

# Cowboy Courage

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY  
BY JENNIFER DENISON

**Singer-songwriter Brenn Hill has put a fresh spin on traditional Western music. His honest lyrics speak of contemporary ranch and rodeo life, as well as his unwavering devotion to horses and the West.**

**O** N A SUNNY SATURDAY AFTERNOON in the summer of 2008, Brenn Hill had saddled his sorrel mare, “Jessie,” in the back yard of his suburban home in Hooper, Utah. It was a rare weekend that the cowboy singer-songwriter wasn’t performing at a gig and could stay home and do his favorite job, being a dad.

Brenn hoisted his 2-year-old son, Briggs, onto the saddle and climbed on behind him. As they rode around the pasture, Brenn noticed that his son lacked his usual spunk and interest in riding. Then Briggs turned to Brenn and said, “Daddy, I want to get off.”

Those words struck Brenn like a stab in the heart. Like his father, Briggs usually took delight in the chance to be horseback, but the past two months he hadn’t been himself. He’d been sick and doctors said he was fighting a virus or might have acid reflux. Blood tests came back normal, but Brenn and his wife, Sylina, suspected there was something more ailing their son. Two days later, a CT scan revealed a massive brain tumor. In shock over the news, Brenn and Sylina met with a neurosurgeon who advised them to clear their schedules indefinitely because their son was in for the fight of his life.

Prior to Briggs’ cancer diagnosis, Brenn had started writing songs for his seventh album, titled *Equine*. He intended for the album to reconnect him with horses, which were an integral part of his upbringing. But the album took on a deeper meaning, with three songs inspired by Briggs. »



Brenn Hill values the time he gets to spend in the saddle. Here, he’s riding Jessie, but the cowboy recently bought a daughter of Smart Chic Olena that he hopes to use for ranch work.



Other songs harken to Brenn's past experiences with horses and his admiration for traditional ranching values. It's the true stories told in his songs, the upbeat presentation, his willingness to work hard and take risks as an artist, plus the use of music downloads and social networking sites that have made Western music fans of all ages take notice of this young cowboy musician.

### Miracle Workers

Just five days after surgery to remove the tumor, Briggs started to speak and smile again. Brenn and Sylina made a difficult decision to allow an aggressive treatment regimen involving several rounds of chemotherapy, radiation and bone-marrow transplants. It was Briggs' best chance of beating cancer.

On Christmas Eve of 2008, after his first round of chemotherapy, Briggs was allowed to go home. As miraculous as it was to have Briggs home for the holiday, his demanding treatment schedule took a toll on his body, as well as on the family.

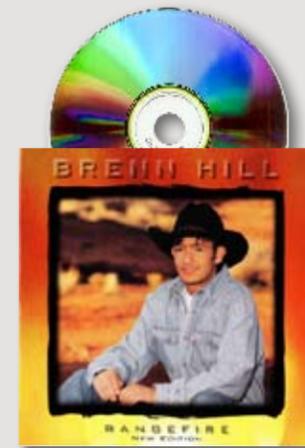
Sylina, pregnant with her third child, quit her job as a loan officer to be Briggs' full-time caregiver. In late December, Sylina was with Briggs as he recovered from a bone-marrow transplant. During that hospital visit she went into labor. Three days after giving birth to daughter Cambridge, Sylina was back at the hospital with Briggs. In the meantime, Brenn and both sets of grandparents juggled feedings and diaper duty.

Little did the Hills know that while they were sitting beside their son's bed as he recovered from brain surgery that word was spreading among the Western music world. Prayer requests were being sent over the Internet and Brenn's friend and mentor, Ian Tyson, began planning a benefit concert in Elko, Nevada, for Briggs.

On January 30, 2009, Brenn drove to Elko, Nevada to attend the benefit concern Tyson was holding. Performers included Mike Beck, Don Edwards, Wylie Gustafson, R.W. Hampton, Corb Lund, Michael Martin Murphey and Dave Stamey. The compassion of the musicians, all of whom were influential in his development as a musician, touched Brenn. He realized the artists he looked up to were more than his role models; they were his friends.

