



BY HAND AND HEART

Artistic Drive

Whether he's braiding rawhide, playing music or training horses, Alan Bell is an artist at work.



By Carter G. Walker
Photographs by Adam Jahiel

32

Alan Bell is a Texas cowboy. He favors big hats, faded jeans, and western shirts, and wears his mustache, peppered with gray, like a horseshoe hanging from his mouth. He is a storyteller and a rawhide braider, a saddlemaker and a horse trainer, a father, a husband and a damn fine musician. When you add up everything he does, and then take it all away, what's left is the artist.

Take the cowboy off his ranch in Greenville, Texas, an hour northeast of Dallas, where leathery-leafed live oaks reach for the ground and the sky at the same time; take away his drums, his workshop and all his scattered tools; take away his family and the Spanish Barb horses he trains and feeds every day once the sun rises and again

before it sets. Take it all away and this man, Alan Bell, big and strong and kind, is still an artist. It's not his work, or his product, or even the way he chooses to spend his time. Being an artist, for Alan Bell, is simply who he is, how he thinks, and the way he approaches every moment of his time on earth.

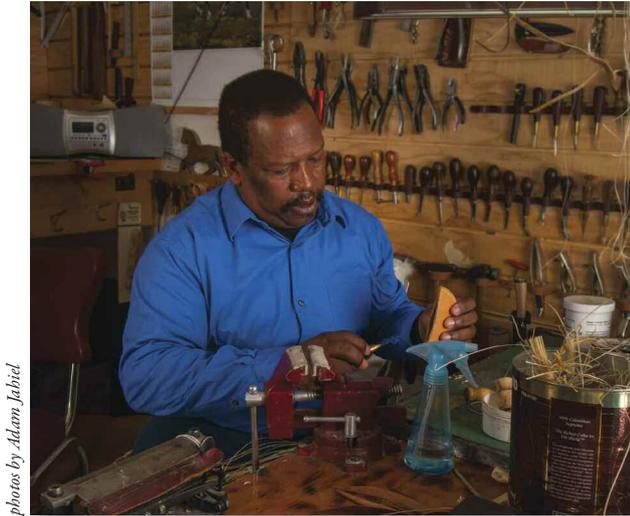
"It's the conscious choice to be good at all the steps of everything you're doing," he says, letting each word come out and line up properly without crowding each other. For Bell, the "everything you're doing" is a list as long as the tangled piles of rawhide string that coil like earthen licorice around his unruly workshop.

But before we see art, we need to understand Alan's artistic drive. And to get there, the only place to start is

**NEVER GIVE UP
YOUR STYLE.**

**SHOP NOW AT
CHARLIE1HORSEHATS.COM**





photos by Adam Jahied

Alan Bell is a horseman, craftsman and musician.

at the beginning.

In 1959, Alan Bell was the first of his family to be born in Texas. He grew up a self-described army brat and troublemaker on a base in El Paso. His dad was an officer, his mom a teacher. Alan was one of five kids in a family that not only appreciated art, but made it. His father painted and drew. Everyone played music. But Alan had another passion no one in his family shared.

“I always had an affinity for horses,” he says.

The Bell family didn’t have horses, nor did any of Alan’s friends. The youngster’s fascination with the animal kept him inside, on the couch, watching every western the rabbit ears on his family’s black-and-white TV could summon. He spent hours in his room, reading about cowboys and their trusty steeds. Sometimes the movie theater on the base showed western matinees. Alan went.

“I’m just odd man out,” he says.

Although his family didn’t share his obsession, no one discouraged it.

He remembers borrowing the car in high school to drive 45 miles to Las Cruces, where he would sit on a fence and watch horsemanship classes at New Mexico State University.

“I just always wanted to ride,” he says.

That opportunity came his senior year in high school, when Alan and a group of friends went camping in Ruidoso for a weekend. The boys splurged to rent horses for a day from a one-hour-ride outfit.

“There were 11 horses and one mule,” Alan says. “I got the mule.”

Precisely one hour in, when Alan says the mule’s “internal alarm clock” went off, the animal turned around and made for the barn. All the horses, their unhappy riders atop, followed behind.

“That mule ran me through trees and did whatever he could to scratch me off,” Alan says, laughing like he was watching a film reel of the spectacle play out on his garage wall some 40 years later.

Eventually the mule sat down and Alan slid off, then walked around for a face-to-face with the animal.

“I looked him in the eye...and slapped him in the face,” he says.

The mule got up. Alan climbed back aboard, and all the other horses followed him back onto the trail for every penny’s worth of their full-day ride.

