

# Country Music Magazine review

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March 2002

by Michael McCall



At this point in time, the cowboy lifestyle and traditional honky-tonk music are purely romantic pursuits that purposely cut against the grain of modern American culture. Wylie Gustafson is not only a true romantic, he's also a craftsman and a perfectionist- and one of the most consistently fine cowboy singers of his generation.

A real-life rancher in rural eastern Washington, Gustafson has become a leading figure in Western music by

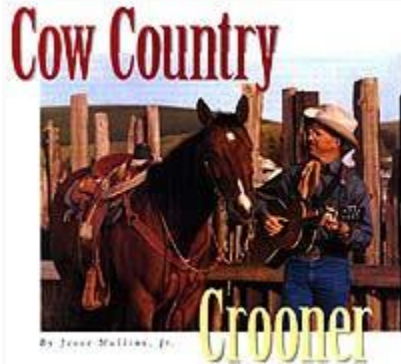
performing songs that extol the virtues of life on the range and setting them to the catchy meter of old-time country dancehall music. On *Paradise*, he proves that he's grown into a master of his niche, enlivening nicely detailed songs about saddle bums and Yukon stars with one of the sharpest, most relaxed honky-tonk combos around. It's like Gene Autry fronting Ernest Tubb's *Texas Troubadours* with a fiddle sitting in, and Gustafson lifts it all with a clear, engaging voice that is as sincere and believable as a Henry Fonda monologue.

# American Cowboy Magazine

## Cow Country Crooner

American Cowboy Magazine March/ April 2002

Article by Jesse Mullins, Jr.



Wylie Gustafson, of Wylie and the Wild West, is one who knows of what he sings. He had just returned from the Sundance Festival, where he'd seen himself up there on the screen in the final cut of a new independent film called *The Slaughter Rule*, and Wylie Gustafson was talking about wanting to do more in films. It's not as if he doesn't have enough to do already. As the leader of an ever-more-popular Western band, Wylie and the Wild West Show, the singer/songwriter is kept to a dogtrot doing live shows and making records, while keeping his hand in the ranch business back home. There are horses to train, and he keeps a handful of buffalo, mainly for training his cutting horses. (The quick and nimble bison present a desirably tough challenge.) When he's not playing dates with his band, he's doing solo shows.

So the film work was hard to wedge in, but fun nonetheless. "It's about six-man football," Gustafson says, explaining the title by the fact that in six-man, a game gets "called" if one team gets 45 points ahead (essentially, a "slaughter") of the other team. "It was beautiful- shot in Montana-and we had three songs in it. I made an appearance and got to speak a line."

Reared on a Montana cattle ranch, Gustafson has more than just a passing acquaintance with the state, and with the lifestyle that is the message behind his music. "My family has a cattle ranch on the Two Medicine River, and I try to get back there once or twice a year to help my brother ship or round up cattle," says the

singer. "I feel lucky and blessed to have been raised on a cattle ranch. Those experiences are something I still draw from. They still come out in my music."

Cowboy poet Baxter Black could see fairly quickly, when he met Gustafson at a celebrity roping event a few years ago, that the young performer was at home atop a horse.

"Wylie had just shown up there [it was Gustafson's first time at the Ben Johnson Celebrity Rodeo] and I saw just enough to know that he sat a horse good, and could swing a rope. They had a calcutta at those events, where you could 'buy' [wager on] each team, and I'd always bought myself, or if not myself a 'long shot,' and that year I bought him."

It was no dice that year, but for three straight years Black put his money on Gustafson. Then on the fourth year Black wasn't able to participate, and Wylie and his partner won it all that time. When the two run into each other on the road, that's the topic of conversation- or of cajoling, anyway. "But I'm as proud of his buckle as he is," Black says. "And yes, the boy can rope."

Meanwhile, the music's been a winner, too. The band's new album, *Paradise* (Rounder Records) is "selling twice [as well as] any other album of ours," Gustafson says. "A lot of it has to do with whether or not the album is getting into the record stores. We're never going to be Garth Brooks, but our goal is to preserve Western music and make Western music that speaks to a contemporary audience. We don't want to be just a 'retro' band that does Sons of the Pioneers songs. There is a place for that, and I respect those bands that do that, but we're trying to write our material and do something new with it."

Their mentors and influences, Gustafson says, are people they have respected and tried to mold themselves after. "Bands like *Riders in the Sky* and *Asleep at the Wheel* -both have been around about 25 years and created their own audiences."

Ranger Doug Greene of *Rider's in the Sky* says that Gustafson is enormously talented. "And he's managed to do a couple of very difficult things," Greene adds. "He managed to achieve a retro took and sound while appealing to a thoroughly contemporary audience, and he also managed to stand out with his own unique sound and vision in the field of Western music, which is crowded with singers and bands who have talent but not individuality. Wylie has talent and individuality, and he is one of the most refreshing guys in the business. For that reason, I'm a fan."

Dusty, Wash., the singer's home, is as remote as it sounds, by the way. His ranch is two miles from town, which in turn is 40 miles from the next town of any significantly larger size, that being Dayton.

"We're really out in the middle of nowhere, but that's why I like it out here," Gustafson says. "There are not too many distractions. We're not in the cattle business to make a profit or make a living. We're in it to provide training for our cowhorses and just because it's our chosen lifestyle. I still have to get up every morning and feed them in the winter. That's why I have a great wife who will pick up the slack when I'm out playing.

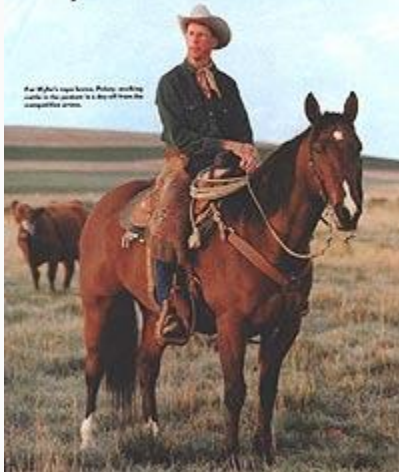
Out there, out in the New Yorks and Seattles and Elkos, the music remains for him the main creative outlet, and the driving force in his working life. He's a trendsetter, a yodeler par excellence (that's him doing the "Yahoo-o-o-o!" at the end of those commercials for the Yahoo! Search Engine), and one of the leading innovators in the Western field. "There's something about Western music that I can't put a finger on," Gustafson says, "but that something is what draws people to Western music, and there's something that is real about it or speaks to them like no other music speaks to them."

