

Interview

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*Bobby Bridger, author of a book about Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull, has also created A Ballad of the West*

By Candy Moulton

Bobby Bridger, who traces his family roots back to Jim Bridger, has researched, written and performed pieces about mountain men, Indians and the development of the West for 40 years. His entertaining book *Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull: Inventing the Wild West* (University of Texas Press, Austin, \$34.95) came out in November 2002, but he has long had a literary bent. As early as 1963, he had the idea to create a long narrative folk song about "Old Gabe" (1804-1881). Bridger's concept of a trilogy of epic-scale Homeric ballads took root with his discover of Nebraska poet John G. Neihardt's work in 1965, but he did begin writing the ballads that became *A Ballad of the West* until 1967. *Seekers of the Fleece*, the ballad based on the life of Jim Bridger and the famous 1822 fur-collecting expedition of William Ashley and Andrew Henry, was completed first. At the same time, Bobby Bridger was researching and writing *Lakota*, a ballad based on the Indian perspective of the Indian wars. He then came up with the final piece to complete the trilogy –and thus the story of the American West –by focusing on William F. Cody, a man better known as Buffalo Bill and who was called *Pahaska* by the Indians.

From 1967-1973 Bridger had a successful career in Nashville and Hollywood making records of his original music for Monument and RCA Records. That success led to a performance career that took him around the world. The touring, however, meant he had no time to research and write *Pahaska*, so the project was set aside and not completed until 1996. At that time Bridger also did research for *Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull: Inventing the Wild West*, which explores the relationship of the two Wild West performers and much more.

Bridger is currently working on two documentaries –one about his life and work, *The Quest of an Epic Balladeer* and another titled *The Making of A Ballad of the West*. Bridger, who also continues to perform, divides his time between Houston and Cody, Wyoming. In a recent interview for *Wild West* he talked about his work.

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*Wild West*: Tell us about *Seekers of the Fleece*, *Lakota* and *Pahaska*.

**Bridger**: My epic trilogy, *A Ballad of the West*, was of course the driving force to write *Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull: Inventing the Wild West*. During the research to write an epic ballad based on the life of Jim Bridger and the historic Ashley-Henry Expedition of 1822, I came to the important realization that of the 100 men of that expedition, Jim

Bridger was the only one who lived to be an old man. As a result, he was a participant in pivotal events in the history of the American West. Bridger was an eyewitness to the exploration, discovery, immigration, wars and eventual settlement of the American West. I realized that if I could find two more men who –like Bridger- lived long lives and were participants in similar pivotal events, I could create a virtual eyewitness account of the history of the American west from the first expedition of free-enterprising Americans in 1822 through modern times. Lakota holy man Black Elk (1863-1950) provided the Native American eyewitness I was seeking. Then, because of his life (1846-1917) with a foot in both the native American and Euroamerican worlds, I realized William F. Cody could fill the bill as a centerpiece uniting the two other parts and began to work on a ballad about his life. I completed the first draft of *Pahaska* in 1973 and within weeks of its completion discovered it was unwittingly very similar to Arthur Kopit's play *Indians*. Immediately upon this discovery, I burned my first draft. Then in 1974 I debuted my theatrical one-man show –*Seekers of the Fleece* and *Lakota*- in Austin, Texas and it has been on tour ever since. In 1978 I became the first poet-in-residence of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center and that thrust me into the vortex of all things Cody. Touring the world for 25 years with “Seekers” and *Lakota* provided the perfect training to write both the final part of the trilogy, *Pahaska*, as well as *Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull*. Of course the scale of my global touring and Cody's Wild West are nowhere near similar but, performing in buckskins and singing the history of the West, I came to empathize greatly with Cody's life in show business.

**WW:** Cody is such a legend, how did you sort out the fact from the fiction of his life?

**Bridger:** This of course is the fundamental conundrum in dealing with Cody. The very mention of certain aspects of his life can stimulate passionate arguments among historians even now. With library shelves sagging with books about Cody and the Wild West, I felt the only way to come to any understanding of his life was to consider what *wasn't* written. I felt it was important to look *behind* the headlines and the controversies. I felt it much more important to come to an understanding of the emotional truths of his life than the historical truths of his life. The most immediate of these aspects to me concerned his relationships with Indians. When I explored these relationships I began to realize that he never ever allowed himself to be placed in a position to lie to native Americans. As the most famous man in the world, with solid relationships with powerful Indians leaders, he could have easily allowed himself to be manipulated by the government to bring Indians into false treaties. This discovery implied that it was fundamental to him to remain true to his Indian friends.

**WW:** What is it about Buffalo Bill's personality that led Indians he opposed in battle to join him in his Wild West?

**Bridger:** The Indians who participated in the Wild West would have never joined his show unless he was a man of great personal character. That unspoken, unwritten reality spoke volumes of his true personality. Essentially, however, aside from the fact that he never allowed himself to lie to Indians, I suspect the bond between Cody and Plains Indians had to do with honor on the battlefield. Combat to the Plains Indians was not so

much to damage an enemy as to distinguish himself on the battlefield. Raised on the Great Plains, Buffalo Bill understood this concept completely and distinguished himself on the battlefield according to Plains Indian standards. More important, however, is the way Cody represented Indians after the wars ended and they joined his shows. He always –always- stood firm for their rights as Americans. Cody believed the American experience was a red experience as well as a white one. Even the most sympathetic missionary's commitment to native American human rights in the 19<sup>th</sup> century pales when compared to William F. Cody's. Indeed, Cody's vision of Indian and non-Indian America is progressive by today's standards.

WW: What is the connection between Cody and the beliefs of the Plains Indians?

Bridger: It is well-documented that Plains Indians possessed great prescient knowledge; indeed, Sitting Bull's accurate prophecies are arguably the most consistent and telling aspect of his life. I came to wonder whether the Lakota weren't well aware of the future greatness of Buffalo Bill when they first saw him as a boy at Fort Laramie in the 1850s. That he would later rise to become the most famous man in the world and the *only* man with the power and understanding to stand between the Plains Indians and the combined deadly forces of the U.S. government and 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelical Christians suddenly had incredible significance to me –specifically, as I said before, when looking *behind* the written story.

WW: Are you planning a book on your ancestor Jim Bridger.

Bridger: My best friend, Vine Deloria, Jr. has been after me to write a biography on Jim for three decades, but I really see no purpose in that. The two existing biographies on Jim, Cecil Alter's *James Bridger* and Stanley Vestal's *Jim Bridger: Mountain Man*, are excellent, definitive works. Of course all Vestal's and Alter's knowledge was taken from Hiram M. Chittenden's classic *The History of the Fur Trade of the Far Northwest*. It is very unlikely that any new information is going to turn up on Jim Bridger. Besides, I am not, nor do I pretend to be, a traditional scholar. I feel I have in *Seekers of the Fleece* offered a unique presentation of Jim's life and should leave it at that. But I'm not saying that in the future I might not want to put a little book together that will present in print the historical information that informed *Seekers of the Fleece*.