

Hillis: Cowboys and Indians: The International Stage

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Craig D. Hillis



Bob Livingston in his Austin office surrounded by instruments collected from around the world.
Photo by Bruce Jordan

There are countless cultural innovations and popular products recognized around the world as uniquely American. Whether with the blues, the Big Mac, tailfins on Cadillacs, or the legacy of space travel, the United States continually astounds and, from time to time, confounds the world with its prolific cultural productivity. Things American are everywhere, at least anywhere a radio wave can reach a receiver or a satellite signal can touch a television set, and two of the most ubiquitous Yankee exports are the mythical cowboy of the Wild West and country music. Bob Livingston, an accomplished Austin musician, has helped to shape these singular institutions into an effective tool of American diplomacy. Since 1986, Livingston has toured extensively in South Asia and the Middle East as an emissary of the State Department of the United States presenting a musical program he calls "Cowboys and Indians." He describes his mission (with his tongue only partially in his cheek) as an attempt "to achieve world peace through cowboy songs and yodeling."¹ Livingston's ambitious crusade has touched the lives of thousands around the world by offering a refreshing and holistic view of American culture. His program, "Cowboys and Indians," is a testament to the practical and positive contribution that American music can make to a deeply troubled world.

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There are few cultural images as widespread and enduring as the image of the American cowboy. This romantic, rough and tumble character embodies the perceived virtues and strengths of an entire society. Although historians know that roughly half of the cowboys working the great cattle drives of the late 1800s were Hispanic, black, Asian, and even Native American, it is the English-speaking, square-jawed, white cowboy of the Marlboro cigarette commercials that the general public seems to envision as the "typical" cowboy of the Old West. The life and times of the cowboy have provided the templates for countless forms of popular entertainment: books, magazines, movies, and music in both the United States and abroad. Since the late 1800s, popular cowboy culture has dominated American iconography, and, at the turn of the 21st century, the way of the West remains popular worldwide. There are "cowboy clubs" all over Europe where "wannabe" cowpunchers get together for quick-draw contests and barbeque;² cartoon cowboy figure Lucky Luke³ is one of France's most popular comic book characters; and country line dancing is all the rage in Japan.⁴ American presidents have incorporated the cowboy image into their political identities; Ronald Reagan's presidency was, to many historians, an extension of his role as a western hero, and Theodore Roosevelt's presidential persona borrowed heavily from his experience as a Dakota cattle rancher.⁵ The cowboy image

has become part of the lexicon of American foreign diplomacy. From Theodore Roosevelt's foreign policy dictum, "walk softly and carry a big stick," to John F. Kennedy's "New Frontier," from the derogatory campaign launched by eastern-block communists that dubbed President-elect Ronald Reagan a "reckless cowboy" to the "ranch" retreat of our current president, the cowboy trope has been a regular on the international stage for over a century. Foreign political initiatives have co-opted the cowboy image: in 1986, Polish artist Tomasz Sarnecki used Gary Cooper's image from the movie *High Noon* to symbolize the tenacity of the Solidarity movement and to mobilize the vote against the Communist government.⁶ Historian Walter Prescott Webb exaggerated only slightly when he described the cowboy as, "the most unique and distinctive institution that America has produced."⁷ A brief sketch of the historical cowboy however, reveals that America's "most unique and distinctive institution" is the distinct progeny of the Lone Star State.

Like many things considered "uniquely American" or "uniquely Texan," the historical cowboy was the product of disparate cultures grinding together in the New World. The Spanish and the Moors herded cattle for centuries before the Conquistadors landed the longhorn steer in Vera Cruz, Mexico in the 1520s. These first longhorns were a scrawny-looking lot, with wide, sinuous horns waving over thin bodies supported by



*Bob Livingston with Michael Martin Murphey in the 1970s.
Photo courtesy Bob Livingston*

long, bony legs. Despite appearances, however, longhorns were a sturdy breed that adapted well to the arid plains of Mexico. Over the years, the herds drifted north to the Rio Grande Valley where, in the early nineteenth century, Mexican ranchers bred them with the beefier bovines from the United States. The result was the hardier Texas longhorn commonly known today. After Texas gained independence in 1836, the Mexicans retreated south beyond the Rio Grande leaving millions of cattle in the vast Nueces Valley of South Texas. Those that were unbranded, the “mavericks,” were considered public property, and, in this rustler’s paradise, the great Texas cattle herds and the Texas cowboy were born.

The success of the cattle business depended on the rancher’s ability to transport large herds to national markets or to railroad shipping destinations. Cattle worth three to four dollars a head in South Texas were worth thirty to forty dollars a head in St. Louis, and even more in Chicago and other booming urban centers in the north and northeast. Estimates in the mid-1860s put the number of cattle in the Nueces Valley at over four million.⁸ To insure that supply met demand, vast herds had to be mobilized, and that called for an army of cowboys. As these early drovers struck out from South Texas to points north, a “unique and distinctive” era of American history took root.⁹

The life of the cowboy on the trail was, by and large, a Hobbesian existence: “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”¹⁰ Cattle drives encountered the natural and manmade dangers commonly associated with the trans-Mississippi frontier: windstorms, prairie fires, floods, droughts, Indian attacks, outlaws; despite the enduring legacy of the cowboy, his heyday was incredibly short. It lasted little more than twenty years. Less than a decade after the first cattle drives of the mid-1860s, conditions developed that all but guaranteed the end of the drover and the trails he rode. Ranchers and farmers began stringing the barbed wire that sectioned off the open range,

railroad lines extended south offering ranchers access to northern markets, and state and local governments began drawing legal lines across the range that denied easements to the great herds. Yet, even as the sun set on the trail drives and the historical Texas cowboy, writers, photographers and artists of every ilk drew on the images from those dusty years to shape the mythological cowboy that would pique the public imagination for many years to come.

