

COWBOYS & INDIANS

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Brenn Hill

by MICHAEL LOHR



You can sense the sagebrush and tumbleweeds in his music, hear the echo of the open range in his voice. Brenn Hill is the real cowboy deal, and his Western Music Association Crescendo Award and Academy of Western Artists Male Vocalist of the Year Award testify that plenty of other people are hearing that authenticity, too. Born and bred in Ogden, Utah, Hill brings the real mystique of the American West and not a lick of sugarcoated hillbilly pop to his music. A traditionalist, he writes some of the most earnest, heartfelt music and poignant, thought-provoking lyrics this side of Johnny Cash. We talked to the down-to-earth Hill about music, poetry, what's next after his CD *What a Man's Got to Do*, and what separates the cowboys from the men.

Cowboys & Indians: *The lyrics of "Call You Cowboy" say, "God saved some lucky men to be cowboys." What exemplifies a cowboy to you?*

Brenn Hill: The cowboy is an intricate and complex figure. Inasmuch as he has been portrayed as a "dying breed," I would point out that, arguably as time goes on, much the opposite has happened. While there may not be as many opportunities to "hire out" and draw working wages as a cowboy, there are certainly more cowboys and cowgirls in existence today than there were even decades ago.

The cowboy is an innovative figure that has found a way to survive amidst an ever-changing world that, by nature, seems to threaten his existence. He has been able to adhere to the Cowboy Code and expand his core of abilities to allow him to succeed in his quest to continue. Cowboys have become

veterinarians, businessmen, doctors, lawyers, songwriters, artists, entertainers, horse trainers, clinicians, plumbers, contractors, craftsmen, etc. I would say that it is both his ability to innovate and his unwillingness to conform that set him apart as a true American icon.

C&I: *Why did you stay in Utah instead of slugging it out on Nashville's Music Row?*

Hill: First, the country music infrastructure offered a formulaic approach to songwriting that instinctively felt counterproductive to my creative ambition. For example, I prefer not to cowrite. I will, if the collaborative effort yields a piece of art that I could not get on my own. But good cowriting relationships are few and far between. I am not a hit-oriented songwriter by nature. I assign my own criteria to a song to determine whether or not it is acceptable, and then let the listeners decide for themselves. Quite frankly, I worry more about how I feel about my music than whether or not anyone will like it. I know my audience, and I know how to hit them in the gizzard with a song.

Second, I was born and raised in the Wasatch Mountains of Utah. I live in a rural community and see the jagged skyline of the Wasatch Front from my backyard. I've tasted the dust mingled with new sage blossoms that hang in the dry spring air behind a bunch of restless mama cows while mountain thunder cracks along a red rock canyon wall. Once you've tasted that, you can never leave. And, finally, my sweetheart's family lives in Roy, Utah.

C&I: *Name five things you enjoy about the American West.*

Hill: The land, the people, the livestock, the wildlife, the seasons.

C&I: *How about five things you love about Utah?*

Hill: Tall sagebrush, red rocks, good people, national parks, raspberry shakes at Bear Lake.

C&I: *What's your favorite Western locale to play?*

Hill: In my hometown of Ogden, Utah, there's an old historic theater called "the Egyptian" [Peery's Egyptian Theater]. It seats about a thousand but feels like a very small, intimate room. I've had some great shows there—memorable shows.... I've had some great shows and seen some great shows in the G Three Bar Theater at the Western Folklife Center in Elko, Nevada. There's magic that happens in that room. But my favorite place to play is at the side of my son's bed. He is battling brain and spinal cancer. He asks me to play "Meet Me in McCall" and "Monster on Your Back" over and over again. The highest honor of my life comes in knowing that he likes my tunes.



C&I: *I've heard that the legendary Chris LeDoux was a big influence. How did his band, Western Underground, come to record your song "One Hand in the Riggin'" for their debut record, Unbridled?*

Hill: The guys in Western Underground have been good friends and mentors to me for many years. In particular, Bob Jensen, who grew up in Ogden, taught me to be very critical of my tunes early on. "One Hand in the Riggin'" is one of those songs that essentially wrote itself. Bruce Bouton and I were up late one night on our third attempt at writing together. We began discussing the song idea and it was like someone turned a light on. The first time I ever sang it, I thought, That's a LeDoux song. So I gave it to Bobby and he gave it to Chris. Unfortunately, Chris passed away soon afterward and never got to record it. But I'm equally thrilled every time I hear Western Underground's version of it. Those guys are one heckuva band.

C&I: *You performed with the Reno Philharmonic Orchestra at the annual Wells Fargo Rhythm & Rawhide Benefit Concert. ...*

Hill: My dear friends Bob and Carole Anderson live in Incline Village, Nevada, and are big supporters of the Reno Philharmonic Orchestra and my music. Carole passed my tunes on to Barry Jekowsky, guest conductor for the event. Barry's a cowboy at heart. He loves the West and its music and particularly loves songwriters. Imagine how I felt when he called me up and said, "Would you like to play with a symphony orchestra?"

