



To some, Beck might appear to be an unconventional cowboy, but the songs he writes about the people, emotions, horses and landscape show his deep connection to the West.

“**F**

EEL.” It’s an ambiguous, misunderstood, and sometimes overused word to describe a touch, physical sense, awareness or emotion. It means something different to each person. To an artist, feel is the rendering of his or her perceptions in a painting or sculpture, or the emotion those works evoke in a viewer. Through the teachings of Bill and Tom Dorrance and Ray Hunt, feel has become an important word to horsemen, describing intuitive unity, harmony and communication between horse and human. For Mike Beck, feel is the driving force and common denominator behind his musical artistry and horse-training philosophies.

“I think being a horseman and musician are similar in many ways; they’re both about feel,” he says, softly strumming a few chords on his guitar. “Feel is not black and white; you can’t put it in a box. It’s so mystical that you fear getting close to it or you might taint it.

“All good hands have feel, whether writing songs, playing instruments or riding horses.”

The founder and front man of the West Coast guitar band Mike Beck and the Bohemian Saints, Beck is best known as an acoustic solo artist in the cowboy-folk genre, and his music is played on Americana radio stations. He has recorded five albums, four of which are collections of cowboy songs he wrote based on his experiences as a working cowboy and learning horsemanship while living with the Dorrances. The fifth album was recorded with his band and has a West Coast rock vibe.

With or without the band, Beck’s music is instantly recognizable. His haunting, gravelly voice and poetic, storyline lyrics give his music rawness admired by traditional cowboy, country and folk-rock fans. Yet his energetic guitar licks and riffs keep young buckaroos turning up the stereo volume in their pickups.

This month, Beck embarks on a global tour to promote his music, with stops scheduled in Arizona, California, New Mexico, Mon-

tana, Texas, Utah and overseas. Along the way, he’ll conduct a horsemanship clinic in Montana and Scandinavia. Based on his years of experience, Beck could be considered a seasoned professional on stage or in the arena. However, he believes he’s a “late bloomer,” and that he’s just beginning another phase of his lifelong journey.

RAISED IN MONTERREY, CALIFORNIA, Beck developed a fondness for horses and for California’s rich ranching and horsemanship heritage. His father was a naval officer who died when Beck was young, leaving his mother to raise him and his two older siblings. Her interest in horses and music planted the seeds for Mike’s future.

“My mom was raised on a ranch in Alberta, Canada, and she grew up taking care of teams,” Beck explains. “She loved horses and music. We listened to a lot of Canadian artists, such as Gordon Lightfoot, and Ian and Sylvia, but also American folk artists like Joan Baez.”

Beck got his first horse when he was in third grade and spent his free time riding through canyons, cattle and ponds on the Work Ranch, then rode over the hills to the September Ranch in Carmel Valley. When he was a teenager, Beck got a job cleaning stalls for Roy Forzoni, who had a training stable in Carmel Valley. It was

RENS HECTOR



there that Beck first saw a colt started and is where he met Tom Dorrance, who became a major influence in his horsemanship.

Beck got his first guitar at age 13. Every day, on the way home from school, he haunted a music store in Monterrey—to the point of being a nuisance.

“One day, the salesman gave me a broken Stella guitar and told me to never come in the store again,” he recalls.

Beck began teaching himself to play, using an old Bob Dylan songbook his older brother had. He did return to the music store and ordered a music book by Arlo Guthrie.

“I couldn’t make head or tails about the chords, but I wore the book out looking at the pictures,” he says. “In the middle of the book there was a picture of Arlo at the Newport Folk Festival with a guy in a cowboy hat, neckerchief and polka-dot shirt. It was Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, and I thought he looked so cool.”

Inspired by the refined rawness of Janis Joplin, Jimmi Hendrix, Arlo and Woody Guthrie, the Stanley Brothers and other talent from the 1960s, Beck was drawn to bluegrass music and pushed the creative boundaries of what he thought it should be. After graduating from Monterrey High School in 1972, he hitchhiked to Nashville to experience the bluegrass scene. He got a job busing tables and doing dishes at a motor inn on Music Row.