Throughout his twenties, Alan toured the Southwest as a musician, a drummer in one of Texas’ first reggae bands, the International Raft Band. Half the group was American, the other half Jamaican. Dreadlocks hung to his elbows at one point, but Alan’s Texas twang hinted at the cowboy underneath the hair.

Alan tells the story of one tour that took the band to both the Hopi and Havasu reservations. They were piled in a van, covering big swaths of hot, Arizona nothing on their way to the Grand Canyon and the people of the blue-green water. They were supposed to meet an emissary from the tribe at some point, but plans were less than specific. They hit a tiny town, not big enough for a stop sign, and Alan demanded a stop.

“I knew that if you miss the post office, you’ve



American
HAT COMPANY, INC.
 100 YEAR ANNIVERSARY
 BOWIE, TEXAS

*"Proud to be an American"
 "Proud to wear an American Hat"*



Tuf Cooper
TUF COOPER
Collection

3X World Champion Tie Down Roper
 NJHRF All-Around Champion



For the complete Tuf Cooper collection visit
americanhatco.com



Proud Sponsor



800-392-4197
www.americanhat.net

missed the whole town,” he says. When there was no one in the post office and no one on the road, Alan didn’t have to think about what to do. He climbed a hill behind the post office and “made an Indian call” – part yodel, part shriek. He’s not sure if the sound came from watching all those westerns or listening to the Havasu war cry on Bob Marley’s “Crazy Baldheads.”

“But it worked,” he says, laughing like a kid who took apart a clock and then managed to put it back together again.

When Alan was 30 and had traded life as a touring musician for life as a touring long-haul truck driver, all in the name of a slight and beautiful woman named Judy whom he still calls “Judy the Great” 25 years on, he finally learned how to ride. After one of his riding lessons, Judy’s brother loaned Alan a magazine with a story about Spanish Barb horses. When Alan read about the mounts of the *conquistadores*, his vision of the kind of horse he knew he’d have someday was narrowed down to one.

His first horse appeared in Alan’s life in 1991. Her name was Pepita and she had heaves, an equine version of asthma. She came from a family in Iowa who couldn’t keep her healthy when the banks of the Missouri couldn’t hold the river, and everyone breathed floodwater for weeks. Alan had done his research through the Spanish Barb registry and was looking to buy a horse when Pepita’s family found him and gave her away. Pepita was a descendant of San Domingo, Alan says, a Medicine Hat stallion immortalized in a Marguerite Henry novel and a made-for-TV movie that Alan had watched in high school.

Becoming a horse owner made Alan realize that he needed to be a horse trainer. He had to find a way to do it well.

Spanish Barbs are filled with the blood of agile Moorish war horses and their rugged Spanish

equivalents. In the lore of the breed, they were favored on this side of the Atlantic by Spanish explorers and, eventually, by Native Americans, so much so that the U.S. Cavalry tried, and nearly succeeded, at exterminating the animals.

Short and deep-bodied, with Roman noses and an A-shape, rather than a U-shape, where the front legs join the chest, the breed was traditionally trained with a soft leather or rawhide *jaquima*, or hackamore, which includes a braided *bosal*. A noseband that acts upon the horse’s nose and jaw, the bosal is used in place of a bit and encourages flexion and softness in the animal.

For Alan, this was the way to train his horses. And so Alan, mule slapper and Indian caller, set out to learn how to braid such gear. He started by reaching out to braider Leland Hensley, a fellow Texan. Alan read books and visited Web sites, and made a list of rawhide legends, artists like Luis Ortega, Bill Dorrance and Bryan Neubert. He learned that if you couldn’t use it, it wasn’t worth making.

Since Alan was going to ride horses he was training – Pepita gave Alan and Judy their “first baby,” a foal the couple named Mariah – he also made lists of saddlemakers, men like Duff Severe, Cliff Wade and the Dorrance brothers. He figured he’d need to learn how to make saddles, as well.

As Alan’s trucking gig took him around the country, he made phone calls, and plans, to meet with the master craftsmen on his list. He would watch the men at work, notice the delicate precision of their weathered cowboy fingers on every loop, and then ask the same question over and over again. Why?

“I never really wanted to know the what without knowing the why,” Alan says. “I’d either find out why or I’d let go of what they told me.”

So Alan learned about making rawhide from cattle, and from deer and horses. He learned about cutting





rawhide strings, about beveling and braiding, and building saddles that could make roping easier. He not only made his own gear – which he used to train Pepita, Mariah and a string of other Spanish Barbs he brought into his herd – but he started to sell gear too.