After the event, Brenn wrote on his blog, "It was hard to sum up just what it meant to me and my little family. I sat and thought about little Briggs and his mommy carryin' on the fight at home. He's too young to understand how sick he is, much less the honor and significance of what was done for him last night.... Over the years there have been a few benefit concerts during the [National Cowboy Poetry] Gathering for the likes of Larry McWhorter and Joel Nelson. I haven't contributed a tenth of what

## DISCOGRAPHY



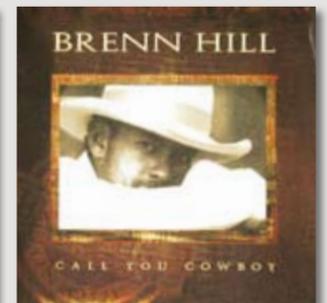
Rangefire, 1997



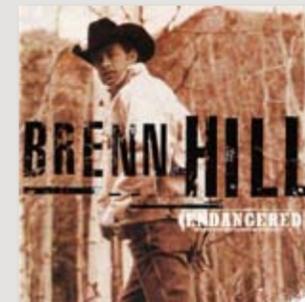
Deeper Than Mud, 1999



Trail Through Yesterday, 2000



Call You Cowboy, 2002



Endangered, 2004



What a Man's Got to Do, 2007

For more information on Brenn Hill and his albums, visit [brennhill.com](http://brennhill.com).



Equine, 2010

### Opposite page:

**Top:** Brenn and his wife of nine years, Sylina, have found strength in each other and their family as they helped their youngest son, Briggs, battle a brain tumor. **Below left:** Brenn's 8-year-old son, Quayden, excels in sports but still enjoys riding the family's horse, Jessie. The title track to Brenn's latest CD, *Equine*, was inspired by a time when Quayden was riding in the pasture. "I remember his hair blowing in the wind and he looked larger than life," says Brenn. **Below right:** Four-year-old Briggs is his father's shadow and shares his love for horses and music.

**“All that you are comes down to horses. Old childhood dreams and unexplained forces. At times you’re the bottle that holds lightning bolts. But you’ll be a dead man if you don’t quit ridin’ those colts.”**

