



All Photography courtesy Jeff Hildebrandt.

Eli Wallach, Jeff Hildebrandt and Andrew Prine discuss some of the old Hollywood Westerns during an interview on the Westerns Channel.

## Behind the WESTERNS CHANNEL Jeff Hildebrandt, On The Trail

BY CORINNE JOY BROWN

Some of us know for a fact that the Western movie never really died, it just moved into our living room. How this happened is due in part to the commitment of one of America's most diverse cable channels and one unsung success ~ Coloradoan Jeff Hildebrandt.

Those of us who grew up watching endearing Western films and television series the first time around can now enjoy seeing them again and again. And for others who are new to the genre, watching

The Westerns Channel, a division of Starz Encore Entertainment, gives new generations an opportunity to see what they missed.

As the channel's managing producer, Hildebrandt deserves the credit for helping this cable giant offer more than entertainment.

Through a showcase of old Western movies and television programs, he is preserving and presenting a vital part of America's heritage to audiences across the country.

A star in his own right, Hildebrandt is both a corporate executive and an artist. But his medium isn't

film; it's the written and spoken word. Cowboy poetry to be exact.

A former U.S. Army staff sergeant, country music DJ, television producer, volunteer fireman and emergency medical technician, he has managed to find his literary voice and assume his rightful place on the popular cowboy poetry circuit.

A relative newcomer, he has slowly stepped into the limelight and won his listeners' hearts, thanks to his charming, often-humorous collection of original works titled *Prairie Prose... and Cons*, printed in 1999 ~ poems with



themes including patriotism, ranch life and the desire to be a cowboy.

But Hildebrandt's national recognition has been due in part to a stirring and inspirational poem called *Cowboy Up America*. This tribute to the fallen heroes of the 911 attack relates the courage and spirit of those who tried to fight back to the best of our Western heroes of yesteryear.

"In November of 2002," he explains. "I recited this poem for the very first time at the Festival of the West in Scottsdale and was stopped twice by applause.

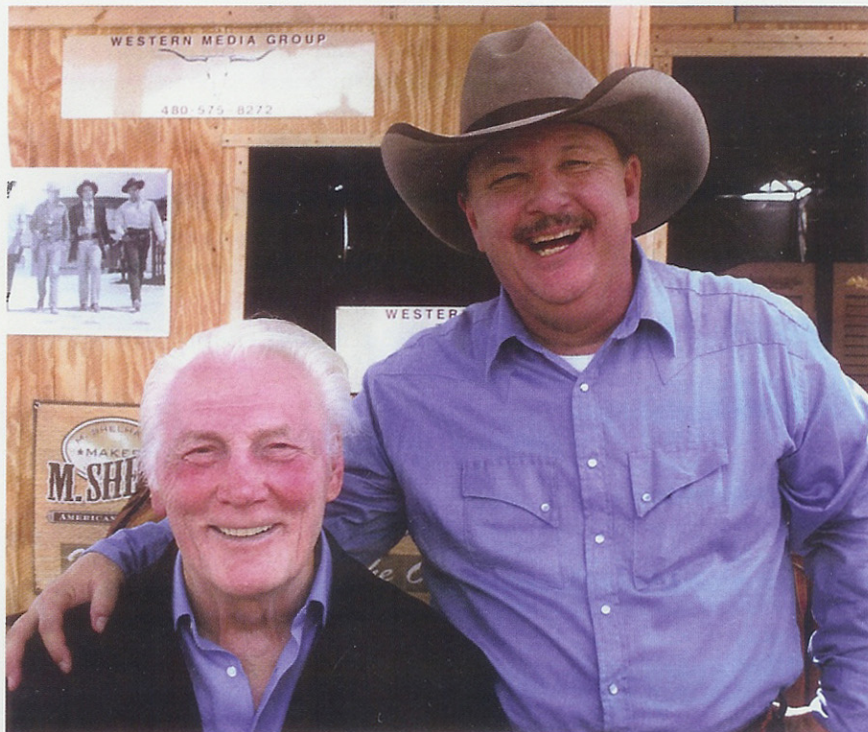
"Its subsequent popularity has resulted in national radio airplay and even inspired a lithograph by a West Coast artist. It's become a requested favorite at festivals across the country. It almost has a life of its own," he said.

An unassuming man who is both a doting father and a grandfather, Hildebrandt makes no pretense about being a real cowboy. Yet, he's been an invited guest at major cowboy poetry festivals all over the country and has been featured at the National Cowboy Symposium, the National Festival of the West, the Tombstone Film Festival, Hollywood's Golden Boot Awards and Dean Smith's Celebrity Rodeo. He has even performed at Carnegie Hall.

So how does an admitted greenhorn tap the truth of the cowboy way?

"Like most folks who enjoy cowboy poetry," Hildebrandt states, "I don't make my living in the saddle. I get paid to watch Western movies. As a result, I've also had the privilege of meeting many of the actors who were my silver screen heroes: Burt Reynolds, Harry Carey Jr., the late Jack Elam, Clint Walker and Dennis Weaver. The list goes on.

"My association with these fine individuals and with Western movies in general helped shape my style of 'range rhymes.' My slightly



Actor Jack Palance with Jeff Hildebrandt at the Festival of the West in Scottsdale, Arizona.

skewed view of home on the range seems to appeal to both real cowboys and wannabees with humorous, positive messages that not only entertain but also enlighten and encourage."

When not writing poetry, he is at work developing on-air features to help The Westerns Channel attract new viewers. The all-Western, all-the-time theme of the network was set by its founder, cable visionary, John Sie.

