

# Horse house

## Equestrian history comes alive in art

By JOCK HATFIELD  
Of the Emerald

There's something about the horse that inspires artistic interpretation. Anything as big and stupid looking as the horse has got to be up to something metaphysical on the side.

The Bible has a lot to say about horses. Psalms in particular warns us about the horse's motives: "A horse is counted but a vain thing to save a man; neither shall he deliver any man by his great strength."

Out on the McKenzie Highway, Martha Shelly has filled up a house with horses. Horses, as Shelly tells it, have had an almost mystical influence on her life. She uses horses as chronologists use history. She credits many of the accomplishments of her family to the help of the horse. Different horses symbolize different epochs in her family's progress.

Visitors to the House of Horses receive a lengthy horse lecture. In 26 years of carving, Shelly has enough horses to start a miniature stampeed and a dude ranch. She has grouped together the carvings in shadow boxes to depict great moments from her family's horse history. These moments occurred on her father's ranch near Hepner, Ore. and her late husband's ranch in Montana. There was the time a bear chased a relative up a tree while the horse stayed below to deal with the problem. She tells of the horse's sufferings under the bridle and of horses leading the way home in the dark.

"We did everything with horses in those days," she says.

The first horses came to America with Cortez, had a few good massacres and spread themselves around the country. They caught on.

Half of the House of Horses is filled with Shelly's paintings. Most of these paintings are busts of horses, but Shelly also dabbles in religion.

She has a painting of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, who had biblical dealings with plague and disaster.

Some of her paintings were inspired by the horse stories of her visitors. One visitor told her of a ranch in Nebraska where everything was white. White chickens, white rabbits, white houses, white horses and white people. Things were going along happily until the father in the family died, and the family had to break up its white monopoly to pay the bills. The horses were split up and carted off to sundry tragic places. Shelly captured this in a painting of eight white dynamic horses galloping around like cumulus clouds, titled "approaching storm."

"My paintings are inspired," says Shelly. "They come to me full blown and I feel pressured until I do it." A painting of a hand being helped out of a sea by a horse was bumping around in her head for months, she says, before she finally tossed it onto canvas.

Shelly's carvings, she says, lie in the wood waiting to be brought out. There is a lot of excavating in art.

"This boy is still in there," she says holding an unfinished fat carving.

Shelly had broken in a thousand horses or so when 26



Photo by Erich Boekelheide

Horses have been more than just animals to Martha Shelly. She uses them as a historian uses historic events. Horses have spent a lot of time in Shelly's family. That's why she spends a great deal of her time carving the huge animals.

years ago her doctor told her she would have to give them up. Shelly sees her carving as a loophole. She kept in touch with horses by making them in her sick bed.

"Praise the lord," she says. "There was a subject I knew thoroughly."

She carves each horse as though it were going to come alive. A muscle placed a fraction of an inch out of line could make the horse into a cripple or give it digestion problems.

"When I finish a horse," she says, "I want to be able to say walk trot or canter and have it be able to do it without leaving behind a part."

"Nothing you see now will be on the final work."

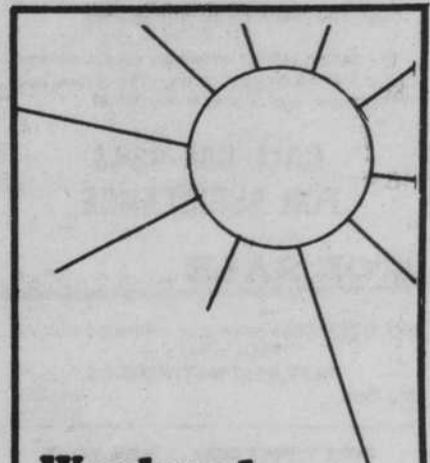
Shelly first picked up her appreciation of horses when a buyer for her father's ranch took her out to help match horses for the family's team. Horses had to be matched by size, weight and muscular stature. Until this time, Shelly had regarded the horse as a horse. Then she began to look at it as a collection of parts, a work of art.

Shelly's work reflects this background. Her horses are suggestive of symbolism, strength and sex. They show the horse as something more than uncooked dogfood.

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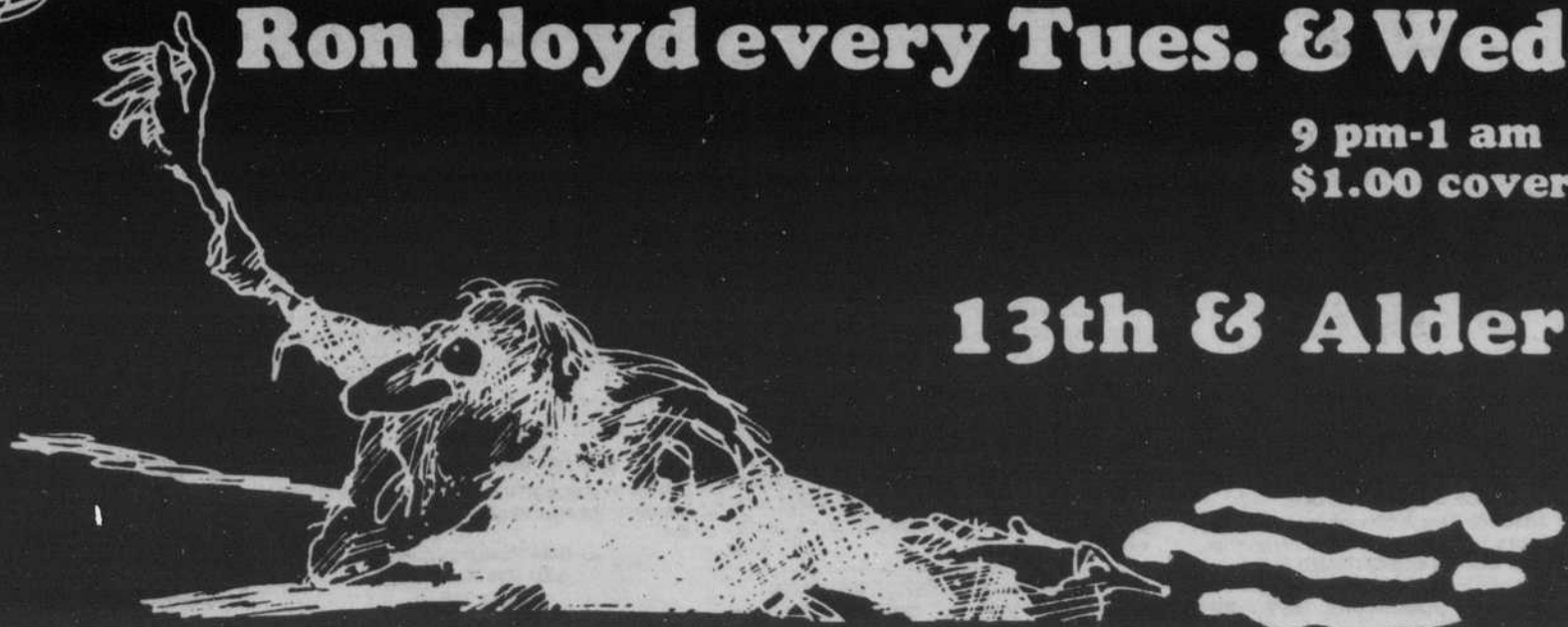
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