“I lived there only four months, but each night I’d go to the Station Inn, a club where everyone played,” he recalls. “One night, I got to play with Marty Stuart.”

Though he had dabbled in garage bands during high school, Beck started his first band just out of high school with a schoolmate and other musicians they found around Monterrey. They called themselves the Coast Ridge Boys, and played Beck’s style of bluegrass at the River Inn in Big Sur.

THOUGH BECK ENJOYED MAKING music, playing in clubs and bars got old. He longed for open spaces and to be horseback. In his early 20s, he headed to Nevada and landed a job on the wagon at the Spanish Ranch, working for Bill Kane, the legendary cowboss on the ranch for 28 years. Beck had never cowboied, but his friend Bryan Neubert, a cowboy on the ranch who Beck had known since he was a teenager, convinced Kane to give him a chance.

“I arrived with my snaffle bit and bedroll, just as Bill had asked,” Beck recalls. “I went right out with the wagon and had no idea what I was doing.”

A little older and more experienced, Neubert became Beck’s mentor. He couldn’t help Beck in front of the other buckaroos, but when they were sent off into the sagebrush to do a job, he would offer advice.

“Mike was very green, and just getting started in his cowboy direction,” Neubert recalls. “I do remember that whatever he might have lacked in experience, he more than made up for in try. He never tried to be anything that he wasn’t or tried to make anyone believe he had more experience than he did. Everyone would have surely agreed that Mike was a fun guy to have on the crew.”

One of Beck’s first orders on the Spanish Ranch was to get a brockle-faced calf out of a pasture.

“He confessed later that he didn’t know that term and thought the instruction was to get the ‘bronco-faced calf,’ so he got the wildest one he could find,” Neubert recalls. “We got a good laugh from that one.”

The ranch’s leggy Thoroughbred-Quarter Horse crosses were “pretty honky,” Beck says, and it was common to see two or three guys get bucked off each morning, and even sometimes on the way back to camp, after trotting all day.

“A lot of the horses didn’t get started until they were older,” Beck says. “They needed to be physically mature to carry a cowboy that far. Each cowboy typically had seven horses in his string, which means each horse got rode four times a month, sent out with the wagon for two or three months, and then turned out.”

Beck learned a lot about horsemanship and cattle from Neubert, and says he “would’ve gotten killed if it wasn’t for Bryan.”

Survival involved doing what you were told, observing, learning, and not saying much. Beck says it took Kane three months to learn his name, but nevertheless Beck had a lot of respect for the cowboss.



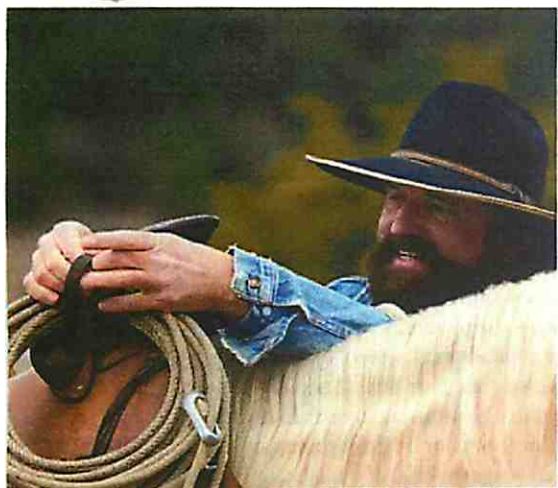
Beck rode out with the wagon on the Spanish Ranch for two years. While the other cowboys braided in the evening, he played his guitar. This photo of Beck was taken in Scrapper Springs, Nevada, in 1976.

“He was a real leader; he had to be,” Beck recalls. “He could and would do whatever he asked one of the cowboys to do. He never complained, no matter how cold or hot it was, or how far we rode. It’s the funniest thing, as I’ve gotten older I have learned the difference between fear and respect. I feared Kane, but I respected him so much I wanted to please him.”

