



writing the COWBOY way

**Dubbed
'the Charlie
Parker
of cowboy
poetry,' Paul
Zarzyski's
words reflect
life in the West**

Born into a Polish-Italian immigrant clan of hunter-gatherers, garlic and tomato tenders, wood-burners, preserve putter-uppers, whiskey distillers and maker-from-scratch curers and procurers, I have picked, caught, shot, cut, piled, wrapped, canned all my life and, thus, have become a writer of poems.

So writes Paul Zarzyski in "Bringing Home the Poems." Zarzyski "(rhymes with whiskey)" is best known as a Montana cowboy poet. He prefers "rodeo poet" since he never worked as a cowboy, but made a living for 13 seasons riding broncs. He's been a featured poet at the ▶



This page: Paul Zarzyski with his faithful companion, Zeke. Zarzyski's "Poet Lariat" medal from the state of Montana.

‘I work like
John Henry,
the steel-drivin’
man, on every poem’

Paul Zarzyski

National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, since 1987. He has cowritten songs with western singer/songwriters Tom Russell, Ian Tyson and Wylie Gustafson. In 2005, he won a Montana Governor’s Arts Award for literature.

But when Ian Tyson introduces the song “Jerry Ambler,” cowritten by Zarzyski, on his “Live at Longview” recording, he calls Zarzyski “the Charlie Parker of cowboy poetry,” referring to the innovative, out-there 1940s jazz saxophonist. (Zarzyski actually has a poem in which Parker steps out of a touring car to serenade a Holstein; her milk output “triples for life.”) Zarzyski remembers not being instantly accepted at Elko because “my poems rhyme a skosh more in the middle than out on the ends.” While many of Zarzyski’s poems feature broncs, chutes and spurs, just as many do not. “cowboy poet” alone does not do him justice.

“Everyone wants to define you, fence you in,” Zarzyski says, insisting the only label that feels right to him is “The one and only Polish hobo mafioso rodeo poet of ▶



Zarzyski and Zeke at work on a new poem.

Manchester, Montana, so far.”

Poetry, rodeo, Montana: only one of these did Zarzyski aim for early on. He grew up in Hurley, an iron-mining town in northern Wisconsin that he's written many poems about, joyfully comparing it, in its rich blue-collar ethnicity, to Butte. His Italian mother was born in the house next door, where his grandmother still lived. His Polish dad worked in the mines, an experience Zarzyski explores often in his poems. In one, as a boy, he's hunting bait worms in the yard at midnight and presses his ear to a wormhole, knowing his father is down there somewhere on the graveyard shift. Zarzyski's childhood was, and his poems still are, full of family, food, town and the surrounding woods where the Zarzyskis often gathered food and wood, fished and hunted.

At age 11, a family trip brought Zarzyski to Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks; he vowed he'd live in Montana one day. He finished high school, where he played football and went on to college. There, a composition teacher introduced him to poetry. "I thought I hated it," he remembers, but the teacher used poems

about fishing, Levi jackets and cowboy boots, the terror of being taught by Catholic nuns, a guy, drunk and alone, dreaming of old football games. They rang true for Zarzyski. "I realized poetry allowed you to tell your stories encapsulated in rich language. That's important." From memorizing chemical formulas, he switched to English, especially poetry. As he neared graduation, the same comp teacher told him about the creative writing program at the University of Montana headed by working-class poet Richard Hugo. Zarzyski applied, was accepted and arrived in Missoula in 1973.

The following spring, he ventured to the rodeo Oral Zumwalt staged in Missoula valley. "I watched those bucking horses boil out of those chutes and felt, if we live other lives—and there's a good chance we

do—I had ridden broncs in one. Or was meant to." In this life, had he ridden much? "Half a notch above ponies at carnivals.

"It was like learning to write poetry. How many poems bucked me off in the second line? Once, a horse bucked me right back into the chute. But I kept getting back on. Finally, I got a score. Then I could ride well enough to place." The experience of riding broncs, plus the life of the traveling contestant, proved to be lively fodder for poems. One of Zarzyski's ten published books, *Roughstock Sonnets*, a collaboration with western photographer Barbara Van Cleve, is an intimate celebration of the sport.

Zarzyski quit rodeoing about 20 years ago. "It wasn't as much fun and hurt more," he explains. But the combination of rodeo and poetry led him to cowboy poetry, a world that enthusiastically embraces and supports living, reciting poets. Rodeo gave him paradigms he still lives and works by. As a poet, he tries "to make every line jump and kick across the page."

"Whatever horse you're forked to, you're not in control. You can't steer him. You let the poem have its head and hope you can stick with it. Try to stay in time and sync, move with it, allow it to go where it needs to go and hope it gets wild—in the sense it takes me somewhere I never thought I'd go. A leap of faith, a trek into the unknown. I want to know what's out there in the cowpoke cosmos."

Zarzyski's poems do a lot of exploring, from the mixed mysteries of killing for meat to the Holocaust to fear on a stormy night to his aging mare, parents and self. Sometimes it's words he explores: their sounds, pure and simple, as in "Antipasto!" ("It's all about the music," he says, and "I'm in it for the fun"); and also, how words came to him, surrounded him growing up. Though his parents didn't read books, he credits their rich use of words for igniting his. In one poem, his family trades language with a pet crow. In another, "Words Growing

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Paul Zarzyski

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Wild in the Woods" (demanded frequently by his audiences), Zarzyski is a boy riding on his father's back, reveling in the obscure names of the fishing flies he sees on his dad's hat and the flowers they pass in the forest. Words equate with love as father and son fish separately, but call back and forth—until Paul's excited summons. He's caught his first brookie.

To Zarzyski, honoring his parents, poetry is blue-collar work. "I work like John Henry, the steel-drivin' man, on every poem." "Wordsmith," he points out, contains "smith," a job accomplished with sweat and fire.

He calls his latest project, slated for publication this year, *51: 30 Poems, 20 Songs, and One Self-Interview*. "Hurley was

on Route 51. There was a billboard that said, 'Where 51 ends and the fun begins.'" He was born in 1951. "I look at the clock and it's 3:51. I drive through Bonner, speed limit 35, and the speed machine's flashing 51 at me." Why is it important to tell our stories? "I could give you 51 different answers on 51 consecutive days," Zarzyski tells me. Today, he answers, "Poetry is a vehicle for wisdom, for looking at what it is to be human. Even a poem about a man who loves his cat shines a bright light on qualities that can bring us peace, health, hope, can help us solve problems without blowing each other and the planet up." **M**

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