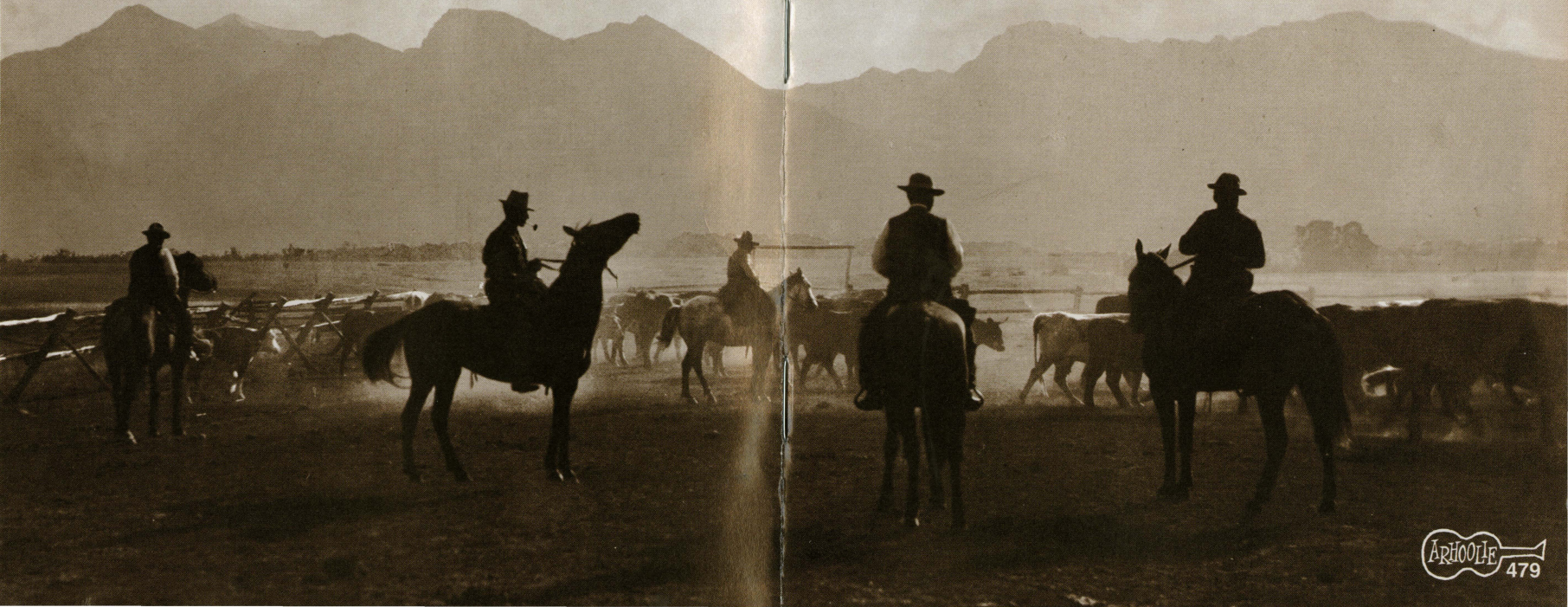


SLIM CRITCHLOW

COWBOY SONGS

"THE CROOKED TRAIL TO HOLBROOK"



SLIM CRITCHLOW

AN INTRODUCTION



SLIM c.1929

Take a Photo
Sally Lane

I met Slim Critchlow in the Spring of 1959 and first heard him sing at one of the Northgate Folk Song Sessions near the Berkeley Campus. I had looked forward to meeting him – as I knew of his early radio singing and relationship as friend and informant of John A. Lomax, dating from 1930 – but I hadn't reckoned on such a man or such singing.

I figured on him being a Gabby Hayes character, but wound up shaking hands with somebody a lot closer to the Lone Ranger. Tall and slender, his commanding presence was the product of great strength and quiet reserve combined. A few minutes later I was hearing him sing and talk about cowboy songs, and it struck me that here was a traditional singer of tremendous importance. His strong and lyrical singing, beautifully simple 8-string guitar accompaniment (top two strings doubled), and obvious authority on cowboy life and lore, were overwhelming.

