

His heart is in the music and lore of the Old West, but he's a descendant of a prominent New Hampshire family. When he's not dressed in his performing outfit of chaps, spurs and cowboy hat, he looks more like an Ivy League professor than an old cowhand. He sings and tells stories from Western campfires, but he makes his home in a 200-year-old farmhouse in Grafton. And he's a champion yodeler; but truth be told, yodeling is a bit too Hollywood for his tastes.

Meet Skip Gorman: Singer, multi-instrumentalist, historian, storyteller and teacher. He's performed around the country and overseas, as a solo act and with his band, the Waddie Pals. He's recorded nine albums, including the brand new double CD "Mandolin at the Cow Camp," and his music has been featured in two of Ken Burns' documentary series. Noted Western writer E. Annie Proulx ("Brokeback Mountain") is a big fan: "The lonesome ache that is in the core of Skip Gorman's voice and fiddling fits close to the bones of the slope country, the rough breaks, the bunchgrass high plains. These traditional cowboy songs, unadorned, openly sad, sometimes lively or gritty, carry the distance and solitude of the West in them."

Now most of us, when we hear the words "cowboy songs," we think of Roy Rogers, Gene Autry or Tex Ritter. But they were Hollywood cowboys. Gorman is interested in the real life of the 19th century West — even at the risk of disappointing an audience. "If somebody asks me to sing 'Ghost Riders in the Sky' or 'Tumbling Tumbleweeds,' I explain that that's Hollywood cowboy music, and I don't do Hollywood cowboy music. They might be a little bit

miffed, but then they listen to what I'm doing, and they learn something."

So if it's not an actor singing to his horse on a sound stage, what is authentic cowboy music? Well, it's what the cowboys sang around the campfire. Gorman's new CD includes classic cowboy tunes like "Git Along Little Dogies" and "Streets of Laredo," along with some Celtic music, a good-sized helping of Stephen Foster (a songwriter who captured the spirit of "traditional" as well as anybody) and even a few Skip Gorman originals. Gorman's not doctrinaire about sources; he's after the sound and spirit of the old West.

Origins of a cowboy musician

Skip Gorman's middle name is "Woodbury," which might ring a bell if you know your New Hampshire history. He's a descendant of Levi Woodbury, one of the most prominent Granite Staters of the 19th century. Woodbury was a New Hampshire Governor, United States Senator, Secretary of the Treasury under President Andrew Jackson, and a United States Supreme Court justice.

"My side of the family went down to Rhode Island and married Catholics," says Gorman. He grew up on an island in Narragansett Bay; his parents' house was on the water facing Newport. That meant the legendary

Newport Folk Festival was only a short ferry ride away. In the 1960s, the preteen Gorman saw some historic performances — like Bob Dylan going electric. But "I hardly remembered, it, because he didn't interest me," he says.

Most young people get hooked on young music, but not Gorman. As a child, when other kids were into rock-and-roll, he was listening to Jimmie Rodgers, the man who brought Western sounds into country music.

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AN OLD COWHAND IN THE GRANITE STATE

SKIP GORMAN AND THE MUSIC OF THE AMERICAN WEST

BY *John Walters*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Jim Block*



At the Newport Folk Festival, he was captivated by older musicians playing older music: “Doc Watson, Bill Monroe, the Kentucky Colonels, the Stanley Brothers, Howling Wolf, Maybelle Carter, the list went on and on,” he recalls. “Now, at 57 years old, I just consider myself so lucky to have seen all this stuff.” He could add that now, at 57 years old, he has joined the ranks of those great musicians preserving — and putting their own stamp on — American musical traditions.

The young Gorman was not only listening, he was also playing. He proudly displays a photo taken at a 1968 bluegrass festival: A 17-year-old Skip Gorman sitting in with Bill Monroe and his band. His interests later extended to another tradition: “I started listening to Aly Bain and the Chieftains and the Boys of the Lough.” The 22-year-old Gorman spent a summer in Ireland, and “got a big dose of Celtic music.”

By then, he had graduated from Brown University with a degree in history and Spanish literature. He went to Utah for graduate school; that’s where he discovered the music of the Old West. “I started collecting these old 78s of the cowboy singers, like Powder River Jack Lee, Carl T. Sprague and Slim Critchlow.” Those men were authentic cowboys; as older men in the 1920s, they had recorded the music of their younger days on the trail.

Gorman joined the Deseret String Band, a group devoted to old-time Western music. The band gained a loyal following and recorded an album. “We got invited to the national folk festival at Wolf Trap, then to festivals in Europe, so I dropped out of graduate school,” he says. “This was too good!”

The late 1970s brought Gorman back East; first to take language courses at Middlebury College in Vermont, and then to a succession of teaching jobs at private schools. He kept playing cowboy music, and also got into the New England contradance scene — appearing regularly with stalwarts like Rodney and Randy Miller and Bob McQuillen.

At home on the eastern frontier

In 1983, Gorman bought a 200-year-

old house on a primitive dirt road in Grafton. Right in front of his house is a sure indicator that you’re off the beaten path: A warning sign that says “Seasonal Use Only — Road Not Maintained In Winter.” His house had been through many incarnations — as a dairy farm, a home base for a Prohibition era corn-liquor distiller and a rustic campground. It became the focus of his other life’s passion: Home repair and improvement.

“I’ve done a huge amount of work,” he says with satisfaction. “I gutted the entire place, redid the outside and I’m only halfway done.” His improvements include a network of stone hearth



Gorman's home has a view of Mt. Cardigan.

fireplaces and a carriage shed big enough to hold two cars and a whole lot of miscellaneous stuff. The result is a house with modern conveniences but a decidedly old-timey look: Skip Gorman’s musical philosophy expressed in wood, stone and concrete.

“I bought this because I wanted an old place in the country, and I’m really glad I did,” he says. He owns 10 acres, and the nearby landowners have no plans to develop. Isolated, rustic and rebuilt to his own specifications: Just the place for a man who’s following his own path in life.

By the early 1990s, Gorman was ready to give up teaching and pursue music full time. He joined Rodney and Randy Miller to form the New Hampshire Fiddlers’ Union, but cowboy music was still his true passion. In 1995

he signed a contract with Rounder Records, one of the country’s leading folk music labels. Rounder released three of his CDs to critical acclaim, but authentic cowboy music didn’t move enough product.

“They were thinking the American West was going to be big,” he recalls. “But other things came along, and they put me on the back burner. So I started my own label, Old West, and I sell CDs out of my house.”

Thanks to the Internet, independent musicians can reach their audience directly. (Information about Gorman’s music can be found at his Web site: www.skipgorman.com.) But it’s not an easy way to make a living. Many of Gorman’s fellow musicians have achieved wider fame by catering to mainstream tastes, but that’s not for him. “I’m not chasing the money trail as much as other people are,” he says. “I love the old sound of this music so much. And somebody’s gotta preserve this stuff. Somebody’s got to do it.”

That mission frequently takes Gorman back to his old stomping grounds: The classroom for presentations on Western life. “I bring in a saddle and a blanket and a fake campfire,” he says. “I sing ballads, play fiddle tunes and an old minstrel banjo. I use maps of cattle trails and of emigrant roads like the Oregon Trail and the Santa Fe Trail.” He tells the story of America’s westward expansion, and the lives of the cowboys, settlers, Native Americans, prospectors and Mexican vaqueros. “It’s just fascinating for me, and I leave these school programs feeling like a million bucks.” **K**

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