For most modern cowboys, country music is the music of choice and, to no small degree, an extension of the cowboy myth. Like so many American music genres, country music is an ever-evolving amalgam of influences. Transplanted folk music from the British Isles became America’s hillbilly and bluegrass music; the Swiss yodel, combined with African-American blues stylings, became the trademark of America’s “first country singing star,” Jimmie Rodgers;¹¹ African-American blues, gospel, ragtime, and jazz influenced the young country genre in many ways as well, while the big band sound of the 1930s and 1940s provided the harmonic structure for western swing. Our concern here, however, is the vastly popular singing cowboy whose songs told, and, when necessary, reinvented the story of the great American West.

Unlike the rough and tumble, gun-toting cowboy, the singing cowboy of western folklore pulled out his guitar rather than his hog-leg forty-four. This brand of western hero, first made popular by Gene Autry, Tex Ritter, and Roy Rogers, brought a gentler form of justice to an otherwise violent western hero genre.¹² The singing cowboy knew the ways of the Wild West; he could ride and rope with the best of them, but when the time came for a showdown, this brand of hero chose diplomacy, reason, and even humor, to save the day. This is the cowboy of Bob Livingston’s imagination, a cowboy more in the image of Will Rogers than Clint Eastwood, a romantic cowboy that makes positive contributions to people’s lives—a cowboy ambassador of good will.

Bob Livingston is a native Texan raised in Lubbock who has survived and thrived in the music business for over thirty-five years. In 1969, Livingston ventured west of the Pecos to Los Angeles where he signed a recording contract with Capitol Records. “Nothing much came of the record deal,” Livingston reported, “but I met some great musicians in Los Angeles.”¹³ Indeed, Livingston teamed up with Michael Martin Murphey and Guy Clark in a music publishing venture called “Mountain Music Farm” funded by Roger Miller. After recording a series of publishing demos, Murphey approached Livingston and asked him to join him for a tour of the Southwest. According to Livingston, “Murphey handed me a bass and said, ‘I’ve got a bunch of dates booked and I need a bass player.’ I told Murphey that I didn’t play bass and he said, ‘You’ll learn.’”¹⁴ What began as a tour of small rooms across the Southwest ended up in Nashville when Livingston and Murphey recorded with

legendary record producer, Bob Johnston.¹⁵ These sessions became Murphey's first record album, *Geronimo's Cadillac*, on A&M Records.

After the successful release of *Geronimo's Cadillac*, Livingston's career picked up steam. He and Murphey left Los Angeles and relocated in Austin where they met Gary P. Nunn and other talented Texas musicians. This eclectic entourage backed up Murphey on his second album, *Cosmic Cowboy Souvenirs*, and toured extensively in support of what was to become the landmark recording of the "Progressive Country" scene that put Austin on the musical map in the 1970s.

During this initial flurry of Austin-based activity, Livingston met Jerry Jeff Walker. In 1972 Walker was on his way from Key West to Los Angeles to begin an album for MCA Records and decided to stop off in Austin to visit his old pal, Murphey. When Walker discussed his plans to hire studio musicians in L.A. for his upcoming project, Murphey suggested that he record it in Austin and use his band. Soon thereafter, Walker, Livingston, and other members of Murphey's band were recording late-night "Sangria" sessions in a makeshift studio on West 6th Street.¹⁶ The end result was Walker's first "Texas" album, *Jerry Jeff Walker*, the first in a long series of album projects with MCA. The following year Walker reassembled the band in Luckenbach to record the million selling album, *Viva Terlingual*, and in its successful aftermath, Livingston and Gary P. Nunn rounded up several new top-notch Texas musicians to form the Lost Gonzo Band. In addition to backing up Walker, the Gonzos pursued their own recording career producing two albums for MCA and one album for Capitol Records. Since those early days in Austin, Livingston has recorded well over a dozen albums with Walker, has had a number of his songs covered by Walker and other prominent recording artists, and stands as a defining figure in contemporary Texas music.

Livingston has embraced his personal life with the same intensity that he has embraced his music. He met his wife, Iris, in 1974 after a show at the Armadillo World Headquarters where he was playing a double bill with Murphey and Walker. Since their early days together they have followed the teachings of an East Indian guru, a path that has taken them back and forth between America and India. On a 1986 trip to visit Iris and their two boys at an ashram in southern India, Livingston had an interesting encounter with a fellow American, Frank Block, a Fulbright Scholar and professor from Vanderbilt University. Block was affiliated with the United States Information Service, the arm of the State Department responsible for disseminating information about America and American interests abroad. As Livingston recalls, "Block explained to me that if you could convince the USIS that you were an expert in any field, whether that be hydroponics or country music, they might have a gig for you."¹⁷

On this particular trek to India, Livingston was accompanied

by a fellow pilgrim and band mate in the Lost Gonzo Band, guitar player John Inmon. Acting on the information from Block, Livingston sent a telex to the American Consulate in Madras explaining that he and John were musicians from Texas and would like to come and audition. Livingston soon heard back from Vice Consul Tim Moore who told them to come ahead to Madras. Livingston recalled their journey:

John and I took an all-night train to Madras for our audition. On the way, I was trying to figure out how we should present ourselves to Tim Moore. Are we just going to get up and play songs? Are we supposed to be sending some sort of cultural message? Then, as I'm looking out from the train at the Indian landscape sliding by, I had this feeling that you could be anywhere. It was about 5:30 in the morning, we were a hundred miles west of Madras, the sun's just peeking over the horizon, and there's scrub brush and gullies rolling by and you could swear that you're in the middle of West Texas. I realized that our two countries not only had a lot in common geographically, but that our people have a tremendous amount in common as well. We all have the same emotions. We all love, we all have frustrations and fears, we all want the best for our families, there are "bad guys" to look out for and there are heroes. I realized that the best way for me to bring out those common themes was through the image of the cowboy.¹⁸

Livingston and Inmon arrived in Madras early the next morning and met Tim Moore at the American Center, an auditorium with a theatrical stage, sound system, and lights located on the grounds of the American consulate. Tim Moore took a seat in the audience and said "OK fellas, what'cha got?"¹⁹

John and I tuned up, took the stage and let 'er rip. I did some old cowboy classics like "Don't Bury Me on the Lone Prairie," songs like that. After we'd done about a half dozen tunes Tim Moore piped up and asked us, "Hey guys, do you mind?" He reached down, pulled out a banjo case, opened it up, pulled out his banjo and said, "I've been dying to play with somebody! So we played "Fox on the Run" and a few bluegrass things, and he said, "You guys got the job, but only if I can play with you every once in a while!"²⁰

Tim Moore asked Livingston and Inmon to return to India

in nine months to do a series of shows. Once back in the United States, Livingston did his homework. He read books about the American West and worked up an extensive cowboy song repertoire. He studied up on Woody Guthrie, Jimmie Rodgers, and the collections of Alan and John Lomax. He even learned some cowboy jokes. In essence, Bob undertook a crash course in cowboy musicology and applied it to the program he anticipated presenting in India. He reasoned that his background as a singer–songwriter and country musician, coupled with his command of cowboy folklore and a healthy cache of songs, would enable him to draw his audience into his performance.

