

MIDNIGHT COWBOYS

The keepers of the flame of country music – men who own horses and get into fights in border towns – take a 2,000-mile train journey to find the soul of the Wild West. Peter Culshaw joins them for poker, songs and discussions about Wittgenstein. Photographs by Antonio Olmos

THERE IS a cartoon attached to Tom Russell's fridge in West Texas, which says 'Don't get me wrong – I'm pro-crazy bitches', together with assorted photographs of his former lovers and current belles. 'Russell, you are one sick motherfucker,' said 23-year-old ex-stripper and now philosophy student Julianne Chung (introduced to me as Russell's 'new attorney') when she saw the photos. She was particularly perturbed

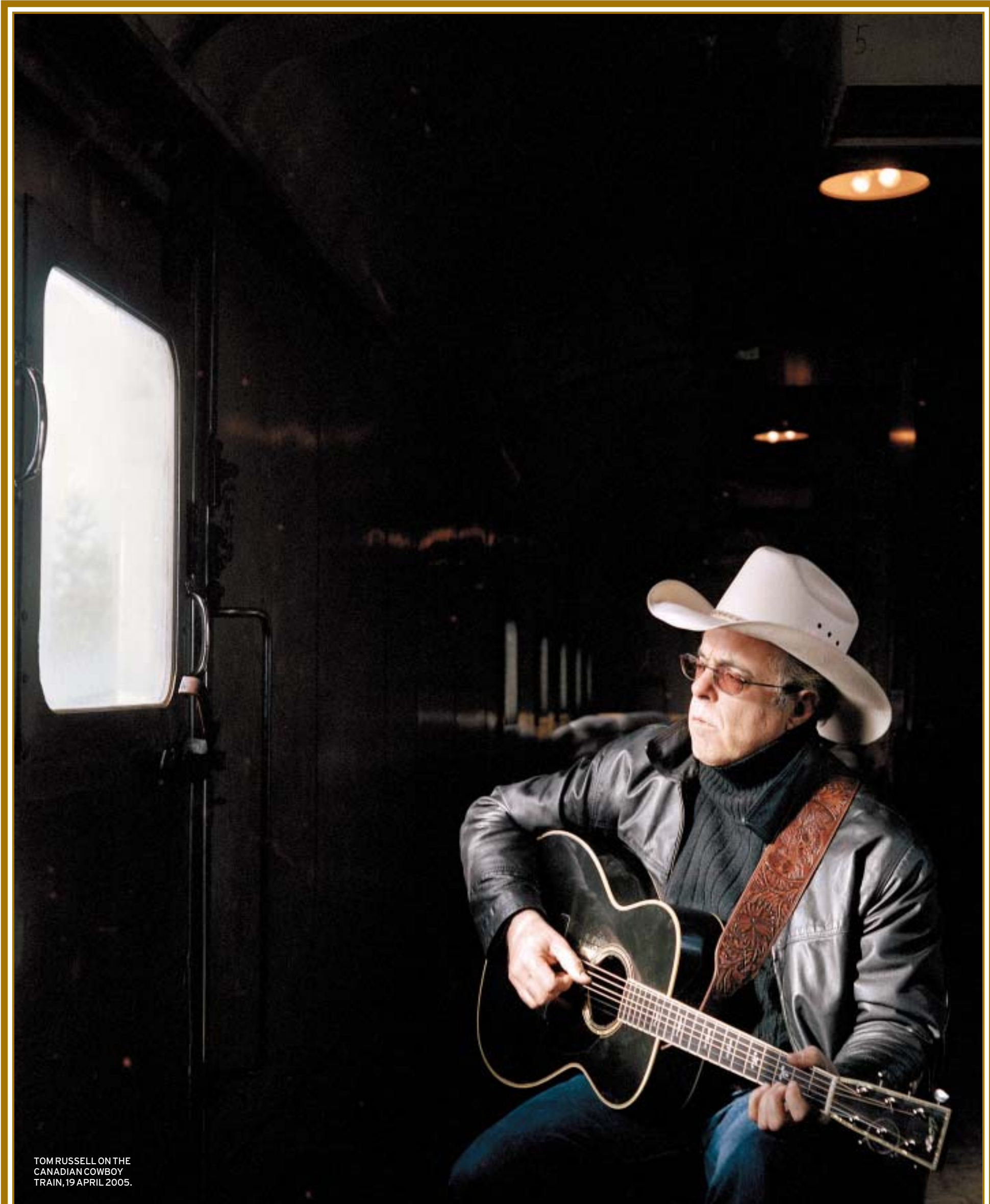
about her striking resemblance to Russell's last girlfriend, Elana Fremerman, the violinist from Texas Swing band Hot Club of Cowtown, now playing with Bob Dylan. Musicians around Russell had started calling Julianne 'baby-Elana' as soon as he had picked her up in a bar in Calgary.

'I haven't got over any of them,' he told me later.

The worst break-up was with his wife, after which 'they locked me up as a hope-

less psycho in a dilapidated dry-out hospital in the desert. I hadn't slept for a year. I broke out once and five huge Mexicans ran after me and stomped me into the parking lot. They planned on keeping me there for ever. Finally the place was closed by the board of health and I got out... and got better. It took six months. Then I got involved with a "borderline personality" and it took a year to get rid of her... a very ugly season in my life. Then I got involved with Elana.'

After he split up with Elana last year, Russell did something really drastic. He gave up drinking – this from a man who told me that the 'secret of life is good tequila'. Then he met Julianne – and that more or less brings you up to date with Tom Russell's love life. The good news is that he got some great songs out of it all – his magnum opus, *Songs of Love and Fear*, an emotional train-wreck of a double album, is released later this year.



TOM RUSSELL ON THE CANADIAN COWBOY TRAIN, 19 APRIL 2005.