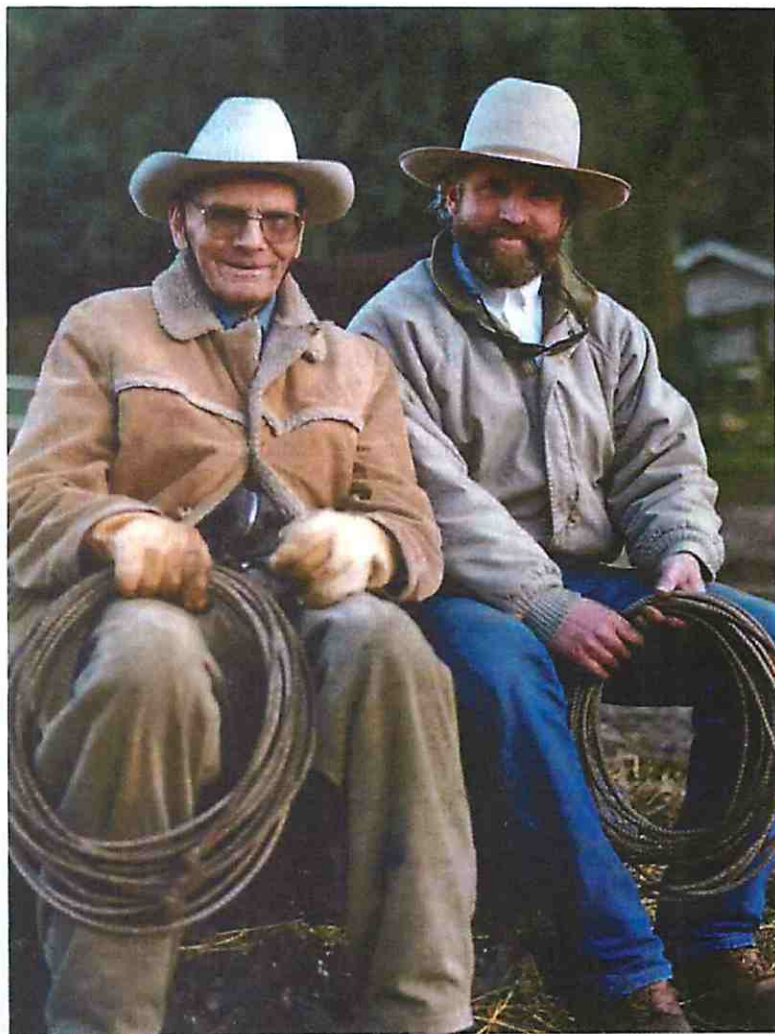
“He would take guys like me and make a circle with us. He’d spread out the circle, and I’d have 30 to 50 pairs to move and wouldn’t see anyone else for hours. Just when I’d start wondering if I was going in the right direction, I’d see Kane in the distance and know that I was going the right way.”

At night, many of the buckaroos—including Neubert—braided rawhide, but Beck chose to play his guitar, instead.

“Kane loved it when I played,” Beck says. “I sang a song by Coun-



Above: Beck's horsemanship methods are based on approaches handed down to him from Bill and Tom Dorrance, and through some of the horsemen he worked with, such as Roy Forzoni, Bryan Neubert and Joe Wolter. **Right:** Beck spent years living off and on with and learning from Bill Dorrance. "Bill was so encouraging but very straight with you" Beck says. "He'd see the positive and build on it. As soon as I'd leave the ranch to go cowboy or do a gig, I'd want to go back and be with him. He was setting me up the same way he did his horses to get them to want to be around him."



try Joe about being in the Army that he liked because he had served. One of the lines goes, 'Get over here. Stand over there ... We're sending you to Southeast Asia.' So, Kane started calling me 'Over here, over there.'"

Cowboys warned Beck that once he left the Spanish Ranch he would never want to go back, but he considers his two years there as his college education.