# Western Horseman Magazine

Western Horseman Magazine- November 2001

Article by Shelly Kurz

## Wylie Gustafson



I came away from my stay at the Gustafson's [Cross Three Ranch](#) in Dusty, Washington with the most promising get-rich-quick scheme I have ever heard. Wylie Gustafson of the western music group, Wylie and the Wild West, and his wife Kimberley have practiced the theory for years and although you probably won't ever hear them hyping it up on the national seminar circuit, sit with them over a cup of coffee at the Dusty Café and they'll be more than happy to share their secret of success with you. "Follow your heart and count your blessings," says Wylie. It's as simple as that... and Wylie and Kim are living proof that it really does work.

"I think how to be happy is to follow your heart... it has nothing to do with how to make money," explains Wylie. "I see a lot of books on how to make money-they may tell you how to make money but they sure don't tell you how to be happy." Following his heart has lead Wylie down many roads over the past decade as he and his Wild West band have worked hard to breathe new life into an almost forgotten genre of music. Cutting a trail to audiences of all ages and backgrounds to bring them a new interpretation of western music is Wylie's ultimate goal. "We are not a band that survives on playing traditional western music," says Wylie. "I have a huge respect for

performers like Sons of the Pioneers, Marty Robbins, and Gene Autry. We do a lot of those songs in our show but I wanted to take western music into a new direction and create something interesting—something that today’s generation can relate to somehow, whether it be my working cowboy friends in Montana or the kids in Seattle.” Whatever Wylie is doing, it appears to be working. Wylie and the Wild West tour throughout the United States and abroad, playing more than 150 dates a year, from state fairs and festivals to the Grand Ole Opry. Their audiences, as well as their fan base, consist of people of all ages. “Magically, we appeal to all kinds of crowds and I don’t know exactly why or how that happened but it’s really a lot of fun to be able to cross social boundaries and generations with our music,” claims Wylie.

Wylie’s passion for music began when he was just a child. He grew up in a musical family on a working ranch in northwestern Montana. “My dad played the guitar and sang cowboy songs to us kids...that was my first memory of listening to music that made me happy and inspired me.” In addition to singing as a child, Wylie also began yodeling at a young age. Although he didn’t take it as seriously then as he does now, he, like his father, had a gift for it and soon discovered what a powerful impact it had on audiences everywhere. In 1998, Wylie released his second album with Rounder Records entitled *Total Yodel*. It’s an unforgettable musical celebration that honors the deep roots that yodeling has to traditional country music. Wylie’s famous yodeling can also be heard on commercials promoting the *Montana State Tourism Commission* as well as *Yahoo.com*.

Wylie and the Wild West have just released their 7th album, *Paradise*. Once again, the integrity of the western lifestyle remains intact since most of the songs were either written or co-written by Wylie. “When I get to write the songs, I really get to impart our style. I feel that to be a great songwriter, you have to write what you know about first and foremost,” says Wylie. “This new album reflects my life right now—everyone has a different version of paradise. Mine lies just beyond my front porch where the Snake River rolls beneath the Blue Mountains in eastern Washington.”

Wylie’s off-the-road lifestyle truly does mirror his music, and it is his life at home that provides the abundant blessings that he counts every day. He and Kimberley thrive on their 120-acre horse and cattle ranch nestled among the rolling wheat and alfalfa fields that are indigenous to the Palouse region of eastern Washington. It’s the land that Kim’s great-grandfather homesteaded back in 1905, it’s also the land where her parents, Dale and Vicki Broeckel still live today. Together, Wylie and Kim are

building a strong foundation and a solid reputation for breeding, training and selling good quarter horses. Both were fortunate enough to be raised around people who had excellent horse breeding programs so naturally, they know what to look for in a horse. “What we’re looking for is a balance between a good mind and strong athleticism,” Wylie explains. “Color is the least important thing we look for. We do like to have pretty, colorful horses but it just doesn’t work in our program because we need to count on these horses whether we’re team roping, cutting, or out rounding cattle along the steep, rocky terrain of the Snake River breaks.”

Even though Kim likes a good cutting horse while Wylie wants a good roping horse, they both come together in agreement on which bloodlines they prefer. The Doc Bar and King lines are their top choices for good cow horses. “Doc Bar changed the cutting industry and the performance horse industry,” says Wylie. “He had the magic, he was a horse that could do a lot of things and do them well.” The King lines breed many of the same characteristics as the Doc Bar lines without being as hot-blooded. “The King horses are more easygoing so it’s really a nice cross,” adds Kim.

Training is another area where Wylie and Kim are in complete agreement. And listening to them talk about their program, I cannot help but think what wonderful parents they will make someday should they carry over some of their ideas into child raising! Confidence is instilled in their horses very early on. Young horses are allowed and encouraged to be a horse instead of constantly being picked at with expectations of perfection. “We like control of the horses but we don’t try to control every movement they make,” says Kim. “As long as our horses do what we want them to do and get the job done, we let them be themselves. We don’t want to give them too big of a job and blow their mind. Our 2-year-olds all work but they don’t work too hard. We want to give them a job that they can accomplish and know they did it well and will do it again the next time we ask.” Wylie is a little more strict with his rope horse, Pokey. “When he’s roping, that’s his job and he has to do everything well. At 6 or 7 years old, he’s old enough to be seeking perfection and he does do an excellent job roping. When I’m out rounding up cattle with him, those are his days off so he doesn’t have to be as concerned with doing a perfect job.” Although Wylie and Kim have attended numerous clinics and seminars featuring a variety of trainers, they have built their program primarily around the principles of Patrick Wyse’s techniques. Patrick has been a professional instructor for more than 30 years. His skills and principles are based on those of his early mentor, Monte Foreman. Without all the mystic and magic that some of today’s trainers use in their

programs, Patrick teaches practical horsemanship so that students can easily understand and implement his methods. Like Patrick Wyse, Wylie and Kim have developed a program based on simplicity and efficiency. “Ours is a very simple program with terms that people can easily understand,” explains Wylie. “It’s a very efficient system for getting a handle on a horse in a short time without taking shortcuts. The end product that we’re shooting for is a safe horse that can do a lot.” “Horse training is not rocket science,” Kim adds. “It’s thinking smart and making it simple so the horse understands and the rider understands.” Through this commitment to their training program, the Gustafson’s are gaining a reputation for turning out safe horses with a nice handle regardless if they are in the performance ring or out on the trail.

