

WESTERN BLISS

Stephanie's Track-By-Track Notes

1. MONTANA COWGIRL: Mid-May, Daggett Canyon: The eastern sky blazes pink, purple, orange, and red above the still-silhouetted piney hills. A meadowlark on a cedar post trills his first "good morning," as the little brook at his feet gurgles in cheery agreement. The clean, sweet scent of sage wafts in the breeze, as the little bay colt between your knees twitches his ears to the rhythmic jingling of your spurs. A coyote, no doubt returning from his all-night hunt, appears on the ridgeline. He pauses, studies you for a long moment, then tosses back his head and wails the coyote equivalent of, "It's a good day to be alive." You grin, toss back your own head, and, in your best coyote, wail what you hope passes for, "It IS a good day to be alive." A little rough around the edges. Okay, seriously lacking in pitch and tone. Simon Cowell: "Stick to punching cattle, or whatever it is you do." But the raven overhead caws "Encore!" The little brook chortles. The cottonwoods nod and murmur appreciatively. And people wonder why you live out here...

2. HITTIN' THE TRAIL TONIGHT: Another fine song for belting out on the trail, in the shower, on your rider mower, or, if you're like me, while waiting for a highway patrolman to hand you a speeding ticket ("Ma'am, if you don't slow down, you're going to be Hittin' The JAIL Tonight.") Blame Rich O'Brien's blissariffic, pedal-to-the-metal twin guitar riffs—that, and this blisstastic gem of a song. The words are from the magnificent Bruce Kiskaddon, one of my favorite cowboy poets. Music by Hal Cannon, one of my favorite people.

3. SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO: Late afternoon. The plaza. Tantalizing scents of chiles, meat frying, corn tortillas, drift through the warm desert air. Wildly cascading baskets of fuchsia Bougainvillea line the street. An ornately dressed trio of Mexican musicians—fiddle, trumpet, guitarron—have just finished "Cietolindo." Your favorite. Maybe it's a sign. You sigh, silently wishing you could stay in this beautiful place forever. You turn...someone smiles...and says, "Hello." could stay in this beautiful place forever. You turn...someone smiles...and says, "Hello."

4. BRONCO BUSTERS' BALL: No, in answer to my dyslexic friend Brad's nervous inquiry, this song's title does NOT refer to an unfortunate incident involving a saddle horn. Now that we've cleared that up, let me unequivocally state that if you haven't been to a real cowboy dance, you haven't lived. And we're not talking about Tuesday night line dancing at the Rusty Spur. A real cowboy dance is a major social event. EVERYONE goes, from Grandma to baby Mikey... You'll dance until your legs pert near buckle. You'll make new friends and catch up with old ones. You might even find yourself sharing the beautifully boxed lunch you bid half a month's wages on at midnight with its equally beautiful maker. Just be sure to comb your mane—girls hate burrs.

5. LEANIN' ON THE OLD TOP RAIL: I learned this wonderful classic as a pup, off an Eddy Arnold record. Infectious melody, great lyrics, and Cindy Cashdollar's steel put the bliss in this one. DAY-YAY-yippie-tay-OH-tee. Saying it three times fast has been rumored to lower blood pressure and cure bunions.

6. NAVAJO TRAIL: There is so much to love about this track – Paul Daniels' silky background vocals, Reggie Reuffer's sultry, soulful fiddle, Rich's exquisite guitar, and of course, the song itself – dreamy, blissful, a delight to sing. Fifty bucks says you'll be humming this one for days.

7. TEXAS BLUES: Well, it's not Montana, but over the past few years I have found much to like about Texas, starting with the musicians and ending with the barbeque. Here's one of my favorite Bob Wills tunes that Rich channels Junior Barnard on. Salty!

8. OL' FAITHFUL: You've heard the saying: in a lifetime, a cowboy is lucky to find one good dog, one good horse, and one good woman... I would add one great guitar player to that list, and Rich O'Brien is it. One listen to this track will tell you all you need to know.

9. TRAIL'S END THEME SONG: "You should do a radio show." "A radio show? Me?" "You should." "I couldn't." "You could." That little exchange between me and my hero and friend, Garrison Keillor, took place several years back, and has haunted me since. I could? I should. I will! And so, next February or so, the pilot of Trail's End Ranch Radio will make its debut. Sketches, sound effects, monologues, the Trail's End Ranch Hand Band... The details are a bit overwhelming, but it all starts with a theme song... Have I mentioned that we need sponsors?

10. IDAHO: This little Count Basie/Benny Goodman ripper took to our "Western Bliss" treatment like a musician to an open bar. Check out the blistering, first-take guitar solo by our friend Clint Strong, who has worked with everyone from The Hag to Herb Ellis. Guitar players everywhere will be tempted to turn their axes into cheese slicers when they learn that Clint actually talked and laughed all the way through the take. Can you say, "multi-tasking monster?"

11. THERE'S A GOLD MINE IN THE SKY: Yes, I'm an old prospector, promising my lame, one-hoof-in-the-grave mule all the grass and good times he can stomach on the other side if he will only keep his exhausted carcass moving a bit longer on this side. A charming old crooner made popular by Gene Autry, among others.