

Cowboy songs and the American West

Singer-songwriter and activist Michael Martin Murphey will be performing a benefit concert at Hamley’s on April 9 for a friend stricken with Lyme disease, as well as previewing his seventh volume of cowboy songs, “High Stakes.” Murphy was generous enough to discuss with me what cowboy songs mean to him and how the songs he performs are an extension of his environmental activism that focuses on restoring rangeland through sustainable ranching practices.

A friend of mine recently gifted me a copy of your 1976 album, “Swans Against the Sun.” It has a varied sound, ranging from the prog-rock synthesizers of the title track, to the jazzy numbers, to country/folk rock styling you are more commonly associated with. Can you talk about how your songwriting has changed since then?

I don’t think my songwriting process has changed. I think my production has changed. I was listening to some of that stuff in recent times. Man, we were really throwing in the kitchen sink! We weren’t about simple back then, we were about complex. When it does work out it’s great, but when it doesn’t ... “Swans Against The Sun” is uneven in that sense. As I look back, simple production is what breaks through. I love doing songs with just an acoustic guitar, and using the low end of the instrument.

“High Stakes” is a mixture of cowboy standards and new songs — two of which were co-written with your son and frequent collaborator Ryan. What goes into making a good cowboy song?

The same things that go into any good song: something that draws the listener in, a good story. You’re there for the audience, not for yourself. You only master your craft song by song. You don’t say, “I’m a master now and anything I

write is masterful!” You have to apply to mastery anytime you write a song, anytime you write anything.

In a cowboy song, you sing about the western life and are reaching culture in a way that is compelling and interesting. “High Stakes” is about taking risks and moving forward. My favorite line in that song — one that Ryan wrote — is, “heaven is so close and hell is there for those who wait around.” Ranchers and ranching culture can not afford to sit back and wait around. We have a job to do. We have stewardship over the land. We don’t want a desert. The next album, “Cowboy Songs: Volume 8,” addresses that though it’s not necessary coming out next year.

There are songs on this album that I’ve had for years that I didn’t release. I’m old-fashioned in the way I think about albums. I like a suite of songs that are in the same spirit and interrelate. In a download world where things happen one at a time, the album is a distinctly different kind of unit, a different form of expression than a single song. I love albums that are based around cowboys.

Cowboy songs tend to celebrate and romanticize the frontier mindset — the untamed land as a reflection of an untamed spirit — something that seems to be gradually disappearing as land is continually disappearing to development and more people move to urban areas. Has the cowboy song changed in response to these societal shifts?

Absolutely! Oregon ought to know about that! Without getting too political, as the world shifts to cities, since we live in a democracy the cities have the power. You have to have a Department of the Interior. If that department is mostly influenced by urban centers, it’s not going to know what sort of work there is to be done on the ground. I don’t think that that’s intentional. The main reason we have the Department of the Interior is

to protect natural resources. We have an urban population and when they think of a national forest they think of a camping trip or staying in a cabin. They elect people who want to manage it for that purpose. If you manage public land just for tourism you’re going to make a lot of mistakes.

We’ve removed a lot of the grazing animals from public areas but we want to see wild animals out there. We already killed all the buffalo. We can’t do it by breeding buffalo, it would take 100 years! We need to have managed wilderness. You can call a place a wilderness area but that area is going to deteriorate without proper management.

Those are issues specific to the cowboy that can only be solved by understanding western and ranching culture. These songs help provide that background.

The official unveiling of “High Stakes” will take place in Dallas at Earth Day Texas. What does Earth Day mean to you?

What it should mean to everybody: We have this planet and whether you think about it scientifically or not we have a responsibility to make it work for the environment or we have an unhealthy planet. We have thousands of microclimates that add up to one big macroclimate. How we take care of our local microclimate affects the macroclimate. It’s about the health of the planet. Without a healthy planet we have no healthy human begins. Earth Day is an important holiday. I don’t think it should be a government public holiday — those should be few and far between — but we should celebrate the interaction people have with the planet.

Aside from the personal connection with Lyme disease, why does this issue

resonate with you? It is the single biggest threat to the health of the outdoors people of the American West. It’s been swept under the rug. Oregon has a huge problem. Refer yourself to the Oregon Lyme Disease Network. Lyme is really everywhere and we need a greater awareness of it.

J.D. Kindle is a Pendleton musician and executive director of the Oregon East Symphony. Contact him at jamesdeankindle@gmail.com



J.D. KINDLE Comment



PENDLETON

Local ‘stars’ step out for charities

By TAMMY MALGESINI
East Oregonian

The Utah Ballroom Dance Company is waltzing into town again to work with six local people as they compete while raising money for a handful of charities in Dancing With Your Pendleton Stars.

Patterned after the hit ABC show, “Dancing with the Stars,” the local participants will be paired up with professional dancers. In the week leading up to the April 16 event, competitors will learn a ballroom dance routine to be performed live onstage with their professional partner. Featured dance styles include the swing, quickstep, nightclub two-step, the Charleston, the Cha Cha and the tango.

The Pendleton stars are Robb Corbett, Pendleton city manager; Megan Furstenberg, a former Round-Up queen; Kathy Kinkead, branch manager at First Community Credit Union; David Nelson, retired state senator; Acosia Red Elk, an artist specializing in American Indian regalia; and Randy Thomas, owner of A Sharp Painter.

