

legs. 'It is not unusual to see elk and mule deer casually stroll down Main Street,' says the guide book, but they seem to be on holiday. Russell corners me and asks me what I was up to with Julianne last night. 'You cad! There are claw marks on her tight little ass – you bastard.'

A big part of the train experience is the afternoon workshop run by Tom's guitarist, Andrew Hardin, who seems to be able to play anything. Passengers come up and play their songs with him to an appreciative audience. Tommy from Finland is there every day – and he's good.

Hardin met Russell when they were both briefly taxi drivers in New York in the early Eighties. Tom had almost given up on a music career when he happened to pick up Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter and sang him his song 'Gallo del Cielo'. Hunter was so impressed that he hired Russell to open for him at the Lone Star Cafe. Russell called up Hardin and they have played together ever since. They are an odd couple – Hardin thin, lanky and quiet, Russell well-built and extrovert. They could probably make it as a comedy duo if the music career falters.

Russell's has his own advice for aspiring songwriters: 'Go get a job in a bar and learn 10 Hank Williams songs. Get lost in Mexico. Songwriting is about building on your roots then finding out who you are... and writing down to the blood and bones. You wanna sell out and stand in line with the other zombies? There are buses bound for Austin and Nashville and Toronto every hour. The promised land? It's the dead fucking the dead... in a vacuum, to quote Bukowski.' Later, he says the Americana and 'alternative country' scene has 'become as watered down and phony as mainstream country and only a few souls survive; when's the last time you heard a song that would give you the chills?'

THAT NIGHT, AFTER WE HAVE STOPPED AT the godforsakenly barren station at Edmonton and are rolling in the Alberta dark towards Saskatchewan, Russell plays some rocking songs from his recent album, *Indians, Cowboys, Horses, Dogs*, including 'Tonight We Ride' (which he played on David Letterman's show – Letterman called it 'music for horse rustlers from Montana'). He previews a couple of songs from the *Love and Fear* album – including an extraordinary song recounting the tale of Mexicans who try to steal electricity from power lines and often end up electrocuted, but 'the laws of nature say you get nothin' for free/And love is like stealing electricity'. Then there is a Hank Williams jam session with everyone joining in for 'Your Cheating Heart' and 'Lost Highway'. Russell says Hank is 'the be-all and end-all... the hillbilly Shakespeare', and a key influence on the likes of Bob Dylan, as was Ramblin' Jack Elliott.

It would take several books to tell the story of Ramblin' Jack's life – he's a kind of Zelig figure, popping up at key moments in music for over more than half a century. Now aged 74, he's been an aspiring cowboy all his life, and sang cowboy songs on the streets of Paris in the Fifties. He has been a sailor (he once steered a nuclear subma-



'RUSSELL'S ADVICE TO SONGWRITERS? 'GET A JOB IN A BAR AND LEARN 10 HANK WILLIAMS SONGS. GET LOST IN MEXICO''



From top: Don Edwards and hat; Tom Russell's girlfriend/attorney Julianne (no hat); Paul Zarzyski and hat; Wylie Gustafson, with guitar... and hat.

rine) and a pilot. Born in Brooklyn, New York, he ran away to a rodeo after seeing Gene Autry, the actor and cowboy singer, at Madison Square Gardens. Having heard Woody Guthrie on the radio, Elliott sought him out and ended up staying with him for two years and started life as a performer as a Guthrie copyist. He came to England during the skiffle craze and was briefly famous. Back in the States in 1958, he got to know well all the Beats, from William Burroughs to Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, who read him *On the Road*. The Beats accused Elliott of stealing their girls – even Ginsberg, famously gay, said Elliott took 'the only girl I ever loved'. Mama Cass later called him 'the sexiest man alive'.

When Bob Dylan emerged, some accused him of stealing from Ramblin' Jack. 'There were a lot of people who tried to get me angry about that,' he says now. 'He's stealing the wind out of your sails.' But I had plenty of wind left. Besides, I was flattered. Dylan learnt from me in the same way I learnt from Woody – and he said, 'If you want to learn something, just steal it.'" Dylan invited Elliott on his Rolling Thunder Review tour in 1975, together with Joan Baez, Ginsberg and many more; he says it was the only time he's ever travelled first-class, or had his guitar tuned by someone else. Before that he was even, briefly, almost a member of the Velvet Underground, when, along with Lou Reed and John Cale, he would back Nico at her solo shows after she left the band. 'I was enchanted by Nico, although she told me she was in love with someone else, so there was no hope. I did get a cheque for 75 dollars signed by Andy Warhol. Maybe I shouldn't have cashed it. I didn't like them much – they were the opposite of the "fresh air and sunburnt faces of the cowboys".'

The nickname 'Ramblin' does not come from the fact that he is always moving about, but because of the way he converses, jumping from one subject to another in an often random way, and his introductions usually last longer than the songs themselves. Only loosely based on reality, they are impossible to transcribe. On the first night on the train he told a story about running late for a gig, how he was so tired he let his dog Caesar drive for him while he slept, and ended up phoning in his performance from a call box in the middle of nowhere, while a distraught promoter held a mic to the phone.

Tom Russell recalls seeing Ramblin' Jack at the Ash Grove club in 1962 in Los Angeles. 'Sometimes he'd come out on stage and never sing a song. He'd rap for 40 minutes. He must have been the first cowboy rap artist.'

The second night, I share a late night brandy with Elliott – he tells me that he simply never had the drive to make it big in the way Dylan or even Russell have. His only regrets are that he hadn't been a better father to his daughter and that he hadn't been a better son to his parents, who were understandably confused by