WHILE ON THE WAGON at the Spanish Ranch, Neubert would share with Beck horsemanship techniques taught to him by Tom and Bill Dorrance. Beck was eager to learn more, so Neubert advised him to write a letter to Bill. The men exchanged several letters about cowboying and horses until Bill invited Beck to come stay with him on his ranch on Mount Toro.

"He told me he'd help me [learn to better work with horses], give me a place

to live and feed me, but he couldn't pay me," Beck says. "I couldn't believe my good fortune."

A scattered cowboy in his 20s, starved for knowledge, Beck stayed at the ranch with Bill for a year, savoring every moment he spent with the man. Bill never had an agenda for the day, but he and Beck would do a variety of work on the ranch, eat their main meal of the day at noon, and then rope and ride until dark. Though he didn't realize it at the time, Beck says that everything Bill had him do was preventative maintenance to stay ahead of a problem, just as when he worked with horses.

"We'd stack nine three-strand California bales of hay on his old Scout and go feed," Beck recalls. "One day, on the way back, he stopped because there was a limb in the road, and said, 'Mike, you know, a feller might want to move that limb to the side of the road. And, since



we're here, we might want to take the shovel in the back and clean out that culvert.' All the time he was inventing little things like this for me to do, and I wasn't sure why. But now I realize he stayed ahead of problems, just like he did with horses.

"Tom was the same way. When most people wash a saddle pad, they hang it square on a fence rail to dry. Tom figured out that if you turn the pad so two points hang down, the water runs to those points and the pad dries faster."

Bill became not only a mentor but also a father figure to Beck. For years, Beck would return to the ranch and stay with Bill between cowboying and music gigs. Bill talked often about "feel" and how it created unity between a horse and rider. Beck remembers the first time he experienced the feeling Bill had told him so much about.

"We were out riding, just me and him, and we were stopped at the gate," Beck recalls. "He said, 'Mike, it's time to step ol' Snip around,' which meant back him in circles. He asked me to do this a lot, so I figured it had some value or he wouldn't waste his time or mine. So much takes place when backing a horse on a circle; you're shaping his head, neck, ribs and hindquarters, and getting in time with his feet. [In past attempts] I was late or early, but this time the horse and I finally were absolutely together; there was no drag. From the smile on Bill's face, I knew he understood what I'd just felt for the first time. It was a huge moment in my life, and something so simple that I continue to strive for."

THROUGHOUT HIS 20s AND 30s, Beck continued to visit Bill regularly and cowboy for a living. He worked on ranches in California, Nevada and Montana. One of his favorite jobs was on the Rafter Diamond Ranch outside of Deeth, Nevada, where he worked on a crew that included noted horsemen such as Neubert, Billy Askew, Troy Tueler and Joe Wolter. Then he started colts on the Madison River Cattle Company, where he met Ray Hunt and "a young kid" named Buck Brannaman.

Fourteen years ago, Beck began conducting his own horsemanship clinics, promoting the methods Bill taught him. Because of his affiliation with the Dorrances, locals started asking him to help with their horses. Word spread, and he began getting requests to do clinics overseas. Most of his clinics are in Scandinavia,

and he prefers to work with small groups where he can take his time and offer one-on-one instruction.

Just like Bill, Beck doesn't have a set agenda at his clinics; instead, he customizes them to the needs of each horse and rider.

"I don't consider myself a clinician or the best horseman, and I don't intend to make a lot of money from clinics. I do it for the horse and myself," he says. "I come from a practical background of using a horse for a job, and what has been shared with me from Bill and Tom. I want to help people understand what's taking place when things come together with the horse, and what's taking place when things fall apart. It's our responsibility as horsemen to get together with our horses.

"It's not about good or bad; it's about sharing what a horse needs, which is really what we all need. It's taken me 30 years to figure out what Tom meant by saying 'do less to get more.'"

Beck has never felt the pressure to do more than a few clinics a year, to promote them or increase their size or duration. The last days Beck spent with Bill, a few days before he passed away in July of 1999, were very personal. Bill suggested that he continue helping people and their horses. Tom also supported Beck up until his death in June of 2003.