It was extraordinary—and I learned a lot. I got to work with an arranger by the name of Sam Cardon from Utah. I'd heard of him before and it seemed surreal that Sam was arranging my songs. Then to see them come to life with a symphony was something I'll never forget. I hope to do it again sometime. I've got charts now.

C&I: *You performed poetry at the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering at the tender age of 16. Do you still participate in the cowboy poetry movement?*

Hill: My music is my poetry. The cowboy poetry movement encompasses more than just a resurgence of cowboy poetry and cowboy poets. This movement represents a resurgence, a revival if you will, of the authentic cowboy that has been all but lost from mainstream art and media. Cowboy poetry celebrates our American agricultural heritage; it reinstates the values system that founded this country through poetry and music of both yesterday and today. I hope to offer the world a contemporary and progressive voice of the real American West as it is today, and I am reliant upon the cowboy poetry movement to provide me a vehicle for expressing my art.

To learn more about Brenn Hill's music, visit www.brennhill.com.



Brenn Hill's CDs

What a Man's Got to Do is contemporary Western-style music brought to you by a real American cowboy. A skilled lyricist and composer, Utah-born-and-bred Brenn Hill comes into his own on this, his sixth, record. His High Plains drifting sound quenches a thirst for Americana country.

With hints of Austin-style rockabilly and subtle touches of Springsteen-strained blues, songs range from traditional cowboy ballads like "The Ballad of Buffalo Brogan" and "Jeremiah's Last Ride" to pounding open-range anthems like "Caffeine" and "The Gaping Jaws of Hell." "Into the Wind," dedicated to the men and women of our armed forces, will give you red-white-and-blue fever, while the haunting "The Ballad of Pogue and Elms," a tale about two murdered lawmen, will give you the willies. Maybe no one will ever fill Chris LeDoux's golden boots, but with What a Man's Got to Do, Hill can sure try them on for size. —M.L.

- What a Man's Got to Do (2007)
- Endangered (2004)
- Call You Cowboy (2002)
- Trail Through Yesterday (2000, won the 2001 Album of the Year Award from the Academy of Western Artists)
- Deeper Than Mud (1999)
- Rangefire (1997, earned the Academy of Western Artists Rising Star Award)



Riding into the wind

"Son this is where you separate / The cowboys from the men / Hard times have come before / And they're gonna come again / So you can turn that horse and ride back home / And wait until it ends / Or just grit your teeth, bow your head / And ride into the wind."

Brenn Hill and his wife, Sylina, are dealing with any parent's worst nightmare: the diagnosis of cancer in their toddler. On November 11, 2008, their son Briggs was diagnosed with brain and spinal cancer. After 32 days in the pediatric intensive care unit at Primary Children's Medical Center in Salt Lake City, Utah, he began chemotherapy treatments. To date, Briggs has undergone five rounds of chemotherapy, a stem cell transplant, and a complete course of radiation. He now awaits further treatment. To express your support, visit www.teambriggs.org. —M.L.

Lyrics That Lope

Brenn Hill happens to be an award-winning cowboy poet. His songs read like poems, and his poems could be sung. No surprise that riding and horses are favorite subjects. Here's a taste of some of Hill's classic Western lyrics.

Equine

Stormy throws her head
She don't like the sound of lead
Rippin' through the sky on a cool clear autumn morn'
She high trots back home
She can't stand to be alone
And she's been that way since the day that she was born
But I love her anyway and I wouldn't trade a single day
Of ridin' for another day to be alive
The wind in her long black mane
She's the only thing that keeps me sane
The only way today a cowboy can survive
Equine ...
A mind all his own
Old Bud was as hard as a stone
And he threw me to the ground a dozen times or more
Runnin' down the road
Cussin' cause I'd just been throwed
All the way back to the old brown double barn door
But I loved him anyway and I wouldn't trade a single day
Of ridin' for another day to be alive
The wind in his long gold mane
He was the only thing that kept me sane
The only way today that a cowboy can survive
Equine ...
There's a fire burnin' in me still
And a cold hard iron will
To get back on no matter how hard I fall
And I think of them days sometimes
To ease my troubled mind
Ev'rytime my back's up against a wall
He's one tired old paint
He's a little less can than can't
And I see the hesitation in his eyes
I lift a little saddle on
He kicks him in the sides and they're gone
And Lord I can't believe how the years go by
And how I love that little boy
Ridin' high like Gene and Roy
Fadin' like a hero into that western sun
The wind in his thick gold hair
I close my eyes and for a moment I'm there
The only way today a cowboy can survive
Equine ...

(Courtesy Brenn Hill/Red Cliffs Press Music BMI/Silversongs West BMI. Used by permission.)