

Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

The Portland Observer

Herb Jeffries: The Cowboy Code Today



Herb Jeffries

"The cowboy never discriminated. He just wanted to know if you could ride and do the work. He didn't give a damn what color you were. We could use more of that cowboy code today. No, this album is a lot more than nostalgia. There's a message too: There's only one race--the human race." Herb Jeffries

For the first, and only, black singing cowboy on the silver screen, there's no such thing as riding into the sunset. In the late thirties, Herb Jeffries became the first black movie hero and, in the forties, a singing star with the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Today, Jeffries is a phenomenally vigorous 83-year-old who's as charismatic (and his smooth baritone as strong) as when the Bronze Buckaroo first saddled up. In fact, nearly 60 years after he made movie history, he's recorded his western songs for the very first time on an album--The Bronze Buckaroo (Rides Again), produced by Jim Ed Norman and like Jeffries himself, his Warner Western debut is both "Now and Then."

"I was like the Pied Piper at personal appearances," says Jeffries at his Los Angeles home, recalling earlier days. "I had a Cadillac with

steer horns up front and my name in gold rope on the side and after the picture I'd do rope tricks, spin my gun and sing songs from the movie. Wherever I went kids would follow me down the street--not only black kids but white kids too, which was unusual to see down South. They'd see cowboys before but not movie cowboys."

Now, on The Bronze Buckaroo (Rides Again), Jeffries sings brand-new recordings of his theme song, "I'm A Happy Cowboy," which was heard in all four of his Saturday matinee horse operas; "Pay Day Blues" (from Harlem Rides The Range) with Michael Martin Murphey; and two new songs he wrote specifically for the album, "Lonesome Rider Blues" and "Down Home Cowboy." He also reprises the western classics "Texas To A 'T'" (with Little Texas), "Nine Hundred Miles" (with the Sons Of The San Joaquin), Bob Nolan's "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" (an innovative version with the R&B group Take 6), "Cow-Cow Boogie" (with singer-actor-musician Hal Linden on clarinet) and Gene Autry's "Back In The Saddle Again" (with Rex Allen, Jr.), he performs one of his many jazz

hits for the forties, "You, You Darling," with The Mills Brothers.

Recording in Nashville, Jeffries realized that western jazz had an affinity for each other and decided to blend them together. "they're the only musical art forms born here," he says. "All the others are borrowed. But there's a whole different cadence to the music now than 50 years ago. It's not waltz-3/4-time western that Garth and Clint are doing; it's a 4/4 beat, which is line-dancing. It's the same beat as jazz! and there's no generation gap in line-dancing, it's for young and old. I smelled an inspired marriage and so did Jim Ed. Norman (President of Warner/Reprise Nashville). After seeing an episode of a PBS series called "California's Gold" that featured singing cowboys Gene Autry, Roy Rogers and Jeffries, Jim Ed Norman called Jeffries in late 1993. That show in turn had been

inspired by a tribute concert the previous year at the Gene Autry Western heritage Museum in Los Angeles that included Autry, Jeffries, Rex Allen and Patsy Montana, among others.

"That was the first time I'd worn a Stetson in public in 50 years," says Jeffries, "but I'd never stopped loving westerns or the image of the cowboy." a pair of his boots, a hat, and posters from his oaters now occupy a place in the museum.

How did a young man from Detroit become a singing cowboy?

From a theatrical family, he began singing in a combo with a neighborhood piano prodigy, performing locally and on radio. When Jeffries moved to Chicago, he was discovered by Earl "Fatha" Hines, who invited him to sing at his local shows there. Hines was so pleased that he asked Jeffries to go on the road with his band for a tour of the South.

Jeffries, who grew up in an integrated neighborhood and went to an integrated school, says he "never saw discrimination until I went South." Playing tin roof theaters and tobacco warehouses, he noticed there were thousands of small movie theaters where blacks went to watch the cowboy pictures of To Mix, Buck Jones, Ken Maynard and Duke Wayne because they weren't allowed in white theaters. "I thought, 'My god, there should be black cowboy pictures.

There were black cowboys."

Once, he saw a group of white boys running from a little black child who was crying. It turned out they were the child's friends but they'd started playing cowboy and since they'd never seen a black cowboy they left him out. Jeffries told the child what he knew of black cowboys and the child wiped his tears and scampered off after his playmates. Says Jeffries, "He belonged in the posse as much as they."

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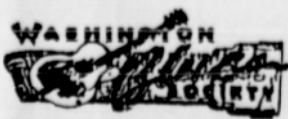
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