Corbett will be dancing for Pendleton Young Life, an interdenominational faith-based program. Affiliated with an international Christian organization, Corbett and his wife, Liz, were among a group of people who established a Young Life program in Pendleton in 2013.

Furstenberg will bust some moves for Pioneer Relief Nursery, an agency that seeks to stop the cycle of child abuse and neglect through early intervention, education and essential support services.

Red Elk will move across the dance floor for Systems of Care. As part of the services provided at Yellow-



Corbett



Furstenberg



Kinkead



Nelson



Red Elk



Thomas

Dancing With Your Pendleton Stars

DATE: Saturday, April 16
TIME: 6:30 p.m., doors open; 7 p.m., show
PLACE: Vert Auditorium, 480 S.W. Dorion Ave.
COST: \$30/adults, \$15/students
*additional \$5 at the door

hawk Tribal Health Center, it provides supports for at-risk children and youths, and their families.

Nelson is kicking up his heels for Kick’N Cancer New Beginnings. The organization raises money to help cancer patients participate in the Spirit Program, which provides exercise and massage for cancer survivors.

Kinkead will heat up the dance floor for the Pendleton Warming Station. Started in 2011, the center provides the homeless with a refuge from the bitter cold during winter months.

Thomas will corral his dance steps for Tough Enough to Wear Pink. Decked out in pink, cowboys and rodeo fans bring awareness and raise money to support breast cancer patients and survivors. The program became a tradition in Pendleton in 2006 on

the Thursday of Round-Up week.

The winner of Dancing With Your Pendleton Stars will be determined through a combination of local judges, Larry Blanc and Dave Tovey, audience voting and money donated on behalf of each dancer’s charity.

In addition to raising money for each dancer’s cause, money from ticket sales will provide assistance to the CAPECO Food Bank. Tickets purchased in advance are \$30 for adults and \$15 for youths. They are available at Pendleton Chamber of Commerce, Pendleton Book Company or www.brownpapertickets.com. Tickets at the door are \$5 more.

For more information, contact Fred Bradbury at fbradbury@yahoo.com or 541-377-7474. For more about the Utah Ballroom Dance Company, visit utahbdc.com.

PENDLETON

Have dinner with Oregon East Symphony’s conductor

PENDLETON — A five-course meal prepared by the head chef at Virgil’s at Cimmiyotti’s also features live music and an overview of the 2016-17 Oregon East Symphony season by conductor Beau Benson.

Conductor is Monday, April 18 at 6:30 p.m. at Cimmiyotti’s, 137 S. Main St., Pendleton. Tickets are \$40 per person and are available at the symphony office, 345 S.W. Fourth St., and Armchair Books, 39 S.W. Dorion Ave., both in

Pendleton. The evening also will include live music by the Oregon East Symphony String Quartet led by concertmaster Lisa Robertson.

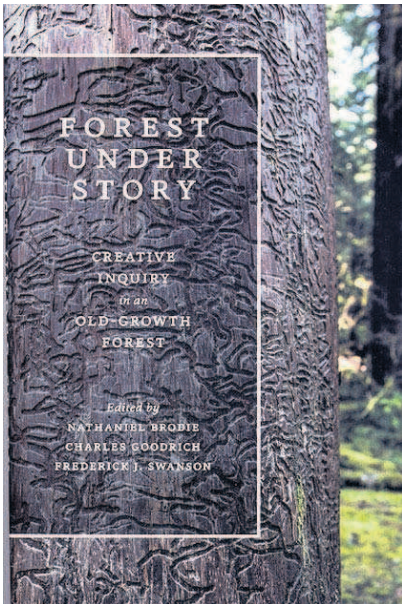
For more information, call 541-276-0320.

BOOK REVIEW

Art, science combine in unique collaboration

In the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest of Oregon’s central Cascades, a very unique, long-term project is going on. It’s not just the scientific work being done on the effects of logging on this temperate rainforest and the Lookout Creek watershed, which began in 1948 and is planned to stretch some 200 years or more. It’s the marriage with a writing project, Long Term Ecological Reflections, that grabs attention.

“Forest Under Story: Creative Inquiry in an Old-Growth Forest” is the first publication of short stories, poems and articles by authors from across the United States whose residency required spending time in each of four “Reflections Plots” within the experimental forest: a gravel bar created by a recent, major flood; the Log Decomposition plot; a recent clear-cut; and a selectively logged plot. Otherwise the authors were given free rein to record their thoughts on the project and its significance in both the study of the ecology of the watershed and how the project has and will effect human attitudes toward forest management practices.



The authors that served as artists-in-residence for this first phase of Reflections are scientists, environmentalists, teachers and champions of green spaces. Many found the experiment daunting. All found a new appreciation for the idea that science and art together can transform how people think about our world.

If you approach this book as just a bunch of poems and musings on the environment, you’ll miss the point. Scientists in the Andrews Experimental Forest can produce

reams of data and spout factoids until the cows come home. But these writers integrate the facts with why they should be important — and that is the value of the program.

Renee Struthers is the records editor and book reviewer for the East Oregonian. Contact her at rstruthers@eastoregonian.com

“Forest Under Story: Creative Inquiry in an Old-Growth Forest,” Nathaniel Brodie, Charles Goodrich, Frederick J. Swanson eds. ©2016, University of Washington Press.

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