In addition to a growing drove of horses, the [Cross Three Ranch](#) is also home to a small commercial beef herd as well as a few young buffaloes. “The reason I have the herd is just because I grew up in the cattle industry and I love cattle and roping. They also work so well into our horse program for training purposes,” explains Wylie. “We’re constantly using the cattle to get the horses accustomed to being around them. We’ll follow a cow, get the colt to be a little bit cowy by putting him on that cow at a young age and letting him figure things out.” As for the buffalo, Kim finds them to be very effective for training cutting horses. “Eventually the cows just stand there—they either won’t move until you’re right up on top of them or they’ll disrespect your horse so much that they’ll run up under the neck,” she says. “Buffalo are wild enough that they keep moving so they are better to practice with.”

When he isn’t out on the road performing and they aren’t working on an intense training program, Wylie and Kim do take time for some good old country fun! Even though neighbors can sometimes be miles apart, they still get together for a friendly roping competition, a branding party or simply to help move each other’s cattle to different pastures. This is how it is in rural America. Neighbors are there to help each other out. Clouds of selfishness seem to dissipate as everyone considers the needs of those around them. “It’s a unique lifestyle that many city people just don’t understand,” says Wylie. “We are so thankful for having been raised in it and it’s a lifestyle that we both cherish. The happiness in my life and in our life comes from the fact that we’re doing what we love to do and we are doing it together. Having someone to share it with makes everything so much more worthwhile and valuable,” he concludes.



So there you have it—just one more blessing that Wylie counts as he does a mental audit of all the riches in his life.

# Seattle Rocket Album Review

## Blazing Saddles

by Deborah Malarek

Wylie & the Wild West

Ridin' the Hi-Line

(Rounder CD)

It's been a tragic couple of years for America's triple crown of singing cowboys. Roy Rogers, Gene Autry and Rex Allen all left this earth behind for the big bunkhouse in the sky, and in these days of mega-merged record labels and corporate farms, there's not much of a market for songs about riding horses, roping and wrangling. Cowboy singers, like cowboys, are a vanishing breed.

Luckily, there's a singer/songwriter in Eastern Washington who isn't overly concerned about the size of his sales projections. "I'm a dyin' breed/Yes indeed/You better catch me while you can," sings Wylie Gustafson of Wylie & the Wild West in the opening moments of the band's fifth album, *Ridin' the Hi-Line*. The lyrics refer to both Gustafson's style of music and his day job, raising cattle and horses on his Palouse spread. The album is a delight, full of romantic tales of the cowboy way told by someone who is smitten with his lot in life. Gustafson's voice is fluffy-cloud light as he sings and yodels his way through music that's airy and carefree, and the mood is infectious enough to start you thinking about buying that land in Montana.

In fact, it's Montana from which Gustafson hails originally, and the title track refers to an area there along the northern tier of the state, between the North Dakota border and the Rocky Mountain Front, where the Great Northern's rail line of the same name used to run. The song, "Ridin' the Hi-Line," the story of a friend who worked a Hi-Line ranch to heal from his divorce, is a waltz featuring the harmony vocals of Oregon western singer Joni Harms. Her sweet voice hugs Gustafson's tightly, evoking a dreamy mood on that tune as well as on "The Gather," a ballad about an annual fall round-up Gustafson participated in as a kid, told through the eyes of a narrator lost in the idyllic nature of it all.

It's the clearly personal tales that make these songs so genuine. The band's last album, *Total Yodel*, was mostly cover tunes, a marvelous tribute to the singers and yodelers Gustafson's dad played for him as a child, including Jimmie Rodgers, Elton Britt and Slim Whitman. It's because of these childhood lessons that Gustafson turned some heads making the club rounds in Los Angeles years ago. Yodeling became Gustafson's hook, and a fine and unique one it is. He is extremely accomplished at it. But both his voice and songwriting are so engaging, he doesn't need a hook. On *Ridin' the Hi-Line*, he yodels on only four of the 15 tracks, and it comes off as a nice touch instead of a *raison d'être*.

The musicians of the Wild West are remarkable, too. The classy guitar work of Ray Doyle enchants "Montana Moon," a slow-dance ballad made richer with Duane Becker's masterful pedal steel playing and Gustafson's emotion-drenched vocals. And the band rocks on "Jitterbug Boogie," a tune tailor-made for swing dancing. The addition of Sam Levin's playful clarinet to the western swing of songs like "Yodeling Cowhand" and "Ridin' Rockin' Rollin'" brings a jazz texture to the mix. "Yodeling My Blues Away" starts with the frolicking fiddle of Hoot Hester, who makes way for pedal steel and Gustafson's gifted vocals as he sings, "I used to punch a time clock/But now I'm punching livestock/I don't earn a whole lot/But I'm so happy when I straddle the saddle." There's no doubt he means every word, and it's enviable.

This is the ideal album to aid your escape from the dark dreary days of a Northwest winter, like watching an old movie or sinking into a great novel. It whisks you away to a life other than your own, where even hardships like long hours and poverty seem diminished in light of the abundance of simple joys. "I'm lost in a western dream/Where the sky is clear and the river runs clean," Gustafson sings on the title track of *Ridin' the Hi-Line*, and it's clear he's ready, willing and able to carry the cowboy singer's torch a bit farther down the trail.

No. 319 February 9-23, 2000 © Rocket Magazine, 2000

# Washington Post Album Review

## A Dusty Yodeler Comes to the Birchmere

By Joe Heim

Washingtonpost.com Staff

Saturday, February 12, 2000

There really is a place called Dusty. Plunked down in the vast plains of eastern Washington state, it's actually just a speck of a town. There's a cafe – the Dusty Cafe – a gas station and a couple of shops, but that's about it. Dusty's most famous resident – and fame is relative in a town with a population of 12 – is a yodeling cowboy named Wylie Gustafson.

In a time when many country and western singers have about as much in common with rural living as John Rucker has with New York City, it's refreshing to know that Gustafson lives the life he sings about. The son of a ranch veterinarian – who is also a cowboy folk singer – Wylie grew up in Conrad, Mont., where he learned to rope horses, play guitar and yodel till the cows came home – all by the age of 12.

These days, the 38-year-old Gustafson has a home in Dusty with his wife and his horse, Cupcake (how tough a cowboy do you need to be to name your horse Cupcake?). But for the past 10 years, he has spent much of his time on the road with his band, Wylie and the Wild West, making regular appearances on the Grand Ole Opry and touring extensively through Europe, Canada and Australia. On Friday the group, which just released its fifth album, "Ridin' the Hi-Line," on the Boston-based Rounder label, performs at the Birchmere with Bill Kirchen's Western Twang Orchestra.