To this end, Livingston had another invaluable asset, his spirituality. As he prepared for his first USIS tour, he realized that, to be effective in communicating the kind of message he wanted to send, he would have to draw on the teachings of his guru. “When you’re at the ashram in the presence of the guru,” Livingston explained, “your direction is clear and you know what needs to be done. It’s really an incredible experience. But when you take those teachings out into the world, you have to work very hard to keep on track.”²¹ Livingston wanted to carry the essence of the ashram into his musical program. If he could weave the threads of spiritual enlightenment into his cowboy message of goodwill, he felt that he could successfully draw his Indian audience into a frontier of the imagination: a frontier where similarities between people transcend their differences, where cultural barriers fade in the light of compassion and understanding, and where world peace is not an abstract dream but a work in progress. To be sure, this was quite an undertaking for a cowboy ambassador from Austin, but, with his determination, his musical background, and his spiritual resolve, he was uniquely qualified to build some cultural bridges between East and West. As the following story illustrates, Livingston was certainly on the right track:

When John and I returned to India, the first show we did was in a small southern Indian town called Cochin in the state of Kerala. When we arrived we mentioned that we would love to play with any local musicians that might be available. For us, playing with Indian musicians was part



Bob Livingston in his office with the main tool of his cowboy yodeling trade. Photo by Bruce Jordan.

of the cultural exchange. So we hooked up with a tabla player and another musician who was a really good drummer. He had a trap set and played in a rock band. We had a chance to get together before the show and run down some songs, and when we brought them up about three–quarters through our show, the audience just loved it. They loved to see some of their local boys up on stage with these cowboys from Texas!

We started out kind of slow and easy, singing a few songs and telling the folks a few stories. I remember telling the audience, (in an exaggerated Texas accent) “We’re from Texas and we come here to play songs about Texas and beautiful women and ugly men. We’re here to tell ya’ stories about cowboys and Indians.” John and I were really decked out: We’re both wearing big ‘ole cowboy hats, vests, bandannas around our necks, with pants tucked into our boots, the whole bit. And the folks were really eating it up! Because if there’s anything in India, or for that matter, all over the world, that people want to know about, it’s cowboys and Indians! That may seem amazing, but it’s true! The Wild West is a part of American culture that seems to translate in other cultures as something pure and honest. It’s something that the people in India can relate to because just as

we have our Wild West in America, Indians have their "Wild East!" They have heroes, bandits, and stories about their own culture, stories that talk about adventure and how the good guys win out over the bad guys. Also, when I refer to our presentation as "Cowboys and Indians," I'm not just talking about the Sioux or Pawnee; I'm talking about the East Indians.

One of the first tunes I did was "Don't Bury Me on the Lone Prairie," and before I'd start the song, I set it up with a story. I told the audience about the train trip we made to Madras when I looked out on the "Indian Prairie," and how the "Wild East" was very much like the "Wild West." Then I said, "Imagine that you're a young cowboy on this big desert, either west of the Pecos or west of Madras, riding along with your buddies on your horse, or your camel, when all of a sudden a cobra jumps out from behind a bush and bites you right between the eyes." Then I'd say, "You lie down in the dirt and your compadres light a fire to keep you warm but you know that your life is slowly oozing away; and what's the last thing you're thinking of? You don't want to be buried out there all alone!" Then I'd go ahead and sing the song.

Backstage after the show, the wife of the Supreme Court Justice from Kerala came up and said to me:

"Oh, I very much enjoyed your program. It was so wonderful. And that song you did about that poor young cowboy. You had to leave his body on the prairie? It's so sad and so touching! But tell me, is there no way you could go back and bring his body back so he could be buried as he wished? It was not right to leave his body on that prairie. He did not want to be left there!"

I was amazed! She had taken the story seriously. She took it at face value. But I was trying to draw them into the show, so evidently I succeeded.²²

This example not only illustrates Livingston's ability to turn a good tale, it suggests certain dynamics between his program and his Indian audience. The Indian woman's acceptance of Livingston's story at "face value" suggests her acceptance of Livingston as a credible spokesman for cowboy culture and, by extension, for American culture. Her perception not only underscores the influence Livingston wields as a cultural interpreter, it places a distinct responsibility on him as a representative of the United States. The woman's disappointment

with the fictitious cowboys' decision to leave their companion's body on the prairie shows that she expects cowboys to take the high moral road and go the extra mile to honor their commitments to others. If cowboys were going to be exemplar of American society, if they were going to be the conduit between American and Indian culture, then their iconic aura must not be tarnished. Livingston took the woman's critique to heart and, in an attempt to exonerate the cowboys and leave his audience with a sense of closure, he wrote another closing verse to the song:

When the sun went down
So far from home,
We had no choice
But to go on alone.
So we dug his grave
Underneath that White Oak Tree,
And we buried him,
Out on the lone prairie.²³

After the first few shows, Livingston fell into the routine of the performances and the extracurricular duties of a cowboy ambassador. Many of his appearances were co-sponsored by local book clubs, academic societies, or other cultural organizations, and he described the logistics and activities surrounding a typical show:

When I began doing the shows, I had an Indian liaison officer to help me along the way. I also had close contact with an American vice consul. What the vice consul did was not only set up the details of our gig, but he'd set up dinners with the mayors and members of the town counsels, and if there was a university involved, with members of the student government. Sometimes we'd go to the Rotary Club, which had a large membership in India, and we'd have lunch, and then they'd give me a little present and I'd give a little speech and the Mayor or the appropriate dignitary would also give a little speech.