The old-time cowboy songs grew out of the cow camps, trail herds, and open range – the everyday life of the cowboy. Although a large number of marvelous songs grew

up fast during the early cowboy days, few people bothered with the old songs anymore. Everyone was too busy with the new-fangled Hollywood cowboy songs.

Slim's deep love for the old ways and the old songs – and his natural disdain for the Hollywood version ("With all the boys down in town shootin' each other, it kinda makes you wonder who was out tendin' the cows...." as he puts it) caused him to keep the old songs alive and to hold to the style he had learned from the old-timers during the 1920's and before.

Following his emergence on the folk music scene in 1959, and the enthusiasm for his music among many of the singers and folk song audiences, Slim started singing publicly again – although he never sought it. His concerts and festival appearances have been numerous, and he has sung a bit on television as well.

Following his appearance at the 1966 Berkeley Folk Music Festival at the University of California (he also appeared at the 1960, 1961, and 1962 Berkeley Festivals), the San Francisco Chronicle wrote: "He has a big, natural, wide-open-spaces voice, an easy, drawling manner and a lovely

sense of low key humor. He is an ex-cowboy, and the seven numbers were nothing if not authentic." (John L. Wasserman)

At an earlier concert, the Sacramento Bee commented: "Critchlow has, with the quiet, lilting, humorous songs he sings, an effect which is not only pleasant but almost

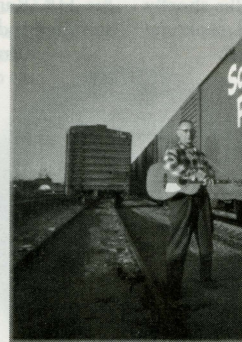
hypnotic.... He is about as unpretentious as a man can be. 'I heard this from a sheepherder in Idaho in 1927,' he says of a song called 'The Crooked Trail to Holbrook,' and by golly if I didn't believe him." (William C. Glackin)

A traditional song, from a singer rooted in the tradition which produced the song, is a statement and celebration of the life the singer lives. It is the full run-down on his relationship with life, his

feelings about everything. Listen to these songs, with an ear tuned for more than words and melody, more than unusual old frontier songs – try to hear what Slim Critchlow is saying about life – his and yours.

As the original record was in the final stages of preparation, Slim Critchlow passed away after a brief illness, at the age of 60, on the afternoon of Friday, October 31, 1969.

Barry Olivier – 1969



SLIM SPEAKS

Like the hero in the old song "Young Companions," I was born in Pennsylvania "among those beautiful hills." Said hero came to a bad end at an early age, but I'm still hoping for the best, although not particularly expecting it. My folks shortly afterwards moved to Iowa and took me along so I don't recall any hills in Pennsylvania, beautiful though they probably were.

From a farm house in Iowa we migrated to Utah and lived there for quite a few years, and then on to Oklahoma where, among other misadventures in the course of the next ten years, I had the dubious pleasure of falling off my first horse. Broke my arm in the fall, or because of the sudden stop. However, I've been pretty lucky. I've parted company from a lot of horses since that day but aside from losing hide no serious injuries to anything but my pride.

In 1923 somebody must have told my Dad about the gold in California so he sold out his share in an oil company that wasn't producing much oil and we lit out for California. My folks settled down there to

stay but after finishing high school I decided to go back to Utah. The following summer I went up to Idaho on a fishing trip with my uncle and ended up staying about a year. Got a job with Harry Kennedy on his HK Ranch in Fremont County. The summer and fall were fine but the winter turned a little cool for my taste, so come spring I went back to Salt Lake. Joined Headquarters Battery of the 145th Field Artillery, a National Guard regiment, horse drawn in those days – the free horses being the main reason I signed on. Grant Young, at that time the Sheriff of Salt Lake County, gave me a job as Deputy Sheriff, so I kept body and soul together and had a good time doing it.