Yodeling, surprise, surprise, isn't in great demand these days. The Backstreet Boys and Christina Aguilera didn't exactly yodel their way to the top of the charts (though Jewel has been known to crank out a verse or two). In fact, other than the annual broadcast of "The Sound of Music," it is a species of music that goes almost entirely unheard.

Unless you're in earshot of Gustafson, that is.

On the new album he performs such songs as "Yodeling Cowboy," "Yodeling My Blues Away" and "Odessa Yodel." While that may seem like an overabundance of odelay-hee-hoos, Gustafson never lays it on thick. The yodeling is woven into the songs and the band also plays a full share of western swing, traditional cowboy songs, and lonesome Big Sky country ballads.

Gustafson's classic western voice and yodeling has earned him comparisons with Jimmie Rodgers who was the first country star to introduce yodeling as an integral component of his songs. In addition to Rodgers, Wylie and the Wild West have much in common with such western musicians as Roy Rogers and the Sons of the Pioneers.

Though it would be easy to classify him as a traditionalist, Gustafson writes songs that acknowledge the past without getting caught in it. His talent as a performer and affinity for the music is such that it keeps him from being classified as a novelty act or anachronism. If the 21st century is ready for a yodeler, Wylie Gustafson is the man for the job.

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# Nashville Scene Album Review

## The Real Deal

Two Country Singers Who Live the Life They Sing  
Wylie & the Wild West – Riding the Hi-Line (Rounder)  
Ed Burlison – My Perfect World (Tornado)  
by Micheal McCall

On the cover of the new Wylie & the Wild West album, *Ridin' the Hi-Line*, singer Wylie Gustafson stands on a sunlit prairie, his head tilted back under the sharply curled brim of a tan cowboy hat. His left hand holds the reigns of a chestnut thoroughbred, and his right hand is cocked on his hip with his fingers touching the top of a pair of brown leather chaps. He's wearing a Western shirt, blue jeans, an enormous brass belt buckle, and a scarf tied cowboy-style around his neck.

If a Nashville-based country singer went to such lengths for a photo session, he'd be a laughingstock. It's one thing to put on a Stetson for the camera and the stage; it's another thing altogether to fake the whole cowboy fantasy for a publicity shoot. Only for Gustafson, this ain't no costume. A true cowhand who owns a working ranch in the Big Sky country of eastern Washington, Gustafson is a real-life cowboy who happens to be one of the most expressive country-*and*-Western vocalists around. As his entertaining new collection proves, Wylie and his crack Wild West band are just as authentic when it comes to music.

Gustafson's songs, most of them originals, are worlds away from the sensitive ballads and slick country-pop that fills country radio these days. Buoyantly upbeat, he concentrates on *yippee-ki-yo-ki-ya* Western barroom music. More energized than fellow Western singers Michael Martin Murphey or Don Edwards, Wylie & the Wild West combine shuffles, two-steppers, waltzes, and lightly swinging rhythms to create an album as fun as riding a galloping horse and as American as a field of wheat.

The "hi-line" of the album's title is another name for the wide-open country of northern Montana and northeast Washington, where Gustafson was raised. He also

spent part of the '80s in Los Angeles, playing clubs like the Palomino, and the driving country rhythms and resonant guitars typical of artists like Dwight Yoakam and Rosie Flores ring through the music of Wylie & the Wild West.

But it's the cowboy flavor that sets Wylie's music apart. For one thing, he yodels—indeed, he's an unrepentant, unrestrained yodeler whose work ranks with that of Don Walser and Ranger Doug of Riders in the Sky. His songwriting shows the influence of Marty Robbins as well as Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Tex Ritter, and the Sons of the Pioneers. In concert, his cover songs include “Cattle Call,” “Tumbling Tumbleweeds,” “Jingle Jangle Jingle,” and a couple of remakes from his new album, a sprightly “Buffalo Gals” and a loping version of “Doggone Cowboy,” a Joe Babcock song made famous by Robbins.

While his songs have a certain pie-eyed romanticism to them—as indicated by such gee-whiz titles as “Yodeling Cowhand,” “Down the Trail,” “Ol' Coyote,” and “Ridin' Rockin' Rollin'”—he nonetheless goes beyond the Tin Pan Alley formulas by adding distinctive details from his experience as a rancher and resident of the rural West. After all, he hears coyotes howl most nights when he's home, and when he dedicates a song called “He's a Cowboy” to his father, it's because Dad was a Montana veterinarian who spent his career making ranch calls and tending to sick livestock.

That said, Gustafson's authenticity and his feel for his material wouldn't mean manure if it weren't for his sweet-toned baritone and the sheer joy he instills in his performances. He also benefits from an outstanding band, especially guitarist Ray Doyle and steel player Duane Becker, both of whom master the ringing, clear-note twang identified with the best country bands of the '40s and '50s. For fans sick of the slick, Middle American pop that fills country radio these days, Wylie & the Wild West are like a fresh, cool blast rolling in from the range.

Singer Ed Burleson carries the same stamp of authenticity as Gustafson and a similar born-to-it talent for real country music. A sixth-generation Texan and former rodeo competitor, Burleson represents much of what down-home Lone Star country music should be. As revealed on his debut album *My Perfect World*—the first release on the late Doug Sahm's Tornado Records—his laid-back, barroom country tunes have more in common with George Strait or Clint Black's *Killin' Time* than with fellow Texas honky-tonkers Dale Watson and the Derailers.

Watson and the Derailers, for instance, draw heavily on the Bakersfield sound, and Watson's songs are riddled with references to truckers and grease monkeys. Burlison is more of a slow-drawling, close-cropped, *thank-you-ma'am* cowboy type, with starched jeans, pressed dress shirts, and molded Western hats—like a lot of Nashville singers these days.

But Burlison is not a careful revivalist. Instead, like Strait, he's that rare artist who uses traditional music forms to speak about who he is and what matters to him in an entertaining, earthy manner. For example, his song "Wide Open Spaces" laments the loss of undeveloped countryside, and when he puts down Nashville in "Going Home to Texas," it's with a gentler, more joyous feel than, say, Watson's "Nashville Rash."