When the USIS found out that I liked to do this sort of thing, mixing with the audience and rubbing elbows with the local muck-id-dee-mucks, they took full advantage of it. They worked my rear end off! Most people that go over there to do entertainment programs, they wanted to play their gig and go back and rest because they were massively jet-lagged. They hadn't been living there like I had been. I would go to a student association meeting, then they'd take me to the Rotary Club for lunch, and then off to a tea with the mayor in his office. After all of that

I'd rally the musicians and we'd go do the sound check, come back to the hotel and get a little nap, and then go play the gig. After the gig, they would take us out to a late dinner. They eat their final meal of the day very late in India. At ten-thirty, eleven o'clock, they're stuffing themselves! They claim that it makes them sleep. It just made me fat!²⁴

Judging by Livingston's reports of these shows, it appeared that the USIS and the co-sponsor invited primarily middle and upper-middle class people to the events. The audience at his first presentation in Cochin, Kerala, for example, was an exceptionally bright and educated group. "Kerala," Livingston said, "is a state in southwestern India that is one of the most

Department in Livingston's program: First, was the target audience confined to only upper and middle-class Indians and second, did the State Department influence the structure and content of his program? In addressing the first question, it is helpful to look at an analysis of an earlier series of State Department programs. In her essay about the government's "Goodwill Tours" in the 1950s and 1960s, Peggy Von Eschen argues that the entertainment venues were tightly controlled to complement American economic interests abroad.²⁸ The jazz acts that the State Department sent to Africa, for example, would generally tour areas rich in oil, diamonds, or uranium. Such economic determinism naturally affected the nature of the audiences in Africa, strongly favoring the well-to-do, while virtually ignoring the common people. An example of such

You must understand that people in India will stare at you unabashedly, especially a big redheaded guy with freckles like me. They thought I was from the dark side of the moon!

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literate states in the world. Cochin, I believe, is in the Guinness Book of World Records as being 100% literate. Taxi drivers there have master's degrees! The state of Kerala is where a lot of India's computer programmers come from."²⁵ Bob described these audiences as "the people that the USIS wanted to reach the hearts and minds of:"²⁶

We were engaged in propaganda in the correct sense of the word. We were spreading a positive image of America and getting a group of people there to share it with. And the places we played would be packed. We might have a thousand, fifteen hundred people! The USIS would have a co-sponsor, like the Kerala Fine Arts Society or a local book club and the co-sponsor contacted everybody on their mailing list asking them to please come to the show. They would tell them about our program and give them invitations. The ladies would come out dressed in their finest saris and men would wear their finest clothes, and they'd bring the family and the kids. You could almost sense their anticipation. "What is this going to be like? American country and folk music? There are going to be cowboys here singing!"²⁷

The audience and the events surrounding these performances begs two important questions about the role of the State

obvious audience bias was the early 1960s Dizzy Gillespie concert tour of Asia. Gillespie recalled that, "the tour skipped India because that country was nonaligned," and the band "played instead in Karachi, Pakistan, where the United States was supplying arms." There, Gillespie refused to play until promoters agreed to open the gates to the "ragamuffin" children. He complained that, "they priced the tickets so high the people we were trying to gain friendship with couldn't make it."²⁹ I asked Livingston about the nature of his audiences while playing abroad for the State Department. Were his shows in any way a remake of the State Department shows of the 1950s and 1960s? According to Livingston:

Many of the shows we played were for a higher, educated class of people, no doubt about it. But as time went on and I became a little more comfortable with the lay of the land. We also played a number of children's schools, universities, hospitals, and quite a few refugee camps. The USIS was open to suggestions that I would make. No, all the shows we did weren't just for the rich and famous. Through the years we've played for all classes of people.

One of my favorite ways to communicate with the common folks was through traveling. India is a very large place, and I spent a tremendous amount of time in train and bus stations. After a few tours, I got so good at getting around the

country that the USIS no longer sent a liaison with me, they knew that I could get to where I needed to go. I remember so many times when I'd be standing there at a train station by myself: I'd have my cowboy hat on, I felt really self-conscious, I didn't necessarily want to wear it, but with my guitar in one hand and my bags in the other, I really didn't have any other place for it except on my head. You must understand that people in India will stare at you unabashedly, especially a big redheaded guy with freckles like me. They thought I was from the dark side of the moon! Pretty soon there are eighty or a hundred people standing around checking me out. So sometimes I'd just pull my guitar out and start playing for them and the place would go bonkers! They would laugh, and just have a great time. They usually couldn't understand a word I was saying, but the message was clear: Let's be friends.³⁰

Livingston travels with a video camera and has been able to get a number of his foreign adventures on tape. I was lucky enough to see one of these railroad station exchanges that he described. It's an incredible spectacle; the dark iron roof structure growing out of the dirty concrete of the train platform, a large antique locomotive puffing away in the background, the sky gray and overcast, and humidity that you can almost see in the air. There's Livingston, big wide straw cowboy hat, scarf around his neck, and a colorful western shirt, towering over his wide-eyed audience, his head thrown back yodeling at full volume to a sun no one can see, an amazing picture. The scene changes and shows Livingston strumming away on his guitar, slightly bent over to meet the gaze of the young Indian woman that he's accompanying. Livingston is listening intently, nodding his head in encouragement and grinning like a mighty happy rascal. The young lady, sari and scarves swinging, is singing without reservation, bobbing gently up and down on the balls of her feet, moving through the quarter-tones in the hypnotic language of a song obviously dear to her heart. The audience smiles and claps along. This is a touching scene and an excellent example of cowboy diplomacy in the Indian hinterlands.

