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Hill's music merges Old West with new

By Carma Wadley

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Brenn Hill, a rising star in the Western music field, is a voice of the new West. While he respects — and often sings about — the cowboys and culture of the Old West, his own music has a tone and tenor that is contemporary.

"I'm trying to chronicle events as they apply to the West, really to all of rural America," Hill said. "I try to be sensitive to the past," but the songwriters he's always liked best are those who chronicle a certain period with their music. "I'm trying to do that now." He hopes people will be able to look back at his own music and see what it was like at the beginning of the 21st century.

At the same time, he never wants to lose contact with the past. "Heritage gives you identity."

Hill, who now lives in Hooper with his wife, Sylinia, and their 2-year-old son, is a sixth-generation Utahn. His family on his father's side came to the area as pioneers. And even though he is two generations away from living off the land, he understands the lifestyle. "And I try to honor it. I try to bring out issues in my music that apply to it. We have a pretty amazing agricultural heritage in our country."

He seems to have found a pathway that is earning him increasing numbers of fans. Over the past six years, he has consistently been nominated for honors and awards, including Male Vocalist, Entertainer of the Year and "rising star" from both the Western Music Association and the Academy of Western Artists. His album "Trail Through Yesterday" was named AWA Album of the Year in 2001.

Hill has released his fifth CD, "Endangered," a 14-song collection that "offers insight into life and love and how changing times affect the land around us."

Still in his late 20s, Hill has been performing professionally since his high school days. But music has been a part of his life for even longer. He started piano lessons as a boy. "I enjoyed that, but I always felt I was learning things that would take me elsewhere."

He credits his love of Western music to a pack trip he took with family and friends when he was in the seventh grade. One of the guys brought along a tape by Ian Tyson. Hill fell in love with the music and started writing songs. "I love singer/songwriters of any genre," he said, citing Gordon Lightfoot, Neil Young, Bruce Springsteen and B.B. King. "There's such a broad choice of styles and sounds."

He got his first guitar at age 9, but Hill didn't take lessons until halfway through high school. "At my first lesson, I got a John Denver songbook. By the time I went back the next week, I had learned to play and sing 'Country



Brenn Hill will perform at Canyon Country Western Arts Festival on March 13.

Laura Seitz, Deseret Morning News



Brenn Hill

Roads.' " His teacher was quite amazed, "but I've felt I've always known music. It just seems natural."

Hill also credits an English teacher who strengthened his love of poetry. He reads everyone from Robert Frost to Robert Service. The best songs, he says, "are really poetry set to music. Poetry is the art of saying a lot in a few words. To have a great song, you have to link imagery with emotion, so even if people are not familiar with a place, you give them a relatable emotion that helps them understand the song."

His song "Legacy Highway" is a prime example. It resonated locally with people familiar with that project but also with other audiences.

Hill spent some time in Nashville in 1996. "That town really taught me how to be a songwriter. I had always been passionate about music. I knew the art. But there I learned the craft. I learned ideas have to be presented melodically and lyrically. They have to be supported and punctuated. The

listener has to get a lot of information in a short time."

He's also collaborated with a lot of other writers, "and every time I collaborate I learn something new. But I feel I have something to contribute as well."

"I like Brenn's writing," said his manager, Brian Ferriman. "It has an edginess that is refreshing. He has a respect for tradition but he's not a slave to tradition. He expresses the values of here and now."

Hill is not sure where his music will take him. Already, he's appeared at a lot of Western festivals and fairs, including the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko in January. He's opened for Michael Martin Murphey and teamed up with cowboy poets. He's been profiled by Western music magazines. At the Canyon Country Western Arts Festival in Cedar City next week, he's the headliner.

His dream is to help a younger audience hook up with Western music. A lot of festivals are peopled by baby boomers, nostalgic over the cowboy heroes they grew up with. But if the genre is to flourish, he said, "it needs to relate to everyone."

And he hopes his music does that. Writing a song, he says, means searching for those lines and phrases that capture the pattern of life. "You search for words to describe the way you feel, the way you see the world, what you're all about."

He knows he's in for a lifetime adventure, one that he is enjoying, embracing and still viewing realistically.

Life's patterns can change. "But the one thing I know about myself," he said, "is that the day will never come when I will not write music — whether I'm singing to six people in a coffeehouse or 6,000 at a concert, or just to my dog at home."