Although Burlison is a distinctive songwriter, *My Perfect World* features a few choice songs written by others, including a couple of Jim Lauderdale tunes, a couple of honky-tonkers by his mentor Doug Sahm, and another by his producer, Lone Star club favorite Clay Blaker. However, the most telling songs on the album are the tender weepers written by Burlison. In the title track, his heart bursts as his wife suggests they married too young. In "Dreamworld," he silently observes his wife putting on a party dress and preparing to spend yet another night in bars without him. And in the sweet "No Closing Time," he wishes a night on the town would never end—not because he wants to keep partying, but because he doesn't want to stop dancing in the arms of the woman he loves.

Burlison has quickly made a name for himself in Texas, where he's been championed as a real-deal country singer. He deserves such praise—as well as the attention of Nashville, which would benefit greatly from bringing back the kind of genuine sentiment and naturalness that Burlison instills in his music.



# Live Review-Seattle Rocket

## LIVE YOU GO IT: Wylie & The Wild West

Tractor Tavern Seattle 1/14

by Deborah Malarek

(First appeared in The Rocket magazine, 1/27/99)

Selling out this two-set, work-night performance midway through the first set and leaving people lined down Ballard Avenue hoping someone might leave early, yodeler Wylie Gustafson and his Wild West were clearly energized by the turnout. And they didn't disappoint.

Unfortunately, the PA wasn't working through the first four songs, and Gustafson's vocals sounded annoyingly muffled. When the unruly equipment suddenly came to life, the singer celebrated with his cover of Tex Owens' "Cattle Call." His yodeling, while technically as substantial as it gets, came out sounding light as the wind.

The band drove through 32 tunes during two one-hour sets, a mixture of originals and covers of western ballads and hardcore honky tonk that, while not all vehicles for yodeling, all sounded genuine. Pedal steel guitarist Duane Becker was phenomenal, playing solos both energetic and full of grace. Guitarist Ray Doyle let it rip at all the right moments, as did drummer Garth Whitson. The band was tight and cohesive, and the show was professional and crowd-pleasing, with Gustafson cracking corny country jokes before launching into his next number. Between sets he came out and chewed the fat with the adoring crowd as if we were all his neighbors attending the county fair. And when Gustafson sang "Heaven," about the happiness of being home on his ranch in Dusty, Washington, or got us all to sing "Goodnight Irene" in unison, swaying back and forth together to keep time, the world, for a while, seemed smaller and sweeter.

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# Tri-City Herald Article

## Dusty's Crooning Cowboy Make Music With A Message

By Mike Lee  
Herald Staff Writer

DUSTY – Just across the dale from the white-steepled church where he sings I'll Fly Away on Sundays, Wylie Gustafson and his horse Cupcake break over the hill at a slow walk. Below them, 30 head of cattle file toward the ranch gate, their hooves sounding like heavy rain on a tin roof as they shuffle through the stiff stubble.

It's rained maybe one inch in this west Whitman County dot-on-the-map since March, and the cows kick up a thick trail of dust – apparently unimpressed that Wylie, as he known to almost everyone, just returned from Japan and a highly successful country western music show. “You kind of have to develop a persona on stage and be kind of confident,” said Wylie, who judges he's a throwback to the good old days of Western cowboy tunes. “Out here on the arena, it's based on humility. If you try to force the cattle, you will get hurt.” Nor, it seems, are folks overly impressed at the Dusty Cafe, where the poet of the Palouse eats breakfast every other day when he's not touring outside the nation's largest wheat-producing county. Wylie is slender as the rye grass that slapped his chaps as he rounded up calves for sale last week. A metal bridge of tiny round glasses rests on his thin face under a white straw cowboy hat hiding a light patch of brown hair. He's a real cowpoke and champion team roper – just the kind that big country stars sing about. Despite his semi-famous stature as a singer-songwriter in Nashville and Los Angeles, Wylie enjoys the kind of anonymity that comes in a town where virtually everyone is related through three German Protestant families that settled here around the turn of the century. Wylie, who married into one of those families, uses his music to preserve the rural life – in all its romanticized glow – in a country that seems to have passed by such antiquities. “That lifestyle needs to be saved,” said Wylie, whose family recently leased out its wheat land to a larger farm operation with a better chance of making a profit. “These families around here are barely hanging on.” The cafe is the place where Dusty (pop. 12) meets for breakfast, which comes in options No. 1, No. 2, No. 3 and No. 4. Combine operators, ranch hands and farm chemical salesmen stop there to read papers from Spokane, Seattle and New York. “When I

go to Seattle, I don't think they realize what goes on out here, that we create food for the entire world," Wylie said. The big cities are where the fate of Dusty rests as the nation ponders removing the four Lower Snake River dams to help recover near-extinct salmon and steelhead. They are breaching the dams in the name of conservation. They are bitin' the hand that feeds a hungry nation. Wylie, 38, started singing and riding horses about the same time as a kid in the ranching and farming town of Conrad, Mont., 50 miles northwest of Great Falls. In high school and college at the University of Montana, his band played for dances and wherever else it could. By 16, Wylie knew he'd be a singing cowboy. He crooned in bars six nights a week and moved to Los Angeles for seven years to participate in the vestiges of its once-popular country culture. He tells the story in his 1997 album *Way Out West: A voice inside calling me awayyyyyy/from the dirt roads of Kern County to the sidewalks of L.A.* Ten years ago, after he caught the eye of Kimberley Broeckel in a Spokane club, the two were married and have spent the last five years on the Broeckel homestead next door to the house where Kim grew up. Since then, however, he's spent the majority of his lyrical energy on cattle calls and range riding, doing for the Wild West what Jimmy Buffett does for Key West. Wylie's songs don't get much air time, even on country radio stations, which seem to be looking for the newest sound rather than something as dusty as a 1950s rockabilly mixed with soulful yodeling. "People who like their country music a little bit different usually like us," said Wylie, who writes many of his own songs for a four-member band. Often, he's out of town touring the Northwest onstage or recording in Nashville, a town he doesn't want to get too musically close to. So Wylie keeps his distance, singing about a life even more romantic than his own idyllic dale – drinking coffee from a can and pining for women named Rose-Marie without a plugged nickel to get to town. His style of Western folk often appeals to the older generation, but it's gained quite a following with the younger set in Seattle. "To them, we're alternative to alternative," Wylie said. Wylie learned yodeling from his father, who did it on the ski hills of Montana or any other time he was feeling especially good. But Wylie didn't realize what a hit it would be until a performance in Los Angeles 10 years ago when a yodel stopped everyone in the club. "I planned it, but I had no idea it would get such a big reaction," Wylie said. "It was then that I realized people wanted to hear yodeling. At least it was a way to get attention." Last year, he released *Total Yodel!*, calling it a "lost art that deserves to be resurrected and echoed far and loud." We can save God's creatures/But let's do it right/Let's have all the facts/Shed a little light. Despite his brushes with fame – at least the kind that comes with appearances on the Grand