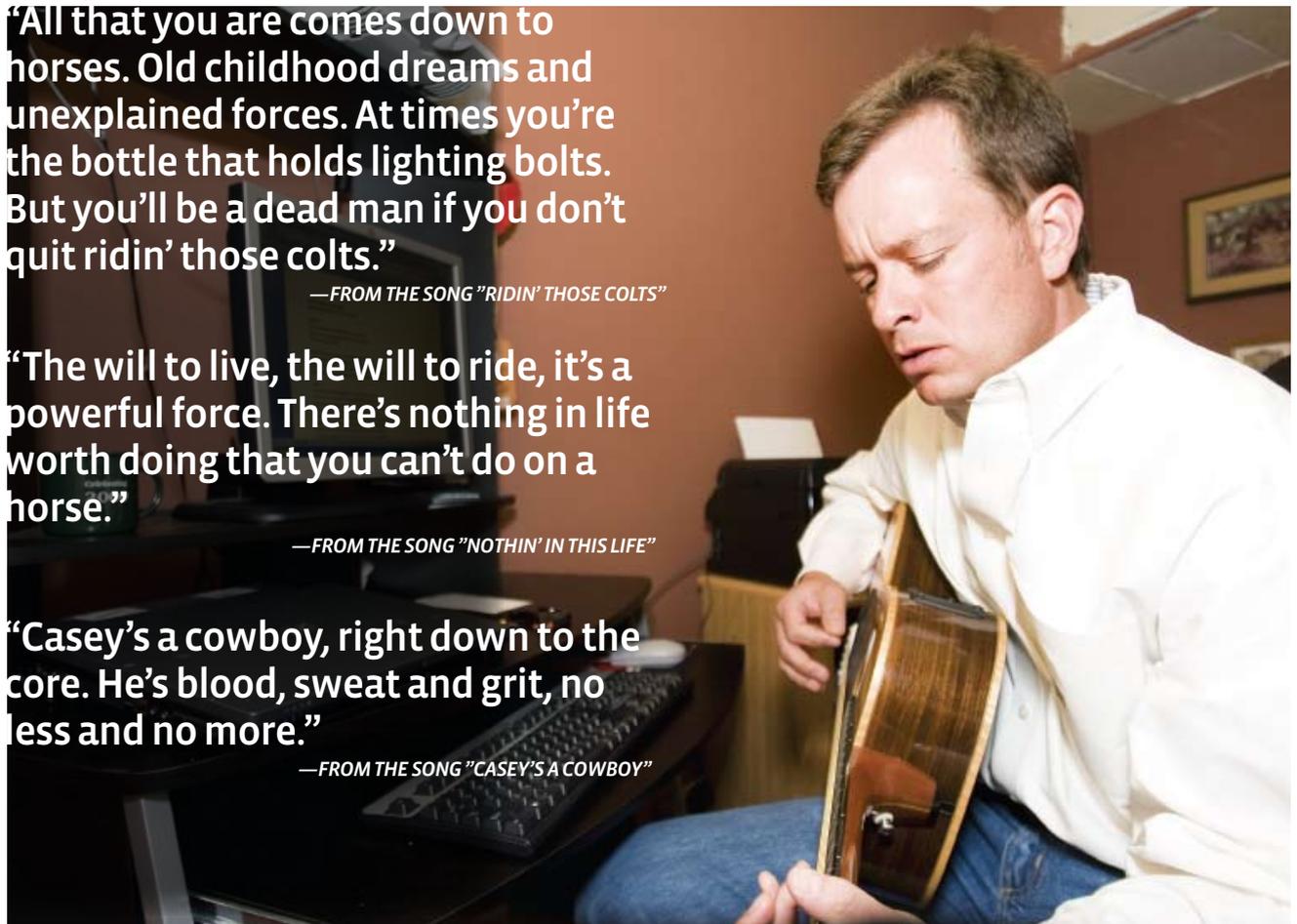
—FROM THE SONG “RIDIN’ THOSE COLTS”

**“The will to live, the will to ride, it’s a powerful force. There’s nothing in life worth doing that you can’t do on a horse.”**

—FROM THE SONG “NOTHIN’ IN THIS LIFE”

**“Casey’s a cowboy, right down to the core. He’s blood, sweat and grit, no less and no more.”**

—FROM THE SONG “CASEY’S A COWBOY”



Brenn says he steals time with his guitar and computer to write music in the basement of his Hooper, Utah, home.

those guys have to the traditions and lore of the cowboy legacy. But I realized last night that my peers and mentors are more like an extended arm of my family.... Suddenly it was clear that Briggs is more than just my son. Briggs is the son of one of our own and we have to come together to help mend a broken fence.”

Each time things got tough, Brenn’s friends and fellow cowboy crooners rallied to the family’s cause. Michael Martin Murphey and Waddie Mitchell held another benefit concert in Roy, and several more were held after that.

It’s been almost a year since Briggs’ last surgery, and MRIs show no signs of the cancer returning. The reality, however, is that the form of cancer Briggs had is highly recurrent.

“We just take it one day at a time and are trying to restore some quality of life for him, and putting the rest of our trust in the Lord,” Brenn says. “I think Briggs is a fighter, but he’s also a bit of an angel who has carried this burden as if it was something he had to do.”

To strengthen his muscles and improve his balance, Briggs is in physical therapy, which includes riding Jessie again. A daughter of Two Eyed Jack, Jessie was given to the Hills in 2006 as a gift for their children. The horse had spent her life working cattle on a ranch in Wyoming. When the Hills got her, she had heaves and was thin.

“We truly honor this horse and what she’s done so we have done, everything to improve her condition,” Brenn says. “I think the highest calling of her life is yet to come.”