In 1929 I went down to Zion National Park as a Park Ranger, both at Zion and Bryce Canyon for about six months a year for the next seven, combining that activity with an honorary (no pay) commission as a Deputy Game Warden. Authority galore! Back in those days in the Parks we weren't as afflicted with people as all the Parks have become since then. We worked seven days



a week, no days off and no overtime, but it was a good life. I used to ride in the local small town rodeos whenever a holiday came along and folks wanted to celebrate. None of the riders got any prizes – it was all just for the hell of it, although at one show the crowd took up a collection and I got \$3.75 for riding one horse. Money in the Bank! For a while we used to hold Sunday rodeos in the Park, on a flat by the horse corral. Roping only. We'd bring in cattle that had strayed into the Park and run a lot of beef off them before we got through with our roping practice. The local cowmen eventually got wind of what was happening, and to put it mildly they weren't exactly happy about the whole thing, so we had to call a halt to the happy proceedings.

To back up a few years to 1930, I came back from the Parks somewhat broke, as usual. One night I heard an old-time group on the radio station, KDYL in Salt Lake, and for want of anything better to do, and also for the want of money, I hit them up for a job. I had learned four chords on an old, beat-up guitar, and had been singing

cowboy songs for years or so. After a quick audition I was hired and went to work that same night with the "Old Country Store" as sort of a drifting cowboy. We were on the air twice a week from midnight to 1 am. Those were the days of no censorship and almost anything went. Our fiddler would show up drunk from time to time and our music probably sounded pretty sour

on those occasions, but at that time of night nobody seemed to mind and we got letters from all over the west.

The bunch was together for two years after that, with my showing up in the winter months.

Then it sort of fell apart, and two of us formed another group called the "Utah

Buckaroos," with some new talent, and moved to station

KSL. The music was considerably

better, but we didn't have nearly as much fun, though the hard cash jingled a little louder.

Those were the days! And it's mighty nice to remember them. Since my wife and I moved to California in 1936 my saddle has accumulated a lot of dust – but I still keep it – just for the hell of it.

"Slim" Critchlow – 1968



THE SONGS

It could be that a word or two of explanation might come in handy, before listening to these songs, so that the “uninitiated” will be better able to follow the story and understand the meaning of the old-time cowboy terms that crop up here and there along the way. Most of the songs date

back to the late 1800’s, (although a few “hand written” songs have been included) and were for the most part made up by working cowboys, who, by the way, would be much more likely to sing “Lorena” or “Silver Threads” than “The Dying Cowboy” when any singing was required.

Slim Critchlow wrote the notes for songs 1-10 & 20-27. Barry Olivier wrote the notes for 11-19.

1

THE CROOKED TRAIL TO HOLBROOK

Here is an old timer from Arizona which seems to have been completely forgotten. I heard it, for the first and last time, from a sheepherder in Fremont County, Idaho – long ago and far away. It’s an uncomplicated story of a cattle drive from Tucson to Holbrook, and doesn’t need much briefing. Catclaw brush is a close kin to cactus and isn’t fit company for man nor beast, the “muddy little stream” is the Puerco River and the wind can blow pretty hard way out there.



Slim (far right) on “Old Country Store,” ca.1931

2

BORAX BILL

This is another “hand written” song, the author, I believe, being Curley Fletcher. It’s the only song I know or have heard of about the long line mule teams in the California borax freighting business.

5

3

THE TRAIL TO MEXICO

This is a song which, like Billy Venero, for instance, the words and the tune don’t change very much no matter where you hear it sung. It’s one of the antiques of the cowboy songs and there’s a great similarity between this tune and the “Texas Song,” one version of “The Dying Cowboy” and a couple of others that don’t come handily to mind at the moment. I never did learn of the circumstances of the drive to Mexico where, in the 1860’s and ’70’s, they had about as many cows as did the Tejanos, and even less money, but it makes a mighty good story.

4

FORTY A MONTH AND FOUND

The title, of course, refers to the going rate for good cowboys back around the ’80’s and ’90’s. The “found” refers to the groceries. A good cook was worth his weight in gold to the ranch boss and a rider wouldn’t complain TOO loudly about his twelve to sometimes eighteen hours if the grub was good. If it wasn’t, he left. This song was put together by an old friend of mine, George Fehr from Salt Lake, and the tune was borrowed from a fairly old cowboy song called “His Trademarks.”

