



BILL OWEN
1942 - 2013

Honored as a Historymaker 2014
Cowboy Artist of America



The following is a radio interview with Bill Owen (**BO**) conducted by Red Steagall (**RS**) on his syndicated radio show, COWBOY CORNER, the week of April 15, 2013.

Transcripts for website edited by members of Historical League, Inc.

Original tapes are in the collection of the Arizona Heritage Center Archives, an Historical Society Museum, Tempe, Arizona.

BO Well, I guess I just born to be ... This is something that I had when I was real young, five to six years old, as far as we know. My mother was an artist of sorts and had pastels and watercolors, and the first little drawing that I did, we think was around the age of six, and it was two horse heads done with pastels. And as far as I wanted to paint subject wise, I was always interested in and loved horses, and my Dad being a cowboy, it was just a combination that came together - the art within me and the encouragement of art with my mother, and of course, the love of the West and the admiration of my Dad and my uncle. I just wanted to be a cowboy, but I couldn't be both. I had to be either a cowboy or an artist so... (laughter) so I guess I've done both, but not at the same time.

RS What artists did you admire?

BO George Phippen came a little bit later. The earliest that I remember was my uncle had Russell Remington and Frank Tenney Johnson prints hanging in his house. I used to just love looking at them and they really made an impact on me. And then later in Prescott, Arizona when I was about fourteen, fifteen years old I saw a George Phippen in the original, "Tying Knots in the Devil's Tail" in downtown Prescott in the Babbitt clothing store. I stood there for hours upon end it seemed, just studying, and looking at it. That made a tremendous impact on me, it was just unbelievable what George could do and did. George has been a great influence on me, although I didn't ever know him personally.



RS He was one of the founders of the Cowboy Artists of America, and Joe Beeler... they were close around you, weren't they?

BO Phippen painted the cowboy so accurately and real and authentically and that just meant so much to me because I had spent part of my time in Prescott and part of the time in the southern part of the state. Joe was in Sedona and Phippen was in Prescott or Skull Valley

Joe and I became good friends and he helped me in the very beginning and encouraged me and would be there anytime I wanted to go talk to him and get some critic.

RS Didn't you go out to the Babbitt Ranch?

BO Not only do I need to be around it and want to be around it and crave it, but that's where I get my battery charged, if you want to put it that way. Everything that I paint, Red, is actual happenings. It's so important to me that I paint accurately what the cowboys are, and what they do, how they work, and everything, down to the type of rigging that they use, the saddles and the accoutrements, whatever the case may be, wherever they're at. I feel that I'm recording what will someday be the history of the now contemporary cowboy of this area - mostly Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, but mostly Arizona.

RS Fifty years from now we'll have your painting to record the history of today's cowboys.

BO That's so important to me! I feel that its gotta be not staged, it's gotta be the actual thing, and it's gotta be not something that I dreamed up in my mind; it's gotta be something that I see or have seen. Ninety-nine percent of everything that I do is not set up. I don't have models, they're my models and I'm with them. They know the horses that they see in the painting. They know the people and the horses most of the time, and that is so important because I do not want to have anything false at all in anything that I do.

I remember Jack Cook, when he was still alive, and he was the chairman at the Cowboy Hall of Fame. I had a painting there, several paintings at the Prix de West. Jack came to me and told me, and this was one of the greatest compliments that I ever heard. He said they were looking at some cowboy art, some other artist there, and there was some discussion on whether this was right, or this was wrong, on that person's piece of art. Jack says, they said, "Well let's go over here and look at Bill Owen's piece and we'll judge it by his use as a measuring stick. That meant so much to me that they had that kind of faith in me. That they would use mine as a measuring stick and look at me as one that has that integrity that I won't compromise. I'll never forget it. He couldn't have paid me a better compliment.



That's for sure ... I hope someday down the road, 50 years, 100 years from now, that people will go, me and some of the others that are painting with the same integrity, that they will say, whatever it is in their paintings you can count on it being correct.

Song ... Will James cowboy dreams... heroes were his horses... painted them true... by Don Owens

BO Well, my all-time favorite of an artist that knew how to paint and use color to set the mood to set the time of day or night, could paint anytime of day or night and do it well was Tom Ryan and Tom helped me tremendously by giving me the tools. He gave me his palette and the colors that he used, and it's called a controlled palette. With that palette, over time, you can see how to use complementary colors and in such a way you can paint anytime - day or night and that's something I've been enjoying. I've struggled and struggled and struggled like I have in anything in my life it seems to get to where I can do something that made me happy. I'm never quite completely happy, but I'm getting happier (laughter) At this age I better start getting happy. I've been painting for over 40 years, I better learn something. I am at the point where I know I don't know it all, but I know a whole lot more. Thanks to Tom Ryan, I've got some control of color where I can do the things I want to do now and paint night-time which is extremely hard to make it believable. And early morning, mid-day, late evening, whatever the case may be, and I'm really enjoying that.

George Phippen was an extreme influence on me even though I didn't know him, just by looking at his paintings. And then of course, Joe Beeler, extremely influential and helpful and he was a great friend.

Sculptures / bronze also influenced by George Phippen – Rock Hopper (in the living room)
The Rock Hopper was so well done with the old cow and her big slip-eared calf and the cowboy coming down off that ridge to rope that calf. Everything about it is right, the cowboy and the horse and the attitude of the horse, the attitude of the old cow with her ears kinda back a little bit and listening to the horse coming up behind her and they're running for their life practically and they're probably a little bit wild. Everything's just perfect in it. I love it and he was just so good, and he didn't go overboard on making everything too tight and too detailed, but he did enough so that it was very realistic. He kept that fluid look about everything that he did; it didn't become stiff. I just love his work.

BO Joe, who did some great sculpting, did some beautiful pieces. I would have to say, probably of this period of time, that George Phippen was the one that really did it all for me.



BO Here in the Southwest of course we're mostly dry all the time and I think there's a lot of dust, even though we don't realize it, in the atmosphere. Also, the grass most of the time is golden and yellows, I don't paint a lot of green. I paint a lot of dried grass, golden colors, and a lot of dust. Then my action paintings, I think people really like to see the true gritty, what life is really all about, it's not that pleasant. It's not as romantic as a lot may think, and you get into the middle of it sometimes the romance falls out, but it is a wonderful life overall.

The light, from what I understand, as the sun goes down, the dust and the atmosphere, could be moisture, all that is what causes beautiful sunsets, and it can become very soft light. One thing that Tom also taught me was that at late evening the contrast is not as much as it is at mid-day and so you've got to work with the color and the contrast, keep it soft.

Mt. St. Helen eruption affected the sunsets in Arizona

It's almost impossible to take a photograph of a beautiful sunset. If you get the sky right the bottom goes black, if you get the bottom right, the sky washes out. So, you've pretty much just gotta paint it sometimes when the sun's going down - you've only got 15 minutes and you don't care how it looks. You just wanta get that color right.