow boots—discarding them, leaving them in the past, as if no longer useful and necessary. The traditional “big white cowboy” is struggling to hang on as giant slaughter plants employ more and more immigrants willing to work for minimum wage (“Summer's Gone,” *Lost*). The cheap immigrant labour, Tyson says, is a “type of labour that will spill over into the last traditional cowboy stuff . . . [and] they'll be on [three-wheeled] vehicles and they won't have to brand anymore, because they'll put a microchip in the calf's ear. . . . It's not good” (Flynn 3).

Tyson also fears other changes occurring in the West, those that have been happening for over a century. In "The Gift," God tells Russell, who was also most apprehensive about change, to "get her all down before shine goes / You gotta get her down 'cause she's bound to go" (*Cowboyography*). The term "bound" suggests that *the* West—its golden age—was destined to disappear, but also reinforces the idea that increasingly more boundaries were being placed on the formerly open and unfenced landscape; thus, as the land became more and more "bound," traditional western culture was "bound" to vanish. Dusard, in his Introduction to Tyson's self-titled album, recalls that, in the late 1800s, "it was possible to ride well into Montana and never have to step down to open a gate"; before long, however, barbed wire got "strung at a dizzying rate: first by nesters fencing free-roaming cattle out, then by ranchers fencing their herds in" (2). In his 1997 Elko keynote address, Tyson adds regretfully, "the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway and the homesteaders combined with Canadian nationalism and fear of manifest destiny gave reality to a political line that bisected the geographic unity of the northern plains" (1-2). He also laments this division because it threatened the cultural fluidity between the north and the south. "The culture is very similar on both sides of the line," he contends (Pynn 2), "[for] a true cowboy doesn't believe in the Canada-US border, nor the border with Mexico, for that matter. Theirs is a 'pan-western' experience, following the Plains up the continent" (Provencher 8). Tyson stresses the kinship between cowboys on either side of the "Great Divide" in his music as well: on Tyson's albums, songs about Texas, Montana, the Nevada deserts, the Owyee Range, and the Blue Mountains of Mexico sit beside numbers on Red Deer, Fort Worth, and Calgary, Alberta. This entire area is, what Tyson calls, his "turf" (Pynn 2); his music has no borders. Even now, over a century after the construction of the railway, the West continues to be divided and subdivided thanks to sprawling cities, eco-tourism, the rise of trophy homes catering to the affluent, and the increasing presence of weekend cowboys seeking their own "twenty acres" of land ("Stony Plain" 3). In his Introduction to *Ian Tyson*, Dusard astutely describes the changing western landscape:

The cow country has been . . . winned, dined, redesigned and strip-mined; encroached upon, poached upon, irrigated, radiated, Inter-stated and Californicated; suburbanized, atomized, condominimized,

Geodesic-domed and mobile-homed, smelted and Sun-Belted; squatted on and Watted on; screwed, skidooed, whizzed and agribizzed.  
(2)

Tyson regards these transformations with much apprehension. “The open country will just disappear,” he worries; “Open country is intrinsic to the culture of the west. You can’t have it in twenty-acre parcels” (*I Never* 77). Tyson marvels at the breadth of the landscape in songs like “Brahmas and Mustangs” in which he looks over “two million acres / and it [is] all green” (*Lost*), or in “Roll Along the Owyhee Range,” as he stands on the top of Mahogany Ridge, from where “you can see forever / and forever is a long, long way” (*Lost*). He also alludes to the great depth and height of the landscape, with its deep coulees, as well as its “snow covered peaks” that “stand white in the sky” (“Brahmas and Mustangs,” *Lost*). Accordingly, while one cowboy sits “down in some lonely canyon,” another pulls calves “at the top of the world” (“Roll on Owyhee,” *Lost*; “Springtime,” *Cowboyography*). Tyson articulates his love for the landscape in “Navajo Rug,” a song ostensibly about lost love, but implicitly about the land, for when Tyson recounts how Katie “spread [the rug] ’cross the floor,” the unraveled rug, much like an expanse of land, reveals “lightening ’cross the sacred mountains [and] woven turtle doves.” Just as the western frontier is being overused and consequently fading, so too is the “worn out” Navajo rug. When the diner burns down, Katie saves the rug—and only the rug—because, as Tyson puts it, “[y]ou don’t find things that last anymore / like an old woven Navajo rug” (*Cowboyography*). Although cow country is not burning, it is under siege, and Tyson, like Katie, hopes to save it.

In response to the many changes occurring in the West, Tyson, who is an “evangelical environmentalist” (Mitchell 1), has begun to use his status as a Canadian icon to help save the land and traditional western culture. Not only has he written songs, particularly found on his more recent albums, that explore the theme of the disappearing West, but he is also working on a film that discusses the environment’s fragile condition. In the late 1980s, he helped raise money for the environmentalist groups who led the unsuccessful protest against the damming of Oldman River, north of Lethbridge. He has even openly criticized personal friend and Alberta Premier, Ralph Klein, who gives environment a low profile, and has argued that, “if Alberta loses its wilderness, I don’t think there’s much to recommend it” (qtd. in Bergman 2). This “patriotism” is another

manifestation of topophilia, for as Tuan asserts, a beloved place arouses profound emotions when under attack. Local patriotism, in particular, rests on an individual's intimate experience with a locale, and on a sense of its fragility (98). Tyson's West has no guarantee to endure change, and so he must defend its integrity.

Change often suggests movement forwards, and away from the past. For Tyson, however, much of the west's current beauty derives from its rich history. As he said in a recent interview, gesturing to the southern Alberta scenery, "There's a lot of history around here" (Cockburn 1). Tuan affirms that topophilia is deeper and lasts longer when a place recalls events that previously hallowed the scene (93). Whether describing the wind that guides him "down the old dim buffalo range" ("Smuggler's Cove," *Lost*), the sagebrush that once hid Claude Dallas, or "the old chant buried in some canyon deep" ("Lost Herd," *Lost*), Tyson suggests that nature is both itself and a repository of the West's rich past. On one occasion, he eyes a magpie, and asks the bird to sing him "a song of way long ago," for this "old coyote in the sky" has soared over the western prairies for ages, and used to "ride on the back of the white buffalo" ("Magpie," *And Stood*). "Every time I cross the sacred mountains," he says in "Navajo Rug," "[a]nd lightening breaks above / It always takes me back in time" (*Cowboyography*). Evidently, Tyson maintains an interdependent relationship with nature: nature connects him to the past; he depends on it to subsist in the present; he hopes to preserve it for the future.

Reporter Andrew Flynn once remarked that Tyson "wears many hats, most of them big" (1). Not only does he sport variable "hats"—folk hippie, cowboy, western singer, and environmentalist, but he wears each one with style. George Tyson, who had once advised his son to sell insurance for a living, must be proud. Ian Tyson's cowboy pride is obvious and merited: he has been the catalyst of a cowboy renaissance, one that continues to flourish. In particular, his songs, rich in western imagery, have touched a subculture of cowboys: whether brisk like a horse-trot or slow like a rising sun, Tyson's songs encapsulate the cowboy's unique experience, and do so with brutal honesty. Most important, Tyson has effectively distinguished western culture from the rest of Canada, and by doing so, has confirmed the presence of a Canadian "West".

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