5

THE BRAZOS RIVER

To Sam Hinton goes the credit for uncovering this gem, but I can’t tell you a thing about it. I can only offer my apologies to the State of Texas for

inventing one of their rivers. After a long sojourn in Oklahoma I was perfectly sure that there was a Nacodoches River and, liking the ring of the name in preference to the Naches (which it was before I tinkered with it), I changed it. Too late now, but let that be a lesson to me!

6

D-BAR-2 HORSE WRANGLER

There are at least two, and possibly more, tunes to this song written in the 1880’s by D.J. O’Malley, or Kid White, or D.J. Stovall. Same man – take your pick – an old time cowboy and “poet Laureate” in Montana, who wrote some classics such as “When The Work’s All Done” and “Charlie Rutledge,” to name two. I’ve never gotten around to checking Montana’s records of old brands to see if the D-Bar-2 brand was registered back then, but the “MacQueen” was Miles City’s leading stockman’s hotel until it burned down in 1897. My thanks to John I. White for verifying these facts.

A couple of comparatively unknown words show up in this song – at least unknown to the younger generation. A “set fast” is an overgrown saddle sore, generally back of the horse’s withers. As long as the horse is used regularly it never heals and as the words indicate it “sets fast”. The word “cavvyyard” or “cavvy” comes from the Spanish “caballada” meaning the horse herd. There were many single blade jack knives on the market way back then, but a genuine “Barlow” was something special.

6

WINDY BILL

Although a comparatively short song "Windy" has the distinction of having more technical terms per line than any other song I can think of. It'll take more than a few words to tell you about this one! It's one side of the story of an argument that has been going on for a hundred years between the "dally ropers" (an English corruption of the Spanish "dar la vuelta" meaning to take a turn around the saddle horn) and the "hard and fast" ropers from Texas, Arizona, Utah, Hawaii and other points – depending on how they were raised – who used a shorter rope tied to the saddle horn. The brush poppers had no time for a dally. They threw a small loop whenever they had room enough to fit it over the steer's horns.

Bill was evidently a fellow who used his saddle stock hard and rough judging from the fact that his horse's withers and back were raw, so maybe he deserved what he got. His saddle was what was known, and still is in some parts of the country, as a "rim fire" or Spanish double, meaning that the front cinch hung directly beneath the saddle horn, the back cinch loose just to keep the saddle from tipping up when the roper made his catch. Saddle rigging is graduated from the full double to the 7/8 double, to the 3/4 or 5/8 either single or double and finally to the 1/2 rigging or "center fire." You can't hardly find those any more. Both "rim fire" and "center fire" terms stem from the time

when metallic rifle cartridges came into use and rifles were chambered for either a rim fire or center fire shell.

The old black steer had his home in the rocky, brushy country – the "mal país" or bad country, and steers like Old Blacky became as wild as any animal could be. Bill's saddle, or tree, was made, according to the song, by Sam Stack (or Stagg, as the case may be) who was evidently a well-known saddle maker in Texas. His rope was a Mexican grass rope made from the maguey fibres, shorter and stouter than the rawhide riatas used by many of the dally ropers back when this song was "composed." His "taps" or tapaderos were short leather shields to keep the brush out of his stirrups, his bit was evidently a spade or curb peculiar to the Brazos River country, and "snake" was a term sometimes applied to a real ornery outlaw steer.

And that just about takes care of Windy Bill. He may have lost his saddle but he'd never lose a finger or two getting caught up in a dally.

8

GOOD BYE, OLD PAINT

In days gone by "Old Paint" used to be "Good Nite, Ladies," the tune that ended Saturday night dances, at least in the cow country. Back in 1927 I attended a festive occasion up in Idaho which wound up, after the usual quota of fights, with the last dance to Old Paint, with all the dancers humming or singing the old song. Something to remember!

THE BUCKING BRONCO

I don't know a thing about this song, I'm sorry to say. Belle Starr, the notorious female outlaw, sometimes gets the credit for composing it, but I wouldn't know about that. Like most cowboy songs of that day it had some verses not fit to print (or record).