I asked Livingston if the State Department made any attempts to shape or censure his program. He maintains that "Cowboys and Indians" is his own creation and that the government had nothing to do with its form or content. Indeed, when he signed on with the USIS, he expected some sort of guidance or direction and was pleasantly surprised when that didn't happen. He assured me that he was left to his own devices in developing and delivering his program. Livingston did bring up one interesting episode that's worth mentioning:

At one point, the State Department did have something to say about my program, but I wouldn't necessarily call it censure. It was more of an advisement. I started doing this thing about yodeling for world peace. At that time, early 1991, the Russians were still in Afghanistan and there were hundreds of thousands of refugees in Peshawar, Pakistan. Also, the Gulf War was in full swing. So I had this idea to teach my audiences how to yodel, and once I got them yodeling and having fun, I told them that it's impossible to feel bad and yodel at the same time! As a matter of fact, I'd say, can you imagine if George Bush would call Mikhail Gorbachev every morning about 6:30 and say, "Mikhail, Yodel—aaaa—hee—hoooo!" And Mikhail would yodel back to George, "Yodel—aaaa—dee—hoo—too!" What a great way to start another day of international relations! Then I'd say, can you imagine Bush and Gorbachev calling up Saddam Hussein, yodeling to him and getting him to yodel back, because, I'd tell the audience, that it's impossible to invade a country and yodel at the same time! I reasoned that if Saddam Hussein had had just spent more time yodeling, he would never have invaded Kuwait! I thought this was all light-hearted, and funny stuff, but a couple of times people would walk up to me after the show and say something like,

"I really like your program, but let me tell you one thing. Don't you make fun of Saddam Hussein. Even you must admit, even though you are American, he's very bold and very much for his people."

And I would say, ah yes, very bold, very good for his people, yes, you're right! These people, I'm telling you, they mean business. This was a time when there was some very serious international business going down and we were over there representing the American government. So what the State Department did, they sent a FAX to the appropriate vice consul that said, "Advise Livingston on the sanity of using Saddam Hussein in a disparaging way or in a light-hearted manner." That's the only time the government ever said anything about my program.³¹

Livingston's first trek into India was in 1981, and he played



Livingston making friends at a train station in Kharagpur, India. Photo by Tucker Livingston.

his first USIS show in 1986. After twenty years, he still tours India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, the Middle East, and North Africa. After the initial tour in 1986, his band mate, John Inmon, went back to the states, but Livingston stayed in India and continued to play. He went back every year from 1987 through 1992. In 1992 he played in sixty different cities in India. Throughout the 1990s Livingston returned on a regular basis and in 1998 began to take his son, Tucker, to accompany him on guitar and vocals. After twenty years of visiting and performing in India and its surrounding nations, Livingston has seen tremendous cultural changes in the region; some of which have been brought about by the infusion of American popular culture:

Back before television and radio expanded so greatly in South Asia, I remember playing a date in Nepal. I believe it was 1987 or 1988. After the show, a young man came up to me and said, "I like your program, but tell me, do you know Michael Jackson?" And I said, "Well, no." Then he asked me, "Do you like his music?" And I said, "Sure, I like his music. I don't know him but, yeah, I like his music." He thought about that for a sec-

ond and said, "Humm, OK, well, then tell me, what other famous American singers are there? You, Michael Jackson and who else?" And I said, "That's about it!" I got a pretty good laugh out of that, but at that time, their exposure to American music was very limited. Their main connection to pop music was through posters and the occasional cassette tape. That was all about to change though.³²

When I went back over in 1990, India had just gotten the Star Television satellite system out of Singapore. There were five television channels on the system, MTV, CNN, BBC, and two other independent channels. I knew their culture was in trouble when I walked into the house of

some Indian friends of mine in Madras. The man's name is Arvis Schwiswan, he plays a sentur, which is like an Appalachian hammer dulcimer, and he's one of the foremost players in the world. His wife, whose name is Chitra, is a Banakian dancer who is very famous in India. These are very talented and well educated people. Both her parents and his parents live in the house. That's another great thing about India. They take care of their parents. There are no old folks homes. When I walked in they're all sitting around a television set watching "Santa Barbara!" There they are in India watching this soap opera so I asked them where it was coming from? They explained about Star TV and the satellite. I didn't see a satellite dish and I asked them what was up, and they said, "We're connected with a friend of ours." Evidently, some guy in the neighborhood had a dish, and for fifty rupees a month he would allow you to run a line and connect it to his set-up! There were lines running down all the alleys and it looked like some sort of spaghetti convention! I realized then that India was in for some changes.³³

The growth of transnational media in India, largely influenced by American mass culture, suggests several important questions: How do the Indian people perceive Americans? Do they distinguish between the American citizens in their country and the American exports they find in their stores and on their airwaves? How was Livingston treated in India? He offered the following answers to these questions:

One thing I was asked again and again as an American in India was, how could the United States support the oppressive government of Pakistan when India, a US ally, is the biggest democracy in the world? Actually I agree with them, but I couldn't really tell them that US arms manufacturers were making a bundle selling their goods to Pakistan. For the most part though, as an individual, I was treated great and I never felt threatened. There's a very large network of State Department representatives throughout the country and the Indian people have a very positive view of musicians. Musicians in India are treated with great respect.³⁴

When I'd travel with my family, people would get up on the bus or on a train and let my kids sit down. Sometimes an old man would motion to one of the kids and have him sit in his lap. I didn't know if this was a carry-over from British colonial times, but they were very kind to us. I think a great number of Indians perceived America as a great nation, and the kids of India saw us as a source of a new culture that was going to take the place of their old culture.

When the media came to India, it came in a big way. MTV is all over India these days. Now the kids are not only able to hear Michael Jackson or see him on a poster, they were able to see him perform on MTV, and you can imagine what a difference that makes. The older people would complain about MTV in India. It was Asian MTV, and it was toned down a little, but it was still MTV. There were pictures of women in bikinis, and similar images that were offensive to the older generations of Indians. "Why do we want to ape the West?" This is something I heard quite a bit. "We're aping the West and it's not good!"

