

# Lifestyles

## Adios Busker Buckboard Buck:

### Where will you be tonight?

When I was a boy in the 1950s and watched western movies like Howard Hawk's "Red River" and read novels like Jack Kerouac's "On the Road," my heroes were cowboys and vagabonds, men always on the move.

Although I've grown up some since then, I still love the stories of those uninhibited and unfettered carefree spirits always looking for happiness beyond the next bank in the river or the next bend in the road.

Of the many people I have known in all my life, my friend Buck Vandermeer, who is about the same age as I am, is the only one who has consistently lived a life on the road.

I've never known anyone else like him, although I have read and read about another Michigan writer, the late Jim Harrison, who was always on the move and who was also born in a river town in Michigan not too many miles north of where Buck was born.

A couple of weeks ago, I gave Buck a ride to a bus station in Lubbock so he could travel to Dallas to catch a train back to Michigan. He still owns a piece of his family farm there in the Great Lakes State. If the dice had rolled differently, he could have farmed or trained horses for a living.

Michigan is also the state that is famous for producing the automobiles we use to travel down our roads. If you are born in Michigan, like Buck or Harrison, are you born with wheels already turning?

In Hobbs Buck has been without wheels since he gave up the Ford van he was living in when he first came to Hobbs. For a couple of years that van sat hidden from view behind my barn.

He told me that he ended up here in Lea County because a fierce northern wind blew him south when he was once again making his way west through Kansas and Oklahoma.

He had heard of Hobbs because his former wife Pam Ross grew up here. When he first arrived here, he thought it was a "pretty good little town."

Just about all of his life, especially after college at Central Michigan University, Buck has traveled back and forth across America, playing music up and down the East Coast and in dozens of places from there all the way to the West Coast.

For many years he played annual three-month summer gigs on Michigan's Grand Island, the water surrounding him touching both the US and Canada.

Many readers in Hobbs and Lea will have known Buck over the last twenty years. Some may have thought he might even have been from here since he has been all over the Lea County map in the kind of work he did.

Of course many will have known him because of his writing for the Hobbs News Sun, his "From the Buckboard" column that appeared off and on for several years.

More Lea people would have personally seen and talked

with him because he is a fine musician, a pianist who has carried Yamaha keyboards wherever he has traveled and played for dozens of different kinds of audiences. His mother was a pianist too.

I've heard him play and sing in Hobbs cafes, in several bars, in senior care homes, in concerts at the Lea County Museum's Town Hall and in its Art Gallery, next to a campfire on an off-grid desert mesa, in Raton, and on the porch of a mercantile in Terlingua, Texas. The Yamahas have batteries for when he wants to play in the boondocks.

When several years ago Buck rode to Austin with me to visit my son, we heard lots of live music at venues where he invariably spent time visiting with singers and musicians who had played in cities and towns where he had.

He almost went ballistic when he encountered the dozens of live-music venues open every day of the week in that city. I have a feeling he could have worked in Austin for the rest of his life if he had chosen to.

One time when he was riding back with me from the desert in my F150, I turned a skittish deer into hamburger when I hit it at 80 mph. I saw the deer only because Buck squirmed uncomfortably while riding shotgun in the truck's front seat.

It may have been the only time I saw him flinch over anything that happened. I gather he stayed calm most of the waking hours of his life no matter what kind of rough and tumble place he happened to be playing music.

It was at least a decade ago that he rode with me to Austin, and 2012 was the year that Willie Nelson wrote and he and his friends Billy Joe Shaver and Jamey Johnson recorded the song "Hero". Here are the opening lines from that song:

"Where is our hero tonight? / The bars are all booming / And he's nowhere in sight / Wherever he is Lord, / we hope he's alright / Where is our hero tonight?"

Billy Joe Shaver died a couple of years ago, but one of his songs he sang at a Lea County Museum street dance in the summer of 2012 was titled "Live Forever". Because of his songs left behind, he sang,

"No one will ever find me, but I will always be around."

Buck had two different championship boxing matches with bad health in the last three years, throat and prostate cancer. He told me he won both of those battles by unanimous decision.

One final note about Buck, a vocabulary lesson with similar words in English. In England a Busker is a traveling minstrel who makes his living singing for money on the street or anyplace folks gather. I first saw buskers in Edinburgh, Scotland.

The minstrel practiced the same sort of occupation in

the Middle Ages in England and European countries. Minstrels were like birds that never land—they didn't care much for stopping and staying in one location.

Buck is also like a griot in several communities in western Africa. The griot (pronounced "gree-oh") is a philosopher as well as a musician and storyteller.

I like to think of Buck as having lived a gypsy life. For all of us who like the sound of turning wheels on a gravel road, being called a gypsy is the ultimate compliment.

He is such a good musician and performer that he could have remained with a number of popular jazz, rock, and blues bands with which he played all along the East Coast from Maine to Florida, but he chose to move on and see as much as he could of what's over the next bank or around the next bend.

I'm going to miss Ole Buck, but I plan on staying in touch with him. Maybe I can give readers updates on him now and then. His plans are to do lots of writing, and of course he will be playing again in several places in Michigan where he started playing piano and performing as a young boy.

As a goodbye to Buck, I should end this column with the opening lines from Billy Joe Shaver's "Live Forever":

"I'm gonna live forever / I'm gonna cross that river / I'm gonna catch tomorrow now / You're gonna wanna hold me / Just like I always told you / You're gonna miss me when I'm gone."

Adios, Buckster.

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Jim Harris  
The Last Frontier



In Lubbock's MacKenzie Park.



At Don Williams's store Q Systems Music and Sound in Hobbs.



With Jay Patton and Harold Brown at Desert Gardens in Hobbs.



At the Lea County Museum in Lovington.