10

I'D LIKE TO BE IN TEXAS

I picked this song up in Utah a long time ago, but can't recall exactly where. I've seen it printed in one or two collections of cowboy songs but the tune I know seems to be entirely different than I make out the printed versions to be. It's purely a homesick song and should appeal to anyone who, like me, wishes it were possible to be in other times and places.

11

ZEBRA DUN

Slim delighted in telling this tale of the "educated feller" who turned out to be a heckuva good bronc buster. John Lomax reports that this song was said to have been composed by an African American camp cook named Jake, who worked for a ranch on the Pecos River belonging to George W. Evans and John Z. Means.

TEN THOUSAND CATTLE

"Ten thousand cattle, gone astray" would indeed have been a dismaying situation – and highly unlikely, as herds that big were usually split up into smaller herds. But even a few thousand cows heading in the wrong direction would probably have seemed overwhelming to some poor cowpuncher and Slim's "high, lonesome" unaccompanied singing on this song poignantly echoes those sentiments.

13

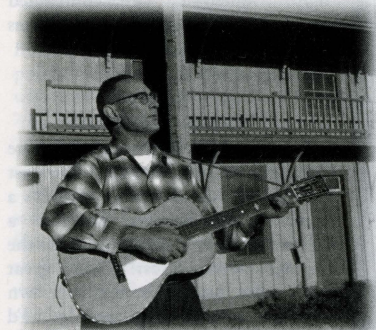
DRIFTIN' COWBOY

Slim wrote words for just this one song (and melody for one, "The Last Wagon," in this collection), and it's a damn shame because he was a wonderful writer – as his notes for the original album attest! These great verses came largely from Slim's own experiences involving people he'd known. He used the same "Billy the Kid" tune adaptation that Woody Guthrie had used for "So Long, It's Been Good to Know You" and also borrowed Woody's chorus. All in all, "Driftin' Cowboy" paints a colorful picture of ranch life in the early twentieth century.



RED RIVER VALLEY

Known by the names of various rivers around the country, this old song has been sung all over the rangelands and ranches – plus over a good many juke boxes as well. And it was sung at the burials of two of the finest people I ever knew – Slim Critchlow and his beautiful wife, Effie Bracken Critchlow, up in Pine Valley, Utah.



THE HIGH TONE DANCE

This frisky romp of a song comes from a poem by James Barton Adams with a tune Slim may have picked up from his friend, John A. Lomax. When Slim threw his head back and sang this one, you felt like you were right there, watching the scene unfold.

THE OLD COWBOY

Since their first meeting in Salt Lake City, in 1930, Slim and John Lomax hit it off and corresponded for two decades. It was Lomax who sent Slim this song and he sang it with great passion. In just a few stanzas, it sketches out the vast panorama from the days of the open range to the coming of the towns and railroads, fences and farms – and the passing of the old cowboy.

STATE OF ARKANSAS

"How many here from the State of Arkansas?" Slim asked his audience at a 1961 Sacramento concert (at which this performance was recorded), adding "I like to check the audience before I sing this one." And then he lit into a rousing rendition of this rough-and-tumble misadventure with its humorous consequences. This old song has been sung by many singers, including Woody Guthrie, but this rendition would be hard to beat.

THE HABIT

A small gem of a song sung by Slim with a wistful jauntiness and a little chuckle in his voice – "The sun is sorta coaxin' and the road is clear – And the wind is singin' ballads that I got to hear." According to John Lomax it was probably written by Berton Braley.

STRAWBERRY ROAN

One of the most famous traditional cowboy songs, often attributed to Curley Fletcher (although Slim had heard and sang a bit of what he thought was an older version), it was presented in various popularized versions often with a tacked-on chorus smacking of tin pan alley. Slim takes this marvelous epoch of man-vs.-bronco and sings it with affectionate admiration for both the cowboy and ol' "Roaney."