This is where I believe my program makes a positive impact. I don't have girls in bikinis on stage with me; I have local musicians. I like to think of my program as the opposite of MTV,

more of an "organic" affair rather than a synthetic–electronic presentation. And, as I've mentioned, we would regularly entertain families and lots of kids. I tried to accent the things our respective cultures had in common, and I did that by presenting the "cowboy way" as an honest and decent way of carrying on. You've got to ask yourself the question, "What would Roy Rogers do?" (Bob laughs) I'm sure our audiences in India perceived a real difference between Michael Jackson's MTV specials and my "Cowboys and Indians" program.³⁵

In Livingston's travels to the neighboring countries of Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, he found his audiences and the public equally charming, but the political environment was sometimes volatile and dangerous. "The State Department sent me into some hellacious areas," he said. "I remember one time they had to smuggle me out of the American Center in Dhaka, Bangladesh in an ambulance."³⁶ Livingston was at the American Center for a press conference when a riot broke out between laborers on strike and government forces. The strikers burned cars, vandalized buildings, and when the violence spread to the American Center, the staff called for an ambulance claiming that Livingston, who they described as a visiting professor of musicology from the University of Texas, was having heart palpitations. The ruse worked. Livingston and the six staff members made it to safety in the ambulance.

In Pakistan, Livingston encountered another politically charged environment that had a profound effect on a treasured musical tradition.

In 1989 I was in Peshawar, Pakistan, just east of the Khyber Pass. I was up there to play for the Afghan refugees and they were everywhere. The Russians were in Afghanistan. At the local university, I met an instructor who was a sitar player and I invited him to join me for the show. We agreed to meet in my hotel room that afternoon to rehearse.

(It's important to realize that) Pakistan used to be part of India. When the partition happened in 1948, all the Muslims went to Pakistan and all the Hindus went to India. Even though they relocated, the Muslims left a great deal of their culture behind in India, and the Hindus left a great deal of their culture behind in Pakistan; their musical instruments, customs, and their epic stories for example. In Pakistan there were still many folks who liked

the classic Indian stories, especially the older people. They loved to hear the stories, and many Pakistanis still loved to hear Indian music.

When I met the sitar player at the hotel, he said, "I'm the last sitar player in Pakistan." He explained that the Pakistani government had systematically erased any marks of Indian culture left in his country. "The government doesn't encourage anything Indian," he explained. "I am still teaching," he said, "but now the young students don't want to go through the discipleship of twelve years of practicing, bringing water, chopping wood, and working with the teacher." We talked about Ravi Shankar, the famous sitar player, how he had a guru that was his music teacher. Shankar had to practice scales for twelve years before he was ever allowed to play a song much less go on stage. "That musical tradition of master and student," he told me, "is dying in Pakistan."³⁷

26 Livingston empathized with the loss of such a great tradition and pointed out that western music also faced challenges in maintaining its heritage. Fortunately, in the United States there are extensive efforts underway to save traditional American music genres from obscurity. Museums, universities, private collectors, and certain institutions such as the Library of Congress and the Center for Texas Music History at Southwest Texas State University are all engaged in preservation projects. Livingston also explained that the majority of contemporary music in the United States was market driven. The government did not dictate musical formats. This was an aspect of American culture admired by many of the people Livingston met in his travels, but he realizes that the free market can have toxic side effects on both American and foreign cultures. The "star making machinery behind the popular song"³⁸ is the same cultural juggernaut that produces the endless stream of aesthetic simulacra that sends shivers through the ranks of concerned parents and traditionalists worldwide. To those Indian families concerned about their children "aping America," Livingston explains that there is much more to American culture than Madonna, with her sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll message, and that many American families share their concern. He intentionally steers away from pop references in his program and prefers to stay the course of the benevolent and heroic cowboy, an image he describes as "one of the purest things that foreigners know about America."³⁹

In his own way, Livingston has carried on the Indian musical tradition of master and student. Since 1998, he has enlisted his son Tucker to accompany him on guitar and vocals. Tucker is not only an extremely talented musician, his presence on stage

brings a new dimension to "Cowboys and Indians." The essence of family is one of the few cultural institutions revered internationally, and when Livingston and Tucker team up, the audience sees a father and son traveling the world, working together, reaching for the same altruistic goal. The combination significantly expands the outreach potential of the program. According to Livingston,

The fact that Tucker and me, father and son, were up there playing together really spoke to them. I had a thousand people come up to me and say, "It's just wonderful to see a father and son up there on stage. When we look at America, it doesn't seem like families matter very much. We don't get a good picture of America and how they treat their families. But to see father and son relating so well and being so close . . . it's really wonderful. It's one of the best lessons you have in your program."⁴⁰

Bringing Tucker on board is consistent with Livingston's effort to include other musicians in his program. Since his first show in Cochin in 1986 when a local drummer and tabla player joined him on stage, Livingston has aggressively recruited indigenous musicians.

Rounding up local musicians for the shows is an important part of our cultural exchange, and I believe that it makes a real difference in what we do. Music is a universal language and when the audience sees their own musicians on stage playing with a couple of cowboys, the message of friendship and unity really hits home. Plus, the musical blend was something that none of us had ever heard before.⁴¹

Livingston's "cultural exchange" is a real-time exchange that enables an audience to witness the harmonious product of music forms largely considered incompatible. This musical confluence illustrates the ability of seemingly disparate cultures to come together aesthetically and to lay the foundation for a greater cooperation economics, politics, and human rights. As Livingston says, "If we can get along musically, we should be able to get along in other ways as well."⁴² When Livingston and Tucker perform with local musicians, they create an indelible cultural link between Livingston's family and the families in the audience, between the eclectic mix of musicians on stage, and between the people of America and the people of India.

Incorporating local musicians into his program is not without its challenges. Many of the players Livingston approached argued

that eastern and western idioms were incompatible. Time signatures, tone intervals, and countless other technicalities clouded the issue, but, as seen in the following example, Livingston effectively set such differences aside to propagate a successful musical synthesis:

In 1999, Tucker and I were in Oman and we were scheduled to play with a group called the Royal Omani Orchestra. The Sultan of Oman was a music nut and supported a number of different musical groups. One of his groups was the Royal Omani Orchestra. They had two or three *udes*, which is like a lute, they had a *quanoon*, which is similar to a hammer dulcimer but it's played with little finger thimbles, darndest thing you ever heard, and they also had violins and dumbats, which are a very interesting type Arabic drum.

