

Deseret Morning News, Friday, July 06, 2007

For Hill, music centers on the West, horses

By Carma Wadley

Deseret Morning News

HOOPER, Weber County — Every chance he gets, Brenn Hill saddles up his horse, "a sweet old girl" named Jessie, and takes a ride. Having room for horses is one reason he and his family choose to live in the rural town of Hooper.



Brenn Hill

Michael Brandy, Deseret Morning News

Hill loves to ride. But he also sees horses as an important connection to the heritage of the West. "They are a well-forged link," he says. "Utah and the West have changed forever, but horses, and the lifestyle they represent, are a way to maintain the heritage and tradition of the past."

That dual sensitivity is a core part of Hill's music, which pays homage to the past while recognizing the spirit of the new West. It's a message that comes through clearly on his newest CD, "What a Man's Got to Do."

And it's a message that he will be singing about on Monday, as headliner of a "Songs & Stories of the American West" concert in the Utah Cultural Celebration Center, which will mark the Wasatch Front debut of the album.

"Horses have been a deep inspiration for what I do," says Hill. "They keep me grounded; they enhance my relationships with people."

A songwriter must be sensitive to relationships, he says. "Horses help me be more sensitive, because they remind me of the need for mutual respect in a relationship. The importance of respect in a relationship is an integral part of my songwriting."

That applies whether it is a relationship with an animal, with a person or with a culture and lifestyle, he says. "Times are changing; culture is evolving. But this way of life will always be part of the future. There's an old saying that you can't know where you're going unless you know where you've been. We learn a lot about ourselves and how we define ourselves when we look at those who lived before us. I rely a lot on that history; that's a big part of my music."

Hill's ability to capture that heritage and to translate it to the present have earned him numerous awards and accolades in the music industry. Those things are nice, he says, but that's not what it's all about. "They could all go away, and I would still sit down and write a song."

The need for a creative outlet is embedded in his soul. He sees himself as much poet as songwriter. "I find I write best in rhythm and rhyme. I've tried free verse, but it's too restrictive. I like to try different meters and rhyming patterns and try to fit them over melodies."

He writes a lot that he "doesn't intend to share with anyone," he says. "But I'm also getting to the place where I can formulate and craft an idea and see it to the finish — say what I'm trying to say as a writer. A lot of times creative energy leads you. Now, I find I can sometimes lead creative energy."

The title song of his new CD is a poignant example of that, he says. The song started out as a story told by a friend. "My job was to take it and tell it in 3 1/2 minutes."

He actually wrote it on a ski lift at Park City, where he was going to perform a concert that night. "I played and sang it, and then wrote it down. The feeling of accomplishment that brings is hard to express. That's the thing that brings the most joy."

It has taken him years to get to that point, he says. "And because this is an art rather than a science, you don't get it every time. So you live for the times you do. Realizing you can say what you want to say brings a very satisfying sense of accomplishment."

That's one reason he's excited about his latest CD — the sixth of his career. "I really feel I've reached another level artistically. The songs are more introspective. I've been able to craft deeper meaning into them. They have a lot to say about this way of life in this time and about changing times."

The CD is special for another reason: It is the first one he has produced himself. This one was also recorded in Nashville, "so we used a lot of great players." Over the years, he's worked with a lot of great producers, he says, but he wanted to try this one on his own.

"It takes me to another level of learning and experience," he says. But that also comes with a burden. He had to find a different perspective on himself and also take a critical look at his art. "An artist can get very close to his work, but I tried to take an approach that separated me from myself. I also had to learn how to manage a recording budget."

He's pleased with the results — and the process. Artists are always looking for ways to stretch and grow, he says, just as he hopes his fans will always be looking for honest, heart-felt songs about Western life.

"My ambition is to make the best possible art I can make. But I also have to believe in what I put out. I'm not going to get on a stage and present stuff that I don't wholeheartedly believe in. Some of it's won fans; some of it's lost fans. But at the end of the day, I'm still looking forward to the next song."

The next song — and the next ride.



Country singer Brenn Hill enjoys rural life in Hooper, Weber County.

Michael Brandy, Deseret Morning News