

## **Jim Wilson – the Singing Sheriff** by Bob Gray

The proper order of things is that first you live it – then you write about it. Doesn't really matter whether it's prose, poetry, or music. It's very doubtful that you're going to have anything interesting to say about an experience you haven't had.

With **Jim Wilson**, a featured player on the Schreiner University campus during **Living History Day on September 26<sup>th</sup>**, that's not a problem. Born in Austin and raised in San Antonio, a peace officer in Denton and elected Sheriff of Crockett County until his retirement in 1996, this is a man who has lived the Texas and Western life.

One of things I look for in a person is the words they are willing, or unwilling, to use when describing what's important to them. So the first line in Jim Wilson's website biography was very reassuring for both the words used and sentiments expressed: "Cowboy music is a great way to keep in touch with our traditions, re-affirm freedom as Western people."

Work it through. He is saying several things – nearly none of which you're likely to hear today said publicly. Most important in my mind is that Freedom is important – "freedom as a Western people." The concomitant thought is that westerners view freedom differently than northerners and easterners. It's true, we do. We have traditions of freedom that genuinely seem to befuddle New Yorkers. We carry guns in our pick-ups (an instantaneous reason for arrest and incarceration in NY). We haven't yet caught the virus that makes every problem a political problem. We don't automatically look to government for help. A true Westerner doesn't go on Oprah or Jerry Springer and cry or display indelicacies and emotions for the world to pick over.

"Cowboy music is a great way to keep in touch with our traditions..." Precisely so. Cowboy music is born of hard work and self-reliance. The Western tradition is not the 9 to 5 and TV 'til midnight way of life found elsewhere. The attitude that prevails in most of the country (and prisons) is that "if it's not happening to me, it's not happening." Westerners think differently. When our neighbors have a problem, we help without being asked – and we expect nothing in return but "Thanks." When we have a problem we keep it to ourselves if possible. We work it out as best we can without applying for a government loan or laying our responsibilities off on others.

In fact, we are much more likely to respond in the way he describes in the song *Seven Days From Musquiz* on his CD, **Border Bravo**. In this song (and remember that it is being sung by a life-long lawman), he and his partner are left with the choice – starve or smuggle some horses out of Mexico. You don't have to guess. They "know that what we're doing really ain't alright, but the grass is short in Texas and there ain't no rain in sight." They don't apply for a government loan, they don't take up a collection from the neighbors, they don't demand the local church bail them out. They smuggle.

It's important to make the distinction here: He isn't saying that hard times excuse breaking the law. If they're caught they'll take the punishment without crying about it. His point is rather that his life is *his* responsibility – and he'd rather break the law than bitch about fate or ask others to subsidize him.

These attitudes are Westerner's customary responses, and are all things that Cowboy music epitomizes. And Jim Wilson's music – the songs he writes and those he covers – are in this tradition.

As if to underscore this fact, Wilson works as the handgun editor for *Shooting Times* magazine, while simultaneously serving as vice-president of the Western Music

Association. “When I was Crockett County sheriff, I worked for the passage of the Texas concealed/carry (handguns) bill. I wanted us to have a better law on the books than the old Penal Code 46.02, that was so ambiguous,” he told me. He is happiest when ranch and rural folks in his audience respond to his music. “My music is for people who live on gravel roads, and the ones who have always wanted to.” All of this is connected – and gratifying to hear from a Texas peace officer.

The Western Music Association has nominated **Border Bravo** for album of the year. One of his original and most beautiful songs, *Mountain Home*, finished in the top five at the Academy of Western Artists awards show held on July 8<sup>th</sup> in Ft. Worth. Considering the hundreds of songs and albums produced annually in Texas, this is no small feat.

Another of his originals, *The Road to Sonora*, combines gorgeous and innovative instrumentals with retrospective lyrics. His voice and style are the perfect meld of the best from Ray Price and Johnny Cash. The result is both individual and warmly recognizable. This is an experienced hand doing what he loves.

You should be seriously considering buying this album by now. If love of truly beautiful Texas music played and sung by seasoned and peerless performers is a motivator, then log onto [www.sheriffjimwilson.com](http://www.sheriffjimwilson.com). There you’ll meet him, see his incredible performance schedule, and be able to order the album.

On Friday, the 26<sup>th</sup> of September, Jim will be performing his songs and telling his stories in person to all comers to the Living History Day on Schreiner University campus in Kerrville, Texas, from 9 am to 3 pm. Well, actually from 9 to 10 am he will be conducting an up close and personal seminar in Cailloux Hall on the campus. This seminar is open to the first twenty people who sign up with \$15. Go to [club.ed@kerrvilleisd.net](mailto:club.ed@kerrvilleisd.net) for more information. The seminar is being kept small so the time spent is personal and intimate.

While the seminar is going to concern mainly music writing, for those of us who write everything but songs – Jim is busy now on a novel. The story will be based on actual circumstances, a murder on the border in the 1890’s. While the rest will be fiction, even the fiction is going to be based on a lifetime of living the lawman life in America’s last real frontier – the Southwest. The tentative title is *Agua Verde Crossing* (also the name of the third of his original songs on the CD). I can hardly wait.

And you aren’t going to find a more widely experienced performer to answer your questions. He’s been performing since his college days back in the 1960’s, and **Border Bravo** is an excellent showcase for all he’s learned through those years. If you can make it to the Living History Day performance, you can buy the album for fifteen dollars and save the two bucks for shipping and handling.

“This will be my second year to perform at Living History Day. Kerrville has always represented all the different types of Texas music, and that’s what I really like about this event. Kathleen (Director of the Texas Heritage Music Foundation: [www.texasheritagemusic.org](http://www.texasheritagemusic.org)) brings them all together on one day in one place,” said Wilson. “The American West and the cowboy aren’t dying as some folks seem to think. They may be changing a little, but they sure aren’t dying out. As long as there’s a beef industry in America, and wild country to run cattle in, the American cowboy will be alive and well.” I’d like to add that, as long as there are peace officers like Jim Wilson, freedom will also thrive in Texas – and America. BG