"During one of my last visits with Tom, he had me take a photograph off the wall in the bedroom," Beck remembers. "He was blind, but he described every detail of the photo, which showed a young girl at one of his clinics, sitting with Tom beside her horse. Both horse and rider had a good expression. He told me, 'That's what it's all about.'"

PRACTICAL-MINDED, THE DORRANCES didn't really care about Beck's music career. Yet, Bill's lessons not only enriched Beck's understanding of horses but also his music. Just as a rope becomes an extension of a cowboy's arm, the guitar became an extension of Beck's arm.

"Bill taught me that to do something well, you have to live it, breathe it, never stop thinking about it, and then start over the next day," Beck says. "If I'm learning a new melody, I remind myself to go slow, take my time and put it all together. That's the same thing Bill taught me to do with horses."

When Beck quit cowboying and started doing clinics, he began writing cowboy songs. One of the songs he wrote, "Patrick," is about Bill's longtime horse and partner. It was the only song Bill asked him to sing for him.

"He was pretty old at the time and was sitting in the house braiding by the fire," Beck says. "We visited for a while and he said, 'I hear you have a story about that horse. If a feller had some time, I'd sure like to hear it.' As I went to get my guitar, I realized I'd never played for him. He loved the song and asked me to play it for the rest of the family. The last time I saw him, he said, 'I hope you can make a lot of money off that song.'"

THESE DAYS, BECK STILL does a few clinics, mostly abroad, but is primarily a traveling musician. Sometimes he travels with his four-man band, featuring the amazing guitarist Tom Ayers, but he mostly travels solo in the 1988 Dodge van he named "Uncle Rico." He was invited to play at the 2011 Heber City Cowboy Poetry Gathering and Buckaroo Fair in Heber City, Utah, and the 2012 National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada. He spent the winter in Austin, Texas, studying songwriting and the music scene, playing backup for a young artist and performing acoustic at different venues.

"I like playing with the band and acoustic," Beck says. "The folk and cowboy tradition is about telling a story, and trying to reach people and take them someplace. I love being in that role and creating a set of songs that's like a story, with a beginning, middle and end. Typically, I have eight songs to tell that story."

When Beck takes the stage with the Bohemian Saints, he maintains his folk sensibilities, but experiments with gritty guitar riffs and a stage presence that engages audiences of all ages and demographics, from hippies and bikers to cowboys and buckaroos. He says the appeal comes from the songs and the ability to tell a deep cowboy story with a rock groove.

"We have a free form with a 1960s West Coast guitar band undercurrent," he explains. "People my age grew up with this kind of music, and now their kids are listening to it. It's a great way to bring Western to bigger arenas."

Inspired by his friend Ian Tyson and legendary guitarists and songwriters such



Mike Beck performs at the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada.

ROSS HECON

as Bob Dylan, Tom Petty and Steven Stills, Beck has an incredible work ethic when he sits down to write a song or experiment on his guitar. He does most of his writing at his home-away-from-the-road in Southwest Montana.

The past six years, Beck has come into his own with his music and wants to start showing crowds what he and the Bohemian Saints are all about. Although his focus hasn't been on cowboy songs lately, he does have an idea brewing for an album focusing on the darker side of cowboy life. Following the lead of other progressive singers and songwriters in the Western genre, such as Andy Hedges, Corb Lund and Ian Tyson, Beck believes Western fans are ready for such an honest album.

A black-and-white photo of Jimmy Page, founder of Led Zeppelin, is taped to the body of the Gibson guitar Beck has played since 1999. To Beck, the photo is an example of feel.

"I love this photo because he's a very sloppy guitar player, but I'm drawn to the emotion in the photo," he says. "A guitar is a living being. The more you play it, the

better it sounds. You have to let it become part of you."

Though Beck doesn't claim to be the best musician, or the horseman that the Dorrances were, or even on the same level as his friends Neubert and Wolter, he does feel fortunate to have had influential mentors.