### **Musical Muse**

A Utah native, Brenn was raised in the suburbs of Ogden. His father was an accountant and his uncle, Ray Hill, was a banker. Both invested in their father’s ranch outside Eden, Utah, where there were always horses for Brenn and his five older siblings. The stories of those horses were part of his songwriting muse for *Equine*.

Brenn was 19 years old when he started his first colt on the ranch, which he did with the help of his cousin. He sold the horse to a cowboy on the Ensign Ranch in Skull Valley, Utah. He also trained a buckskin filly that was part of the bloodline his uncle perpetuated before his sudden death in 1996.

“She was strong-willed, and I struggled with her,” he recalls. “She tested me, but she also helped me realize that I truly loved horses. I discovered that horses reveal our character flaws and encourage us to look a little deeper at ourselves.”

Brenn adds that the greatest horses he ever rode were the ones he struggled with the most. One example is Bud, a palomino gelding Brenn’s uncle gave him when he was young.

“I remember riding that horse on countless hunting trips into the high country,” he says. “I’d get burns on my hands from the reins because he always wanted to go.”

Horses and hunting were the catalysts that hooked Brenn on music. With his mother’s encouragement, he started playing classical piano when he was 8 years old, but couldn’t read music. Instead, he played by ear and enjoyed writing lyrics and melodies. He also played the guitar. When he was 12, he was with

his dad and uncle on a horseback hunting expedition along Idaho's Payette River. One night, while sitting around the campfire, one of the hunters in the group pulled out a battery-operated cassette player and played a home-recorded version of a new album called *Cowboyography*, by a then-unknown cowboy singer named Ian Tyson. It was a defining moment for Brenn.

"I'll never forget looking into the fire and listening to 'Claude Dallas,' 'Navajo Rug' and 'Summer Wages,'" Brenn recalls. "There was something about those songs and the horses on that trip that made me fall in love with horses, the cowboy way of life and music."

About the same time, Brenn's parents and middle-school English teacher encouraged him to enter a school prose and poetry contest because he showed a gift for writing. Inspired by the tone and story songs of Marty Robbins, he wrote a cowboy poem and story, both of which won awards.

Fostering their youngest son's talent, Brenn's parents took him to the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko in the 1980s so Brenn could recite his poem at an open-mic session.

While attending Weber State University in Ogden, Brenn was the lead singer in a garage band. In 1992, he returned to the poetry gathering—this time to sing in an open-mic session. Legendary cowboy entertainer Sawyer Tom Hayden had heard his music and invited him to be part of a main-stage, ticketed show called the "Best of the Cowboy Music Jamboree." Other performers in the show were Ramblin' Jack Elliott and Peter Rowan. The theater was packed beyond capacity.

"I was shaking in my boots as I sang a couple of cowboy songs I'd written," Brenn recalls. "I don't think the songs were that good, but I draw a line back to that night as a confidence builder."

### A Songwriter Emerges

After college, where he majored in technical sales, Brenn went to Nashville, Tennessee, to cultivate a career as a cowboy singer-songwriter. It was the mid-1990s, the era of big belt buckles, starched Wranglers and roper-style boots. Garth Brooks dominated the country-music scene.

Brenn says he felt like a "fish out of water" because he wrote story songs about the West. He was told to broaden his subject matter and not make his songs so personal. Though he refused to conform in subject matter, his writing style developed from poetry and short stories into song lyrics.

"Songwriting, to me, is very efficient," says Brenn. "A song lasts three and a half to five minutes. You really present an idea, try to support it, build a melody around it and sort of leave it there for the listener to dig in. The best songwriters, to me, are those lyricists that present an idea and leave it out there for the audience to digest and interpret. I think that's why my writing evolved into songwriting. Once I got a guitar in my hand, it just kind of fell together."

To promote his songs and his own brand of music, Brenn realized he was going to have to become a singer as well as a songwriter. He recorded his first album when he was 20 years old, with unconditional support from his parents. That debut album, titled *Rangefire*, featured acclaimed musician Rich O'Brien and earned Brenn the Rising Star Award from the Academy of Western Artists.