The leader of the orchestra was from Britain. He was hired by the Sultan to put together the

group and direct it. We were all there at the concert site that afternoon, doing our rehearsals and I suggested that we do something together. The British bandleader wasn't too crazy about the idea and came up to me and said, (here Livingston imitates a highbrow English accent) "You know, this Anglo-American thing, this cowboy thing, we don't care about that! Why don't you just play your program and we'll play ours, and everything will be fine. Because, really, Arabic music simply does not go with American western music!" And I said, "I'm tellin' ya, it'll work."

Well, about this time the orchestra was playing a drum beat that sounded like a cross between American Indian war drums and Buddy Holly's "Not Fade Away." So I pick up my guitar and start singing, "Kaw-Liga was a wooden Indian standing by the door," the Hank Williams classic, and the Arabic players just loved it! The British band director acquiesced and we learned "Kaw-Liga"!



That night when we played, there were two American generals and their wives in the audience. One was the head of the Central Command, General Zinni, he's the guy that took over from Schwartzkopf, and the other was General Jones, the Commandant of the Marine Corps. The rest of the crowd were Arabs who had been educated in the United States. They were the elite that ran the country of Oman. Everybody showed great appreciation for our program and for the Arab music, but when we got together with the orchestra and played "Kaw-Liga," they just went crazy.⁴³

After the show, one of the Arabic gentlemen in the audience came up and said to Livingston, "I never understood country music until now." The gentleman, who happened to be the Cultural Minister of Bahrain, explained that he had gone to college in Alabama and one of his favorite pastimes was to rent a car and travel around the South listening to country music on the radio. "I loved that music," the minister said, "but I never really understood country music until I heard your program. Through your narration, the stories you tell with the songs, you've explained what I've been listening to and loving all along!"⁴⁴ Bob went on to explain the scene backstage:

After I finished talking to the cultural minister, the two generals and their wives came backstage and said to Tucker and me, "You guys are doing more good for public relations and morale in this area than an aircraft carrier out in the Persian Gulf! We want to give you some medals." And they gave us these special medals that were for civilians that did great things for America and told us things like, "You did a great job for me today soldier," that kind of thing. Tucker and I were eating it up. We thought we were in a John Wayne movie! And then they said, "We want you to go with us! We think you guys could just tear the troops up!" So the next day we went to Bahrain with them, to a huge naval base, and ended up on an aircraft carrier doing several shows for a pack of beer-drinking sailors and marines. We had a great time.⁴⁵

The State Department remains enthusiastic about Livingston's program and has expanded it considerably:⁴⁶ In 1998 and 1999, they arranged for a series of shows in the Middle East, including the show in Oman mentioned above with its interesting excursion to the naval base in Bahrain. In 2000, Livingston and Tucker returned to India, Nepal, and Pakistan. Livingston recently returned from a tour of Morocco. He speaks highly of

the State Department's people in the consulates and embassies where he's traveled: "The USIS people I've dealt with for the most part are just as sharp as tacks. We can feel comfortable knowing that our national interests are being well served in the world."⁴⁷ The State Department, through cultural programs like Livingston's "Cowboys and Indians," has worked hard to make new friends and keep the ones America currently has.

At the end of our last interview, I mentioned to Livingston that the mission of the State Department was quite clear, but I asked him to expand on the nature of his personal mission:

There's a selfish mission of course, and that is to go visit these wonderful countries, play these great places, and get paid for it! After fifteen years of doing it, the money is pretty good. They're flying me in and out of the various countries and paying for everything. I'm able to take my son with me and give him some work. But basically, I really love doing this. I'm continually trying to develop the "Cowboys and Indians" show. I keep writing more material that's suitable for cross-cultural programs in different countries. It's basically a vision of world peace and I believe it's a formula that works.

The cowboy image is very important. I mentioned before that the USIS has sent me into some hot spots like Yemen and Bangladesh where the government was falling. I never felt really threatened, however, because I was viewed as a curious figure, a cowboy, a mythical figure with good intentions. If there's one positive image of America that people around the world have, it's the image of the cowboy. Plus, I'm a musician, and in India and many Middle Eastern countries musicians are well treated and revered. Music in those countries is an honorable vocation. It's not like America where so many talented young musicians are encouraged to "keep their day job." So, with this peculiar combination of cowboy and musician, I'm not viewed as a threat. That gives me a little extra elbowroom to operate in tight places and set a soothing tone.

When I get on stage and start singing songs and telling stories about American folklore, cowboys, and explaining the message behind the songs, I don't care whether it's in Bombay or Bahrain, Katmandu or the end of a dusty little road in southern India, I draw the people in and get them involved. I let them know that there are cowboys all over the world and that we're all in this together. We all have families, we all love and cry, we want to be educated and do

our best for our kids, and we're all part of the family of man. The audience would always say YES to these ideas. They would enjoy the show, laugh and for that one moment at least, they would witness an aspect of American culture that was almost 100% good and as far as I'm concerned, that's just great!⁴⁸

Prior to the September 11th attacks, the information arm of the State Department had its hands full making new friends, maintaining relationships with old friends, and refurbishing an ailing American image overseas. United States multi-national corporations like Nike, McDonald's, and countless others are viewed by many of our international neighbors as implements of economic imperialism. Further, the perception of the United States as an international bully flaunting its military might is a particularly tenacious stigma to overcome. Indeed, such lingering tensions between the United States and smaller countries, religious splinter groups, and foreign economic partners might fittingly be described as "McWorld versus the Jihad." But since the tragedies of September 11, a new paradigm is in play that might be more fittingly described as "Civilization versus the Jihad." Given this new and unsettling global environment, the need for America to reach out and win the hearts and minds of

the world community has taken on a necessity and immediacy unrivaled in modern history. Understandably, the State Department has put cultural programming on the back burner to deal with the pressing challenges at hand. American bombs and technology have prevailed over the Taliban, American troops and intelligence agencies have crippled the al-Qaeda network, but these accomplishments will stand only as tactical victories unless a strategic, long-term mission focusing on cultural exchange and mutual understanding is embraced by the American people and our government.