"The Dorrances were such classy guys who lived exemplary lives," he says. "They were shaped by the era and open to learning more up until the end. I feel obligated to share their knowledge and feel with others through clinics and even my music."

It appears as though Beck has roamed most of his life, but he says that's part of his quest.

"I think the time I spent cowboying and with the Dorrances had a huge influence on my music," he says. "Sometimes you have to go to different places and do different things to find the questions and get the answers." 🐾

For more on MIKE BECK, visit mikebeck.com. Jennifer Denison is a senior editor at *Western Horseman*. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.

BECK'S PICKS

In the April 2009 issue of *Western Horseman*, we named Mike Beck's song "In Old California," as one of the top 13 cowboy songs for the trail. Here, Beck lists his picks for the top albums—from various musical genres—of all time.

1. *Lost Herd*, by Ian Tyson

"Every song is a masterpiece of intelligent songwriting and arrangement. Ian set the bar high in cowboy music, as a folk legend and as a cowboy."

2. *South Coast*, by Ramblin' Jack Elliott

"Armed with just a guitar and songs, Ramblin' Jack Elliott has brought more peace, joy and harmony to the world than the United Nations ever has. One of my favorite guitar players, Jack says more in three chords than anyone I know."

3. *Blue*, by Joni Mitchell

"How can anything that hurts this much sound so beautiful? In her masterful songwriting and singing, Joni's heart is laid bare to the listener with simple accompaniments on piano, guitar and Appalachian dulcimer. This stark instrumentation says it all for me."

4. *Ballad of Easy Rider*, by The Byrds

"My guitar hero, Clarence White, and drummer Gene Parsons are the driving force on this 1969 release, making it my favorite Byrds album of many. Not only were Clarence and Gene best friends, but also they played so well together that they became one amazing musical entity. Unstoppable live in concert, these guys are a force that has never been matched, and so inspiring."

5. *The Band*, by The Band

"All Canadians, with one boy from Arkansas, these guys are the godfathers of Americana music. Recorded in 1969 in Sammy Davis Jr.'s pool house, the album features my favorite singer and drummer, Levon



Helm. It took a Canadian, Robbie Robertson, to write one of the greatest songs about the pain of the Civil War, 'The Night They Drove Ol' Dixie Down.'"

6. Liege & Lief, by Fairport Convention

"The greatest folk-rock record ever made, this English band featured a young Richard Thompson on guitar and a drummer, Dave Mattacks, whose playing could take a band of soldiers across any misty battlefield. Sandy Denny's vocals led the charge, and she could write a song so steeped in English ballads that they sounded ancient."

7. Big City, by Merle Haggard

"The Shakespeare of country music asks in song 'Are the good times really over for good?' on this album. Merle's songs and vocals are the real deal, and his band, The Strangers, with Roy Nichols on Telecaster, says it all for me."

8. Wildflowers, by Tom Petty

"To me, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers say it all about American music. I saw them perform in a small venue one night, and that show changed my life. In short, they are the best band in America."

9. Live At Leeds, by The Who

"English street punks channel their energies into the greatest live rock record of all time. A sonic dream of raw power, Pete Townsend takes the cosmos of a Gibson SG plugged into a Marshall stack to new heights. Tired of sappy love songs? This is your remedy."

10. Any Day Now, by Joan Baez

"Joan and a dream team of Nashville's finest session players, led by Grady Martin, give this collection of Bob Dylan songs the royal treatment. Originally a double album recorded in 1968, this is a lesson in how to make a record. Great songs, great vocals, and man, these guys can play."

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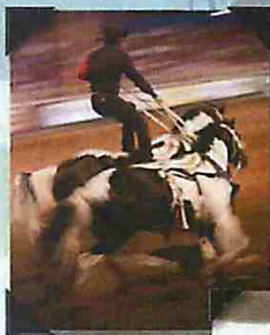
~ Sir Winston Churchill

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