Ole Opry and in front of 20,000 Western-clad Japanese – Wylie’s heart is on the farm, as evidenced in his new CD *Ridin’ the Highline*, to be released in February. But it was a single he cut this summer in Spokane that’s got Wylie’s attention these days. *Save Our Dams* – a fast-paced ditty with an infectious refrain – is the only political song Wylie’s written and probably his last. He doesn’t intend to rewrite Woody Guthrie’s *Columbia River Collection*, re-released in 1987 by Rounder, the same company that releases Wylie’s albums. The dams song isn’t necessarily getting lots of air time in the Tri-Cities. One country station didn’t even know about it. And, of course, by virtue of the song being country, it’s not likely to strike a chord with the bureaucrats and East Coast politicians that will ultimately have a big say in the dams’ fate. Nonetheless, the song is his contribution to a cause that farmers are not necessarily well organized to fight – and one that the Grant County Farm Bureau wants to hear when he performs at its annual banquet on Thursday. “Hopefully, it will get people to listen to our side of the dams issue,” said Wylie, who penned several verses in a few hours. “I had a lot to say.” By doing so, Wylie cast himself as a Guthrie for the modern age, a man dedicated to saving the dams that Guthrie’s songs sold to the American public, the dams that brought hydropower and took the Old out of the West. Taking out the dams would increase shipping costs for vast reaches of the Inland Empire, pushing farms already struggling with low wheat prices closer to the edge. But the newspapers at the Dusty Cafe didn’t tell that story – at least not well enough to please the people who live there. “It has the farmer worried,” Wylie said. “They need more voices out there supporting their cause and presenting their side of the story.” Wylie said he’d rather farm than sing, but the economics of cows and wheat won’t allow it – and they probably never will, he fears, without barge transportation down the Snake River. “It’s not so much save our dams,” said Wylie, “as it is save our family farms.” *Save our dams/Save our dams/Make a little room for a hard-workin’ man.*

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# Seattle Times

## Yodeling Fool Seattle Times

by Richard Seven

Lifestyles : Sunday, November 08, 1998

LET YOUR EYES STRAY BENEATH the cheeseburger and omelet prices on the wall inside The Dusty Cafe and you'll find a display of Wylie Gustafson's autographed CDs and tapes, including his latest, "Total Yodel."

Buy an album and the waitress will pick up the phone to see if Wylie is home. He probably won't be. He could be tending livestock on his Palouse spread, shoring up a corral or even taking his volunteer turn digging graves in Dusty's community cemetery. Most likely, he'll be out performing his offbeat country-Western act on some stage in Orofino or Omak or San Bernardino or even Nashville.

If he is home, though, he'll hop in his rig and get to the cafe within five minutes. He'll walk up and thank you for giving a small-town country singer, a yodeling cowboy no less, a try.

Wylie will be wearing a compact white cowboy hat nothing like those oversized black ones Garth Brooks and his country-music clones favor. A smaller hat stays on your head in a stiff wind like those that barreled down from the Rockies and across the sprawling ranch near Glacier National Park where Wylie was raised.

He's 6-foot-1 and fence-post thin, with a face so narrow that even his wire-rim glasses look oversized. People who see him perform tell him he's a ringer for Buddy Holly, but with his shy smile, light freckles and sweet thank-you's, he seems more like the Howdy Doody of Honky Tonk.

"Anyone who will take the time to find my music is deserving of my time and thanks," he says.

From the fuss inside The Dusty Cafe, where Eastern Washington highways 26 and 127 meet 33 miles west of Pullman, you might get the impression that this is the first CD Wylie's ever sold. But he's released four albums and popular-music videos, he's played the Grand Ole Opry about 40 times, and he even performed at a Gene Autry birthday party. He did a duet with Merle Haggard at Haggard's suggestion. He and

his band, The Wild West, are big in Australia and with critics who rummage deep enough in their CD piles to review them. He's at most record stores, right between Hank Williams Jr. and Tammy Wynette.

He's got lots of stage charm and a silky baritone that's at home with Western swing, honky-tonk shuffles, rockabilly, lonely cowpoke lullabies and the wry ballads he writes with words like: "If Jesus loves me, why can't you?"

He is a clear and resolute yodeler who can do justice to legends Jimmie Rodgers and Elton Britt. He learned to yodel while helping his dad make ranch fences horse-high and hog-tight. He perfected it in L.A., of all places, practicing with a demanding Austrian instructional tape, of all things.

But he's also been too this or too that for major record labels to take a chance on, or for mainstream country radio to squeeze into its tight, safe playlist. He's heard the reasons: His music is too Western for country-Western, it's too edgy, too traditional, a little too odd to sell millions.

So he rides a career as grueling as a cattle drive, adding to the 165,000 miles on his van, playing 150 road shows a year and trying to build a career one fan, one CD, at a time. He must be thankful for small-town radio, like the station down the road in Colfax that once a week does "Waylon, Willie and Wylie Wednesday," and for that rare passer-by who stops by the remote Dusty Cafe and notices him.

His signature song is "Yodeling Fool," a semi-autobiographical tale about a small-town Montana boy who, despite ridicule, keeps yodeling until he becomes the "finest yodeler in the land."

While he did become one of the finest yodelers around, even a 37-year-old optimist must occasionally wonder: Am I a yodeling fool or just a fool? How does a cowboy who lives two miles south of Dusty, and looks too much like Bill Nye the Science Guy, make it in a country-music industry obsessed with steel-guitar pop, tight jeans and great hair?

HE GETS ONSTAGE, that's how, even a converted hay flatbed adorned by nothing but triangular plastic car-dealership flags at the Jefferson County Fair.

Wylie was dressed in his small white hat, a staid-brown but expensively tailored coat with Western piping, a plain brown tie, black jeans, cowboy boots and a steer-roping belt buckle he earned at Reba McEntire's celebrity charity rodeo. It's silver, as big as

a trucker's dinner plate and chafed from brushing against hay bales and guitar bodies. The most cowboy thing about him is the gnarled little finger on his right hand, shaped like Idaho after he got bucked off his horse, Cupcake.