In time, presidents, premiers, and diplomats will meet in the gilded halls of governments to discuss the War on Terrorism and its complicated global ramifications. Eventually the talks will turn to collateral damage, humanitarian aid, and nation building. Plans will be made to soothe the suffering and rebuild the goodwill between nations, and those plans will eventually "trickle down" to the rank and file in the form of treaties, policies, and relief efforts. It's questionable however, whether the "hearts and minds" of the common folk will reflect the sea change handed down from on high. To insure any lasting harmony between societies, new ideas and modes of communication must be embraced by laborers, farmers, teachers, local leaders, students, artists, writers—in short, the people who *are* the



Bob & Tucker Livingston rehearsing with the Royal Omani Orchestra in Oman. Photo by Bill Wilbur.

culture. Here, Livingston provides us with a template. He illustrates through his “Cowboys and Indians” program that seemingly small adventures into the nesting places of the ethnic “other” can make a significant difference in developing meaningful ties with another lifestyle. With his cowboy hat and guitar, Livingston has successfully delivered the State Department’s message that “we’re the good guys” and that “we’re all in this together” to thousands of people in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, the Middle East, and Morocco.⁴⁹ These encounters have been warm, close, and personal, and, judging by Livingston’s correspondence and press files, they have left a lasting and positive impression with audiences around the world. Livingston’s program clearly illustrates the wisdom of sharing cultural commodities and focusing on those things that people

everywhere hold dear. Only through such exchanges can we be assured of any “enduring freedom.”

Hopefully, in the months to come, the State Department will reinvigorate their cultural programs. When they do, I’m confident that Livingston will be on the international cowboy trail singing Jimmie Rodgers songs and performing with an eclectic group of local musicians trying to touch the hearts and minds of people in their own back yards. Given the success of “Cowboys and Indians,” the State Department might consider expanding on Livingston’s message and methodology. They should assemble a small army of cowboy singers and songwriters, arm them with Stetsons and guitars, and deploy them to teach the people of the world how to yodel. ■

NOTES

1. Interview with Bob Livingston, April 10, 2001.
2. Interview with Freddie Krc, March 15, 2001. Fred Krc is a country performer based in Austin, Texas, who has traveled extensively in Europe with his musical group, Freddie Steady and the Shakin’ Apostles. Krc reports that a number of English, German, and Italian music venues have patterned themselves after the romantic saloon of the Wild West. See also, the “Willkommen in der Welt von Karl May” website. Karl May (1842–1912) was a German writer of Wild West fiction who has had a profound effect on twentieth-century German popular culture. May, for all practical purposes, was to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European market what Beadle and Adams were to the American market during the same period with their famous “Dime Novels.”
3. See “Lucky Luke,” a website: [www/geocities.com/SouthBeach/Shores/5270/lucky-luke.htm](http://www.geocities.com/SouthBeach/Shores/5270/lucky-luke.htm).
4. See “Happy Country Dancin’ . . . Country Dance in Japan,” a website: www.country-dance.com/. Also of interest, “Macaroni Westerns . . . Spaghetti Westerns in Japan:” www.pscweb.com/macaroni/.
5. Theodore Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966), 24.
6. Kevin Mulroy, ed., *Western Amerykanski Polish Poster Art & the Western* (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage and Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 73.
7. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1931), 244.
8. Joe B. Franz and Julian Ernest Choate, Jr., *The American Cowboy the Myth & the Reality* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 27.
9. Webb, *The Great Plains*, 244.
10. Thomas Hobbes, quoted in “Thomas Hobbes,” *Lexicon Universal Encyclopedia*, John P. Doyle, ed. (New York: Lexicon Publications, Inc., 1983), 192.
11. Bill C. Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), from the table of contents, the title to Malone’s third chapter: “The First Country Singing Star: Jimmie Rodgers.”
12. Two out of three of these cowboy icons were native Texans: Orvon (Gene) Autry was born on September 29, 1907 in Tioga, Texas; Woodward Maurice (Tex) Ritter was born on January 12, 1905 in Murvaul, Panola County Texas; and Roy Rogers, the lone non-Texas native, was born Leonard Franklin Slye on November 5, 1911 in Cincinnati, Ohio.
13. Telephone conversation with Bob Livingston, February 4, 2002.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Bob Johnston is a legendary record producer in the country/rock genre, having recorded such recording giants as Simon and Garfunkel, Bob Dylan, and Johnny Cash. For detailed biographical information, go to www.bobjohnston.com/disc2.htm.
16. I was the guitar player on these sessions. They were called the “Sangria” sessions because before we would begin recording, Jerry Jeff would brew up a large, multi-gallon tub of Sangria Wine.
17. Interview, April 10, 2001.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. Telephone conversation with Bob Livingston, February 5, 2002.
22. Interview, April 10, 2001.
23. Discussion with Livingston, February 8, 2002.
24. Interview with Bob Livingston, May 1, 2001.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. Penny M. Von Eschen, “Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz, Race, and Empire during the Cold War,” *Here, There and Everywhere: The Foreign Politics of American Popular Culture*, Reinhold Wagnleitner and Elaine Tyler May, eds. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), 163.
29. *Ibid.*, 170.
30. Interview, May 1, 2001.
31. *Ibid.* I asked Livingston how his comments about Saddam Hussein got back to the State Department. He said that there was always a representative from the State Department at every one of his shows and that they write a report about each event. This report was then passed up the chain of command.
32. Interview, April 10, 2001.
33. Interview, May 1, 2001.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*
36. Interview, April 10, 2001.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Joni Mitchell, “Free Man in Paris,” *Court and Spark*, Elektra/Asylum Records, 1974.
39. Interview, May 1, 2001.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Interview, April 10, 2001.
42. Telephone conversation with Livingston, February 5, 2002.
43. Interview, May 1, 2001.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. The United States Information Service (USIS) is no longer an autonomous agency within the State Department. Over the last few years the USIS has been absorbed into the State Department. Livingston assures me however that the USIS’s mission is alive and well and that he continues to work with Cultural Affairs Officers at the State Department. He cites budget considerations and reductions in personnel as the main reasons for the change.
47. Interview, April 10, 2001.
48. Interview, May 1, 2001.
49. Interview, April 10, 2001.