THE BUFFALO SKINNERS

This is a great song about a bunch of fellows who hired out back in 1873 to hunt the buffalo. They started out from Jacksboro in Jack County, Texas, had easy going until they crossed Pease River into the buffalo country, and then everything came unstuck. The song tells the rest. To clarify a few points that may not be known to one and all, a grayback is simply a louse; croton coffee was a rank substitute for the real thing made out of the dried pod of the croton bush; the "Navy six" was the forerunner of the 1873 model Colt .45 Peacemaker and the Colt .44 Frontier model; a needle gun was a heavy caliber rifle using a paper cartridge fired by a long, needle like firing pin. This song is a really fine record of days gone by. And that's that! Hope I haven't forgotten anything.

COWBOY'S LAMENT

This is one of the oldest, and for the last thirty years, thanks to Burl Ives, one of the best known of the old time cowboy songs. Unfortunately, it always seems to be known now as "The Streets of Laredo," which may be all right for Texas but not for the fellow who learned the opening lines as "As I Was a-Passing By Tom Sherman's Barroom," "So Early One Morning I Rode O'er the Ranches," "In Tucson's Fair City," etc. and other locations far removed from Laredo. From Oklahoma to Idaho I never happened to have heard it sung to any other tune than the one included in this record. There are a lot of verses – too many to include them all – but whatever version is sung it always leads to the conclusion that gambling, drinking and helling around don't pay in the long run.



THE WILD BUCKAROO

A "composed" song written, I think, by Curley Fletcher. A good song and fun to sing, but to me the old timers have something about them, whatever it is, that the more modern songs can't match, no matter how hard they try.

SNAGTOOTH SAL

A great song, I think, and one which I first heard sung by John A. Lomax in 1931. There were many "ladies" throughout the west, back in the early days, who were better known by some little oddity in their physical appearance than by their right names, but, as far as I know, "Snagtooth" was the only one who ever had a song made up about her.

THE TRUSTY LARIAT

This song was written by Harry McClintock, formerly of radio station KFRC in San Francisco, sometime around 1930. "Mac" had been pretty much everything in his day including cowboy, hard rock miner, railroad man, and author but he came to fame through his talent as a song writer and a performer. His songs were sung from one end of the country to the other, and if I had five dollars for every time I've sung "The Trusty Lariat" during the last thirty-five years the rocky road would be much smoother.

JOHN GARNER'S TRAIL HERD

This is one of the best songs of the trail driving days when millions of Texas steers were trailed up to Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana and Canada. I've heard from fairly reliable sources that the above

John was kin to the late Vice President John N. Garner, although I wouldn't want to bet more than four bits on it. The listener won't have much trouble in recognizing the tune as "Son of a Gambolier," "Sam Bass," "The State of Arkansas" and "Zebra Dun." An old tune can be pretty well disguised with a little change in time.

As the story teller relates, John Garner's herd of 3,000 or so was a big one – just about as big as could be handled on a drive. Much bigger herds were gathered for trading under one road brand, but they were generally separated into smaller herds, each one being held 10 to 20 miles back of the preceding herd. There would have been hell to pay if a "blue norther" came up and eight to ten thousand longhorns spooked at the same time.

A word or two should be said about some of the terms used in this song, and my memory strikes out on the very first one – the "Inspectors" at the Red River crossing. However, I'm pretty sure that when the trail drives got to be big business the State of Texas commissioned inspectors, with full legal authority, stationed at the crossing points out of Texas on the various trails used, to insure that the trail bosses hadn't gathered in along the way any cows that didn't wear the proper road brand. The "road Brand," by the way, was the means of showing that all cattle in the herd wearing that brand, regardless of what the owner's brand might be, were consigned

to the custody of the trail boss for delivery to the destination point. The trail boss was supposed to have papers from each individual owner to prove it. The trail boss, by the way, was known usually as the "corporal," that word being anglicized from the Spanish "caporal" or head man.

The "Indian Nations" or the "Five Nations" as it was sometimes called, (now a part of Oklahoma) was the homeland of the "five civilized tribes" the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickawsa, Creek and Seminole tribes, plus several other tribes who held the land in the western part of the Nations territory. All in all, the trip across the Nations was a lot more peaceful than it would have been if the herds had attempted to cross lands to the west claimed by the Sioux or Cheyenne tribes, for instance.