His sophomore album, released in 1999, was titled *Deeper Than Mud*. Brenn and the album's producer, Bruce Innes, aimed to create an album that showcased Brenn's folk influence. His best-selling album to date, *Trail Through Yesterday*, was released in 2001 and received the Western Music Association Crescendo Award. *Call You Cowboy*, which included two of Brenn's poems, came out in 2002 and continued to define Brenn as a cowboy singer-songwriter.

In 2004, Brenn released the album *Endangered*, produced by Eddie Schwartz. Recorded in Nashville's famed Ocean Way Studio, the album was a landmark in Brenn's career, earning him an AWA Male Vocalist of the Year award. The acclaimed album gained mainstream radio airplay and made the top-20 on Americana and Texas radio. To promote the album, Brenn toured the Texas music scene, which took him away from home for long periods of time.

The album's synthesized sound, featuring a five-piece band and strong political and environmental messages,

were controversial in the Western music genre.

"At the time I recorded *Endangered*, I'd just read a book called the *Unsettling of the American Culture* and it influenced my political views and changed my perspective on the environmental movement," Brenn says. "I saw elitist groups emerging who didn't embrace who I felt was the ultimate conservationist, the rancher. Also, in Utah plans were in place to build a major highway that would cut through family ranches and farmland."

"Artistically, however, the record was gratifying. I enjoyed being in a studio with musicians who had an arsenal of sounds that created a diverse palette for my music."

Brenn's next album, *What a Man's Got to Do*, marked his first time as an album producer. The singer again took artistic risks, hiring an ensemble of background musicians, which offended some purists in the Western genre.

"If a synth sound works on a cowboy song, then I say let's do it," Brenn says. "I want to give this musical genre a broad, diverse sound that appeals not only to the guy on a ranch but also those fascinated with the mystical West. Making this genre appealing to a broad fan base only benefits the Western way of life. It makes them realize what a valuable piece of American culture it is and why it needs to be preserved."

Each album has presented a different challenge for Brenn, but all were stepping stones to his latest endeavor, *Equine*, which he co-produced with Larry Beard and released this past spring. Already, sales for the album have surpassed Brenn's other albums, and fans rave that anyone who loves horses must buy this album.

"I'm very much at peace with *Equine*," Brenn says. "I dug to a deeper place inside of me for these songs and I believe in them. As an artist, I have to be confident in my work, and even though some purists might criticize me for being untraditional, I'm okay with that."

### What Lies Beneath

Brenn considers himself first a songwriter and then a singer and musician. A relatively shy guy, he still struggles with

stage fright. On stage, the singer strives to make his music sound like it does on his albums. It's not financially feasible to have a five-piece band, so he boldly strums all six strings of his guitar, getting as much sound as possible and creating a diverse listening experience for the audience. He sings his own material, rather than reviving traditional tunes, speaking from a contemporary perspective and presenting new ideas on the shaping of the West as we know it today.

"Whatever I lack in being a real cowboy, I make up for in my music," Brenn says. "I'm a bit of a nonconformist in the Western genre, but I relate to and understand the values and traditions behind the cowboy way of life, and that's what I like writing about. I believe the Western genre commemorates a way of life that's unique to the West, and I consider it a sacred duty to carry forth this genre as those before me have done."

Brenn credits much of his success to the support of his family and the artistic inspiration and perspective that came from Briggs' tragic battle with cancer.

"I realized I've taken so much for granted in my life, including my own mortality and that of those around me," he explains. "A parent thinks his kids are bulletproof. I really learned how special relationships are, whether it's with my kids, family, fans or horses. It really forced me to look at the relationships I've had with horses in my life and those I've created through my music and travels."

Brenn has always been available to do a benefit concert for children in need. When Briggs was diagnosed with cancer, Brenn and Sylina were coordinating a benefit for another boy with a life-threatening condition. Now, he resolves to reach out even more to those in need, using his music as a vehicle to raise money and awareness.

"I appreciate my music even more now," he says. "Every time I step up to a microphone, I realize I've been given a gift of sharing songs in which I believe and that touch others' lives just as deeply as they have mine." 🐾

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