He two-stepped across the stage strumming a cheap guitar stenciled with his name and Western scenery and cruised through "Yodeling Fool." He yodeled like a shifty halfback runs, changing pace, blasting forward, darting and gliding.

The syllables came out clear but impossibly fast until he wound down:

"yodelayhEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE" . . . looking at his watch as if he had a couple minutes of this left . . . "EEEEEEEEEEEEEE . . ." again checking his watch . . . EEEEEEEEEEEEEEE . . . then the finish . . .

yodelayheedeeOdayodelayeeOteedAyOlayaOhee . . . AWWHAH!" He let loose a big scissor-kick finale, with the band – steel guitar, mando-guitar and drums – smacking the final hard note just right.

The 90 or so nonpaying customers scattered across the grandstands roared for an encore, irking the old guy waiting with a tractor at the corner of the stage, eager to hitch it up and haul it off to make way for the main event: a drag race across a soupy mud field. The driver swooped in the moment "Good Night Irene" finished, dragging the platform away with band members and volunteer roadies still unplugging amps and coiling cords.

Wylie climbed down and stood behind a card table, where he shook hands and sold almost \$400 worth of albums, photos and refrigerator magnets. Older people thanked him for playing C&W classics like "Cattle Call" and "Devil Woman." Younger fans told him he was corn-pone cool.

Then he looked up into the stands suddenly swollen with people cheering and hooting and riveted to the field behind where the stage once stood. A truck was stuck halfway up its doors in mud on the drag strip, sinking deeper as it revved.

"This is gotta be the first time we opened for a mud race, huh, Wylie?" said Ray Doyle, the longtime leader of Gustafson's band. "But we did open for a bass demonstration in Minnesota once. Remember that?"

Wylie laughed, stubbornly upbeat.

He and the band had played until 2 that morning at a cowboy poetry jam session in Lewistown, Mont., grabbed two hours' sleep, driven two hours to Great Falls, caught

an early flight to Seattle, gotten in the Isuzu Trooper Wylie had left at the airport days before, sped up Interstate 5, boarded the Edmonds-Kingston ferry, all to perform a 45-minute early-afternoon show with more sheep behind the stage than people in front of it.

It didn't seem to matter, as he signed autographs, that his van, carrying some of the band's equipment, was broken down somewhere near Spokane.

That's the road-dogging life, and there would be plenty more in the months ahead: fairs in Moses Lake, Salem and Minneapolis; a Central City, Colo., casino; a Sun Valley gig in Idaho; private parties and remote bars; and a week in Nashville including a two-night shot at The Opry and points beyond.

It would include a trip to Elko, Nev., where he found out after driving 1,000 miles that another act had been mistakenly booked in his place, and a seven-day dude ride through Utah canyons where he was the campfire entertainment until a horse kicked him, breaking his leg. "I guess it didn't like yodelers," he said, continuing to tour.

Each stop was an audience, a chance to win fans who might spread the word and make him so popular in a grassroots way that the major labels and radio would have to embrace him and his music.

"I like Wylie," said a Nashville agent who shepherded another ambitious act at the Jefferson County Fair. "Wylie's sincere, and God, he's talented. I just don't think Nashville knows what to do with him. He should have come along 20 years ago."

YODELING CAME naturally, but Wylie never would have given it a thought if his father hadn't done it and played Slim Whitman records at home.

Rib (short for Rib-tickler) Gustafson was a northern Montana veterinarian who drove 100,000 miles a year for almost 50. He'd make house calls to birth calves, remove stink glands from skunks and kidney stones from cats, and castrate bulls – brain surgery, he called it. He worked in blizzards, chased down ailing critters and always kept an eye out for a flying hoof or an angry horn. He sometimes got paid with a calf. He wrote two books about his adventures, some witnessed by his kids, including Wylie, the youngest.

Rib, who still lives in northern Montana with wife, Pat, would yodel on the long drives to work and family trips and while working on the ranch. Wylie was the only one of



his five children with much aptitude for it. Rib would also play guitar and sing songs like "Cattle Call," prodding his children to sing and dance.

By 15, Wylie was more impressed with his rock-'n'-rolling brother, Erik, than with yodeling. He taught himself how to play the guitar to James Cotton and Chuck Berry records. The brothers wound up at the University of Montana in a band called The Talk, playing cover tunes by Elvis Costello, Talking Heads and other edgy rock acts. They barnstormed the roadhouses and college pubs, and Wylie became hooked for good when they easily won a Battle of the Bands contest, got recorded and heard themselves on the radio.

"Here I was just off the ranch and on Missoula radio," he says. "That was something I couldn't ignore."

Erik tired of touring and bars and went back to playing country, which he still does when not teaching high school. Wylie met his future wife, a young woman from Dusty named Kimberly Broeckel, at a Spokane show in 1984. He was ready for the spotlight and she wanted to get out of Dusty. They moved to L.A. in 1986.

In the first weeks there he dented actor Ned Beatty's car and received his first celebrity cursing. He took a day job as a law-firm clerk while playing at open-mike sessions and clubs at night. He became entranced by the lively C&W scene, quit rock and became a regular at L.A.'s Palomino Club.

His early act had a distinct rock leaning, and he stood out with his tousled hair dyed red (his wife's idea, he says), flashy clothes and supple voice.

He attracted Southern California critics, won talent contests and met performers both famous and soon-to-be. But the seminal moment came when Kimberly, who worked as a makeup artist, brought her hip friends to one of his performances. They were bored – until they heard him slip in a yodel. Then, suddenly, Wylie was cool.

He tracked down an Austrian yodeling tape, honed the skill and wrote "Yodeling Fool." He called his dad and declared, "Yodeling's gonna make me famous."

He achieved some measure of fame in about 1990, when he used his credit-card limit to finance his first music video of "This Time," a song Erik wrote. They shot it at the picturesque Montana ranch and shipped it to The Nashville Network and Country Music Television. It instantly became popular, so much so that Wylie hustled out an album, then more videos, then another album, all independently produced.

He was ready to move to Nashville and become a star, but the record companies weren't interested.

"We talked to every record company," he recalled, standing in a dusty field. "They'd say we're not signing any male acts right now or we're not signing any acts, period, and just about every other reason. I guess they thought we were too weird."

It was another five years before Wylie put out another album, "Way Out West," his third, and the first since moving to Nashville. It was voted the best independent country album of 1997, but it received virtually no promotion.