WHISKEY BILL

This is the first cowboy song I ever heard when I was just a kid in Oklahoma in 1918 or thereabouts. All I ever knew were three verses, and although John Lomax printed it in one of his collections as a "fragment" I think the three were all there ever were. They seem to cover Bill's life and death briefly but thoroughly and to the point, like an epitaph. No wasted breath.

THE LAST WAGON

To the old time cowboy the coming of the wire fences was the signal that the old days and the old ways had gone for good, as they always do. This little poem was written by Bennett Foster, a western story author, many years ago, but the tune belongs to me. I've been known, under certain conditions, to get damp around the eyes singing this little song. To add a word of explanation about "circle," in the old days of free range a cowboy used to occasionally be detailed to ride "circle," just like it sounds, to keep cattle from drifting too far from their home range, pushing back any he found during the course of his circle. During the spring and fall roundups, on the larger outfits, several riders would fan out at considerable distance from the gathering ground and start pushing the cattle into the gather. Where their circles crossed a puncher going left would pick up the cows started by the rider heading right, and eventually as the circles narrowed the cows would wind up with the rest of the gather – except for the ones missed, of course. A too-simple explanation of geometrical cow gathering which worked well except in rough country.

LOOKING BACK

Thirty years have zipped by since we first issued the Slim Critchlow album and I am more amazed now by the man and his music – and the great spirit he possessed and expressed in his songs – than I was when I first met and recorded him. With decades of playing and listening to traditional music behind me, I now realize that we were righter than we could have known at the time about Slim – he stands unequaled as a giant among traditional cowboy singers. He also ranks with the finest men and women I have ever known.

Slim Critchlow sang in four of the Berkeley Folk Festivals plus various other concerts and festivals, but he was really more of a “chalice” holding the beauty, spirit, wit and wisdom of the open range in songs, than any kind of “performer.” He just opened up his heart and let the songs do the “performing,” and his idea of a ghastly nightmare was singing these treasured songs for anyone who didn’t enjoy hearing them.

Although the songs on this collection were recorded between 1959 and 1963, all but six of them were recorded in a single evening –

Saturday, April 13, 1963, stretching into the early hours of April 14 (Easter Sunday), at my home in Berkeley. Surrounded by a number of his best friends, and his beloved wife Ef, Slim sang through the night and we recorded forty-seven songs, including many with several “takes” – all of this without even a glance at any printed source. His source was deep within him.

In the preface to his novel, “Lonesome Dove,” Larry McMurtry quotes from T.K. Whipple’s “Study Out the Land:”

All America lies at the end of the wilderness road, and our past is not a dead past, but still lives in us. Our forefathers had civilization inside themselves, the wild outside. We live in the civilization they created, but within us the wilderness still lingers. What they dreamed, we live, and what they lived, we dream.

Here is a collection of great songs to ride the trail with us – in our dreams and in our everyday lives, from here to eternity – riding with as good a compadre as could be found in a thousand years.

Barry Olivier – March 1999

CREDITS

Slim Critchlow: guitar and vocals

notes:

Barry Olivier: pages 1-2, 13 and notes on tracks #11-#19

Slim Critchlow: pages 3-4 and notes on all other tracks

Produced by Chris Strachwitz and Barry Olivier

Recorded and edited by Barry Olivier with technical assistance from Gerald Adamson.

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Selections #11-19 previously unreleased.

All photos from Barry Olivier’s collection.

Pages 2-4 & 8-10 photos by Dennis

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Ef & Slim Critchlow, c.1962



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SLIM CRITCHLOW

Cowboy Songs - "The Crooked Trail To Holbrook"

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The old-time cowboy songs grew out of the cow camps, trail herds, and open range – the everyday life of the cowboy. Slim's deep love for the old ways and the old songs – and his natural disdain for the Hollywood version ("With all the boys down in town shootin' each other, it kinda makes you wonder who was out tendin' the cows...." as he puts it) caused him to keep the old songs alive and to hold to the style he had learned from the old-timers during the 1920's and before.

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