But the current look and feel of the network is largely due to Hildebrandt's love and dedication. "Sie's need and my talents were an amazing fit," he states. "It was the opportunity of a lifetime."

The Westerns Channel was totally created from scratch. The goal was to provide wholesome, nostalgic movies any time a viewer wanted to watch. Above all, Sie wanted to give the viewer a good feeling, almost like going to an art cinema, especially since none of the channels are supported by commercials.

"In truth," he explains, "we

weren't much different than any other movie service at the beginning. But what we discovered is that people watch us constantly. This has proven to be a real challenge," Hildebrandt said.

Hildebrandt met that challenge by creating a variety of short features that run between the movies.

On *The Trail* is a travelogue of Western events and locations, including the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. "My producers were really impressed with that one," he says.

These have been so successful in creating awareness that he constantly receives requests to cover festivals from coast to coast.

Another feature is "Conversations with Andrew Prine." These are one-on-one interviews between Prine and a variety of Western stars like Eli Wallach, Earl Holliman, Patrick Wayne, director Mark Rydell and others.

"What we do on the channel is approach movies and actors with respect," he stresses. "The point is to have fun, but never make fun. We





Jeff Hildebrandt performs at the Single Action Shooting Society Convention in Las Vegas, Nevada.

try to cover the whole gamut as well; the A-Western or big-budget film is just as appealing to us as the B-Westerns, which came second in a double feature. Many of the B series were turned out quickly and often shot at the same place with the same cast."

The Westerns Channel is committed to keeping the legends alive. By showing these older films and then getting up-close-and personal with the actors who made them, the network does a wonderful job of keeping the legends alive.

"After all, people went to movies to escape reality," Hildebrandt observes. "The best part of television, in my opinion, is that heroes never die. They persist."

With creative introductions and compelling voiceovers by noted Western music talent Bill Barwick of Denver, the inimitable "voice" of The Westerns Channel since 1994, watching the channel is fun.

Hildebrandt loves Western music, poetry and literature, and he is extremely well read. He knows the stories behind the films and the

biographies of the actors.

Meanwhile, his appearance calendar seems to be fuller than a debutante's dance card. During 2004, highlights included a performance at Dodge City, Kansas, hosting the Colorado Cowboy Classic in Lakewood, and reciting at Michael Martin Murphey's West Fest in Snowmass, Colorado. But, by far, the most impressive was his part in the Great American Cowboy In Concert at Carnegie Hall.

"I recited *Cowboy Up America* as the last act in the show prior to the finale. The Prairie Rose Wranglers and the 150-voice Independent Middle School Chorus from Wichita, Kansas, backed me up with a rendition of *America The Beautiful*.

"When I finished, the audience actually came to its feet! Imagine, getting a standing ovation," he said.

**I**n the two years of this event, Hildebrandt is the only performer in either show to receive that honor.

For sheer sentiment and impact, it would be hard to top his most recent recognition, the receipt of an award from Dr. Walter Bishop, director of West Quest in Litchfield, Illinois.

West Quest is a nationwide nonprofit that has as its goal "the preservation and promotion of the history, heritage, music, traditions and spirit of the American West." Many of its events are fund-raisers for charities, especially the John Wayne Cancer Institute.

"I subscribe to The Westerns Channel," Bishop explains. "I had gotten to meet a lot of the old actors and, along the way, I met Jeff, too. I was touched by his commitment to the past and his deep regard for the code of the West. We awarded him with the title The People's Poet. His work goes way beyond cowboy ~ it's about the ethics and attitudes that shape America."

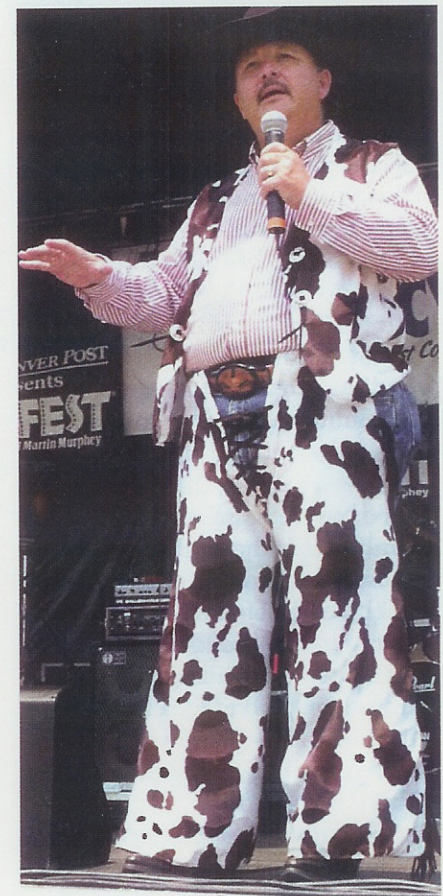
Aside from Hildebrandt's love affair with the cowboy way and the

open range, he is also a deeply spiritual person who writes about life's glimmering moments and man's connection to the land and his loved ones.

"The purpose of my poetry," he emphasizes, "is to try to entertain, but that's just the beginning. God gave me the talent and led me to a place where I can use it to encourage others."

That's another cowboy trait he has in abundance ~ his humility. So next time you turn on your television in search of Gene or Hoppy or the dashing Lash LaRue, keep Jeff Hildebrandt in mind. After all, not even Roy could ride into the sunset with a better purpose than his. 🐾

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Jeff Hildebrandt, dressed in one of his Western costumes, performs at Michael Martin Murphey's West Fest in Snowmass, Colorado.