

Cowboy lets his heart hang out

By JOHN CARMAN
Minneapolis Star Staff Writer

Glenn Ohrlin, cowboy singer and raconteur of the range, believes the buckaroos of the west have something to teach city folks.

"Now, I ain't too much on in spouting no general opinions," he said in St. Paul this week. "But most of the city people I meet, I find them kind of bound up in the concepts they're busy learnin', and they can't see things 'cept through that light."

"Most anything I'll talk about will give them somethin' to wrestle with that somehow don't fit with all that. I kind of see those concepts come and go since I've been around," Ohrlin said.

"Things like what I deal with seem the same all the time. Like horses, cattle, weather, getting the wood and hay for winter, whether the grass is going to grow, staying ahead of the game a little bit so you can make a living."

ALL OF WHICH is to say that Transcendental Meditation won't cook the chuckwagon beans. Or something like that.

The National Endowment for the Arts paid to bring Ohrlin, 50, and his songs and stories to the Twin Cities this week. He's the first "artist in residence" on radio station KSJN's "A Prairie Home Companion" program, with Garrison Keillor as host.

Ohrlin was scheduled to perform tonight at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and tomorrow on the live broadcast of the Keillor program, from 5:30 to 7 p.m.

Ohrlin's background isn't entirely swathed in cowhide. In fact, he was born in Minnesota's lake region, at the Cass County town of Remer.

His father, a sometime prizefighter and painter, moved the family to California when Ohrlin was 15. The boy had ideas. His father's preachments about steady work and settled living failed; at age 16, Ohrlin ran away to Nevada to become a cowboy.

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ON THE CATTLE spreads of Nevada, Ohrlin found the laconic heroes of legend.

"I liked them," Ohrlin said. "Course, they were doin' what I wanted to do. I remember now they were very close-mouthed. You wouldn't learn much unless you asked them questions directly. They just figured people could learn things for themselves."

Ohrlin drifted from ranch to ranch in Nevada, Arizona, Wyoming, California and even Arkansas. He had begun working, too, as a bareback bronc rider in rodeos.

From ranch hands and rodeo performers, he picked up songs and stories. The rodeo stories were populated with men like Pistol Holiday and Kid Fletcher.

FLETCHER WAS A bronc rider of some renown in the late 1930s. A favorite Ohrlin story is about Fletcher climbing on a particularly obstreperous bronc behind a rodeo gate. The horse turned over on its back, with Fletcher beneath it.

"Everybody thought Kid Fletcher was killed," Ohrlin said. "No one knew what to do. Finally the Kid stuck his head out from under the horse and said, 'Well, open the gate. I can't ride him in here.'"

Ohrlin tells a similar story about himself. He was a young cowboy who'd been bragging to fellow ranch hands about his rodeo skills, sure that "I had the world by the tail with a downhill pull all the time."

During a lunch break, the hands brought out a bronc and arranged

for a show of Ohrlin's riding prowess. Ohrlin agreed, of course. He spent about three seconds on the horse and two minutes in flight before gravity intervened.

OHRLIN REGAINED consciousness on that spot 10 hours later. In the darkness, he could see one friend standing above him. Ohrlin asked the time.

"About 10 o'clock," his friend said.

"You mean I've been here all this time? My God, I coulda died." The other cowboy shrugged. "We figured you did," he said.

Ohrlin catalogs his injuries matter-of-factly. "I cracked a vertebra in my back in Tucson, Ariz., in '48," he said. "I broke my left arm in Nashville, Tenn., in 1954. I had a broken wrist in '43. In '47 I broke some ribs, but I never did know exactly where it happened. I've had some broken knuckles and stuff like that."

Ohrlin eventually settled on a ranch of his own near Mountain View, Ark., with his wife and stepdaughter. He was singing at a local folk festival in Eureka Springs, Ark., in 1963 when he was heard by a folklorist named Archie Green.

GREEN APPROACHED Ohrlin, noted that he was dressed like a cowboy, and asked whether Ohrlin knew any traditional cowboy songs. Ohrlin said he did but no one liked to hear them.

But that night, Green recalled in a telephone interview this week, Ohrlin sang a song called "The Hellbound Train," about a cowboy who falls asleep drunk on a barroom floor and dreams about going to hell.

"I just flipped out," Green said. "He's the real McCoy—unornamented, understated, lots of quiet humor. He's not a college kid wearing Levis and imitating Woody Guthrie."

With Green's encouragement, Ohrlin began seriously collecting authentic cowboy songs. He has recorded two albums and written notes for a published collection of



Star Photos by Tom Sweeney and Jack Gillis
Glenn Ohrlin, 50, Minnesota-born cowboy

the songs, entitled "The Hellbound Train."

GREEN SAID TRUE cowboy songs are different from contemporary country-western music because the increasingly slick Nashville sound is a hybrid of western music and the string-band tradition of southern Appalachia.

Ohrlin, he said, "is the only traditional cowboy singer now on the folk-music circuit."

Ohrlin performs songs such as "Strawberry Roan," "Windy Bill," "Cowman's Prayer," "The Trail to Mexico" and "Bonny Black Bess."

They deal with the cowboy's work and loneliness, with drink and jail, and with being jilted in romance. They are songs, Ohrlin said, that "I've just always sopped up all my life."

THEN THERE'S "The Swede from North Dakota." It's hardly a cowboy song, but, sung in dialect,

it has an obvious appeal in the Midwest:

"Oh, I'm a Swede from North Dakota
Worked on a homestead for a year
Now I'm going to Minnesota
For to see the big state fair"

I landed down in Minneapolis
There I went on one big spree
Now all the Swedes in Minnesota
Look a little bit like me"

Ohrlin admits to one flaw as a cowboy singer: "I can't yodel. I would if I could. Usually my voice is just too low."

When his week in the Twin Cities ends, Ohrlin told Keillor during a broadcast Tuesday, he'll return to his Arkansas ranch. And to the basics.

"The first thing I gotta do is figure out my federal income taxes," he said.

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Ohrlin will appear on KSJN with Garrison Keillor tomorrow night.