While the title of his latest album, "Total Yodel," sounds like a cruel, Slim Whitmanesque yodel-a-thon, Wylie picks his yodeling spots carefully. It's his retro album, a collection of cowboy classics, a few of his dad's favorites, and originals. It's got a stripped-down, old-time honky-tonk sound that recalls those Western singers from the 1930s, '40s and '50s who seemed to sing through their noses.

"You say 'yodeling,' and people think it's this goofy thing, and it sure can be," Wylie says. "But to me it's expressing an art form, a largely lost one."

Yodeling is also his meal ticket. He's managed to yodel his way onto national Mitsubishi, Porsche, Miller Lite and Taco Bell ads, a couple of episodes of "Northern Exposure" and a few movie soundtracks. He wrote and performed a yodeling lullaby for an award-winning Montana tourism commercial; it's perhaps his most popular work.

He's angling for a guest spot on Letterman or Leno or Conan O'Brien as a novelty act, if nothing else. Yeah, novelty's good, they'll say, but do you have any hits?

THREE MORE FAIRS and a blur of shows after Port Townsend, Wylie found himself in Nashville standing just offstage behind the giant red curtain of the Grand Ole Opry, between country-charts star Vince Gill and George Hamilton IV. Wylie was being introduced by Little Jimmy Dickens, a 4-foot-11, 40-year Opry member who wears a suit of powder blue and glittering rhinestones that makes him look, he admits, like Mighty Mouse in pajamas.

The 4,424-seat auditorium was packed with tourists who paid between \$16 and \$18 a ticket. They sat still, almost reverently, in pew-style seating while about 1 million viewers watched on live TV and millions more listened on the radio.

For Wylie, it was the crescendo of a week of Nashville club gigs, interview shows – including one live at 1 a.m. on the truckers’ network – strategy sessions with manager David Skepner, who used to assist Loretta Lynn, and futile shopping for a newer van.

He had recorded five new songs for his next album, which he says will be more radio-friendly than “Total Yodel.”

There had been an impromptu set in a downtown Nashville club called Robert’s Western Wear, a funky pub selling cowboy boots along one wall and Budweiser along the other. He didn’t hesitate when the night’s performer invited him onstage. Wylie crooned, yee-hawed and yodeled while the college kids danced and hooted. It was impromptu and joyous, stripped of music’s business side. (But you never know who is watching: BR5-49, a red-hot alternative-country band, got discovered on that very stage and is now bankrolled by a major record label.)

The Opry, though, is what brought Wylie to Nashville. It is replete with tired tradition, toupees and tacky ads, but it is still exposure, legitimacy, affirmation, contacts, an audience that pays attention.

He has been invited repeatedly since 1995, because Bob Whittaker, the Opry general manager, loves his voice, music and attitude. “I’ve worn out a lot of stick horses listening to ‘Cattle Call’ and those other Western songs he does,” said Whittaker.

The Opry crowd loved “Cattle Call,” too. It’s a mournful 60-year-old prairie song tailored for Wylie’s supple voice, which can slide from deep-voiced singing to high-pitched, flutelike moaning and back. “Yodeling Fool” was so popular that applause and cheers kept drowning out the yodeling.

Wylie was so nervous he forgot to plug his new album on live TV, but he made an impression. He lingered backstage, accepting congratulations and soaking up the moment because he knew he’d be back on the road by morning. A major-record label rep approached and claimed interest; he heard through a backup singer that Gill’s manager was impressed.

It reminded him how close he is and what a mystery the music business is.

DUSTY GOT ITS name because it is, but the first song Wylie wrote after moving there is titled “Heaven.”

It sits on the western edge of the Palouse atop a bed of silt dredged up and left by ancient floods. The unincorporated town, with about 30 families in a five-mile radius according to Wylie's estimate, was once named after an early resident, but Dusty seemed more appropriate in an area where blowing dirt closes roads.

It's got a white grain elevator, a farm co-op, a gun club and a cemetery, but that's about it. The one-room Dusty Cafe is the gathering spot, with oil paintings by Wylie's mother-in-law on the walls and his albums above the lunch counter.

It's mainly combine country, but you'll find pockets of cattle and horses, including Wylie's place. He's got a few cutting horses, an Appaloosa and a thoroughbred that is granddaughter of Triple Crown winner Secretariat.

He and Kimberly moved to Dusty four years ago after weathering eight in L.A. They live on her family's turn-of-the-century homestead, where she grew up and her grandfather was born. Her parents live on the same property, also home to 30 cats and one friendly dog. The family worships at a little white church a mile away that the area's four or five core families have kept going for about 90 years.

Wylie has a mountain of C&W albums, including his current favorite, Sourdough Slim. His bookcase is stuffed with books like "Trails I Ride," "We Pointed Them North," "Free Grass To Fence" and his favorite, "Log of a Cowboy," a fictional account of a Texas-to-Montana cattle drive. His study walls are lined with guitars, Native American artifacts, Western art. He has photographs of himself taken with famous performers, but he's most proud of autographed black-and-whites of Roy Rogers and Gene Autry.

He's linked to the outside world by his computer and a Web site – [www.wylieww.com](http://www.wylieww.com) – that he uses to list concert dates, dish news, sell merchandise and maintain a fan club called "Wylie Pals."

He will sit on his front porch and scan livestock and the empty hills and wide blue skies beyond. This is good yodeling country, he says, because no one can hear you practice. From the shade of his porch, the dreams seem distant and the disappointments far-fetched. If there were justice, Wylie the yodeling cowboy would have been picked to sing "Cattle Call" – a song he not only nails, but understands – on the soundtrack of "The Horse Whisperer," instead of a mumbling Dwight Yoakam. Then again, who's Wylie and where's Dusty?

He still wants to be famous but is no longer counting on a big record company to swoop in and make him so. He is in it for the long haul, he says, and that means far-flung road trips and two-mile jaunts to The Dusty Cafe to thank a surprised customer.

“I know I’d be farther along if I didn’t live in Dusty, but I like knowing everyone and living in a place where you can’t get away with flipping off somebody in traffic. I’m not getting rich, but I’m making a living playing my music. Living here and raising horses and cattle validates the music. I don’t have to work as hard as some to make it sound real.”

Wylie Sings

You can listen to Wylie and The Wild West perform “Yodeling Fool” by calling the Seattle Times InfoLine, 206-464-2000, from a touch-tone phone and entering category WILD (9453). This is a free call in the local Seattle calling area.

*Richard Seven is a Pacific Northwest magazine staff writer.*