When he wasn't on the road, Alan was in his garage, choosing to get good at everything he was doing. In 2001, 10 years after he'd started, he landed an opportunity to study under braider Nate Wald.

Nate grew up working cattle on a ranch in Montana, near the eastern edge of the Crow Indian Reservation, where grassy hills roll like ocean waves to meet the sky. An accomplished horseman and former bull rider, Nate laid eyes on braided rawhide for the first time at a saddlery in Three Forks, Montana, near Bozeman, where he was in college. It was the beauty that got him.

"I fooled with it for a few years," he says. "And I just never stopped doing it."

Nate too studied under some of the greats – the likes of Bill Dorrance, Bryan Neubert, Vince Donley – and made braiding a part of his daily routine. By lunchtime most days, when the cows were checked and the horses fed, Nate was in his workshop. One needs only to look at any single piece of his work – the knife handle on his work table, for example, made with rawhide strings that measure less than 1/32 of an inch, and incorporating four pattern changes in less than five inches – to know that Nate has put in his hours.

Alan went to stay with Nate on the ranch and study his work. The men braided California vaquero-style reins

and bosals, headstalls and quirts. They worked on making hides, slipping the hair and then pulling the skin taut to dry on big, round frames, like drums that might be heard, a heartbeat from the ground, a hundred miles away.

"Alan is always willing to learn," says Nate, stirring a vat of lye that smells like the goodness of wet earth. "And he rides, so he knows how gear should work."

But before you think Nate's words aren't enough of a compliment, remember that these men are cowboys, not talkers.

Instead, both men tell about the roof they put on Nate's garage during the internship, and the time they spent playing music. Their kinship is obvious. Their families – Alan and Judy and their two girls, Ahnaliessie and Alyssa; Nate and T.J. and their son,

NETTLES COUNTRY
Made in Texas by Cowboys

Feel Good...

Look Great!

1-800-729-2234
orders@nettlescountry.com
www.nettlescountry.com



Alan Bell at work with Nate Wald in Wald's Montana shop.

Jackson – are close.

In his own workshop, a thousand miles, as the crow flies, south and east from Nate's, Alan fingers a rawhide knot on his fid, a well-worn wood and metal tool he uses to open braidwork for another string to pass through. Sometimes the strings are the color of sand, or the gold of grass in the fall. Other times, they are red or brown, dyed with black walnuts, coffee or onion skins. The fid, and the braided knot, came as a gift from Nate.

"I see it every time I braid," says Alan. "And it's absolutely perfect. He will always be an inspiration to me."

If Nate's goal is to produce "straight, clean work" that is always getting better, Alan's is to create gear that "holds up to use and close scrutiny." When he talks about what he learned from Nate, Alan pauses. One can't be sure whether he is holding back a laugh or trying to ditch the lump in his throat. When he starts talking again, he calls the experiences humbling.

"It's almost so humbling that you're not sure you can continue," he says, now clearly laughing.

But Alan has continued. He was able to give up trucking five years ago to focus on braiding and

saddlemaking and horse training. He started playing music again, in a blues band with his brother on guitar, after a 20-year hiatus when the focus had been on "driving the truck, buying the ranch and paying bills." On top of that, Alan and Judy managed to raise two remarkable and accomplished daughters; one earned entry into the National Honor Society and the other is in her first year at the Honors College at Texas A&M.

There's one thing about Alan that we haven't paid much attention to. Alan happens to be black. Which is not out of the norm, historically speaking, for a Texas cowboy. But there aren't many African-Americans in the western gear-making crowd.

"Race is a part of it and it's not a part of it. It shouldn't be a part of it," he says. Alan puts things in context by telling how Ruby Bridges, the first black child to attend an all-white elementary school in the South, is just five years older than he is.

There are unpleasant moments, he says, and he tells the story of someone picking up his braidwork at a show.

"The first thing they asked was 'You did that?'" he recalls. "And I said 'yes.' The second thing they asked was 'Are you telling a lie?' They didn't think I was capable of doing that work. The fact of it is race. They look at me different."

In his workshop, which smells like the holy trinity of leather, earth and saddle soap, Alan's red Yamaha drum set is at the ready, tucked between sawhorses for saddles and the ruler-edged table where he cuts and braids string. There is always a click-click-click in his shop, like a metronome, which means the fences are charged, and the horses and dogs are where they need to be. Just like Alan. And there is often reggae music filling the space with slow, offbeat rhythms.



Carter G. Walker is the editor of *Western Art & Architecture* and the author of *Moon Montana & Wyoming* (Moon Books, 2014). She lives in Montana.

