

The 56-year-old Russell is – certainly geographically – the last great American songwriter. His adobe ranchhouse is perched as far west in Texas as you can go, near El Paso and just over the border from the Mexican town of Juarez. Russell approves of the saying ‘if you can’t piss in your front porch, you are living too close to town’. Little known in this country, he has put out 18 of his own albums and built himself a formidable reputation as a songwriter in the States – he made the top three in the US folk charts last year alongside Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan. He has made several records of cowboy music – but has also strayed way off beam with a ‘folk opera’ called *The Man From God Knows Where* and his recent *Hotwalker*, a kaleidoscopic account of low-lives, circus dwarfs, Mexican music and reminiscences about growing up in Los Angeles in the Fifties and Sixties (his father, he says, was a ‘horse trainer, land developer and jailbird – a typical American dreamer’).

He picked me up from El Paso airport in a beat-up truck and took me to his ranch – ‘I love the dry heat and the way the light changes here’ – which is decked out with Indian rugs (one of his best known songs is called ‘Navajo Rug’), religious icons and a battered grand piano. Then there’s his Martin guitar, which has a bullet hole in the back (‘Some asshole shot his pistol at it when I was working in a carnival in Puerto Rico.’) There’s also the Matador Room, where he has mounted the head of a bull from the Juarez bullring (‘He must have been a brave bull because his ears are missing’), and a library with ‘everything ever written in English about bullfighting’ (including *Lady Bullfighter*, the story of the first female bullfighter Patricia McCormick). Indeed he’s tried his hand at bullfighting and is off to Spain this summer to improve his skills as a matador.

After a day at a rodeo and much talk about the elegance of lasso work and the art of rodeo riding (his brother is a professional), Russell told me his plan for a train ride across Canada – from Vancouver, where he started his career as a musician, to Toronto. He would invite leading cowboy musicians – including Don Edwards, Paul Zarzyski and Ramblin’ Jack Elliott – whom he described as ‘a piece of American history, a walking icon of modern folk art.’ He complained that Nashville had abandoned the western element of what used to be country and western: ‘Now they are only interested in crossover artists like Garth Brooks to sell to golfers – it’s pretty much corporate bullshit. Fuck Nashville, man.’ The train would be a great celebration of the beating heart of cowboy music.

So what exactly is cowboy music? ‘Much of it was Scottish and Irish tunes given new lyrics about Jesse James or something,’ says Russell. ‘There was also a big Mexican influence with the guitar.’ Just as much of the mythology of the Wild West ‘was created by travelling shows such as Buffalo Bill’s 80 years ago’, the most famous cowboy singers were made by Hollywood – Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. Go on the train, Russell told me, and I’d see the real, unvarnished, deal.



## HIS GUITAR HAS A BULLET HOLE IN IT. ‘SOME ASSHOLE SHOT HIS PISTOL WHEN I WAS WORKING AT A CARNIVAL IN PUERTO RICO’



From top: Wylie Gustafson, Don Edwards and a captive audience; Canadian country singer Don Edwards and Tom Russell; lonesome cowboy Ramblin’ Jack Elliott.

### VANCOUVER, DAY 1

It’s raining, but Russell wants to show me the Skid Row dive where he played in the Seventies, when they ‘had snake acts, topless and bottomless bars, cheap hotels where old sailors came to die’. Vancouver is a beautiful city but this part of town is full of skanky-looking prostitutes and hopeless homeless-types living in boxes in alleyways. Russell shows me where the Smiling Buddha club was: ‘What they used to call a knife and gun club – people would get rolled for money in front of you. One of the most tragic things was the Native Americans drunk and lost.’ So was he a middle-class kid from California slumming it for fodder for songs? ‘I was middle-class but then one day dad walked in and said we’ve lost it all. The next day they towed away the Cadillac – so we went from middle to lower class in one day. Dad did jail time for misappropriating huge amounts of money and we moved in with grandma.’

We are relieved to escape and in the evening board the train – which boasts gorgeous 1950s stainless steel cars and a ‘Bullet Lounge’. There is a diverse selection of cowboy music-lovers on the train: a lawyer from Alaska, a couple from Las Vegas, others from Ireland and Cornwall. I’d love to say we were attacked by Indians, but this is a pretty well-heeled, civilised gathering – not surprising with tickets for the trip costing nearly \$2,000.

We are directed to our quarters – I’m sharing a sleeper cabin with Tommy, a would-be cowboy from Finland, who has his hat and guitar primed for action, and Antonio, the photographer. After dinner is served in the dining car, we all squeeze into a car that has been set up as a performance space and each of the acts that Russell has invited to join this journey plays a short set.

Wylie Gustafson and his band the Wild West are this evening’s highlight, playing cowbilly songs from his latest album *Hooves of the Horses*. Gustafson lives in Dusty, Washington (population 11), where he and his wife tend a small herd of cattle and some Appaloosa horses (they’re America’s spotted breed). He is a champion roper, having won first prize at a Reba McEntire Rodeo competition.

Tom’s love interest, Julianne, and I are the only smokers on the train, and we have to sneak off to one of the vestibules for a quick cigarette. She’s wearing a T-shirt with a picture of two deer copulating. She wants my opinion of Wittgenstein, whom she is studying. Then she’s off with Tom’s godson to set up a floating poker game.

### ON THE TRAIN, DAY 2

We awake to the extraordinary sight of Mount Robson, the highest peak of the Rockies. It’s snowing and bleak and magnificent. We roll past Glacier Creek and Yellowhead Lake into the small town of Jasper, where we get out and stretch our