

Creating A Coherent Self

A Conversation with William Matthews

Artist, musician, graphic designer, clear thinker, wanderer and former SF hippie-type would all be apt ribbons of grand competency one could pin on William Matthews. He would be politely pleased, but would mostly allow the artist ribbon to linger the longest. In the western genre of painting and its broadly dispersed fan and collector base, few would not be aware of his sought after work and style. A style heavily influenced by his early life exposure to the work of artists such as John Singer Sargent, Andrew Wyeth and Winslow Homer, among others. His mother the portrait artist Joan Matthews encouraged this exposure, supported by his grandfather, also an artist and passionate world traveler. “I was always encouraged to get out and experience what was out there, so I did,” Matthews says, “It’s how I’m made.”

Many, many stories and pictorials have appeared about Matthews and certainly about his work regarding the American West and other subjects he has painted –

from still life work and studies, to grain silos, to fishing and images from his world travels – have been broadly depicted. So when Willy and I sat down to chat, the subject of his most recent trip back to Ireland seemed

the perfect subject for us to cover – among other things, as you will see. Over the years, Matthews has travelled and lived in a variety places but he considers his time in Ireland like going home.

R&R: When and why did you first travel to Ireland?

WM: In the late 70s, I lived in Ireland for almost 3 years as I had moved there to learn to play the Uilleann Pipes. I had been

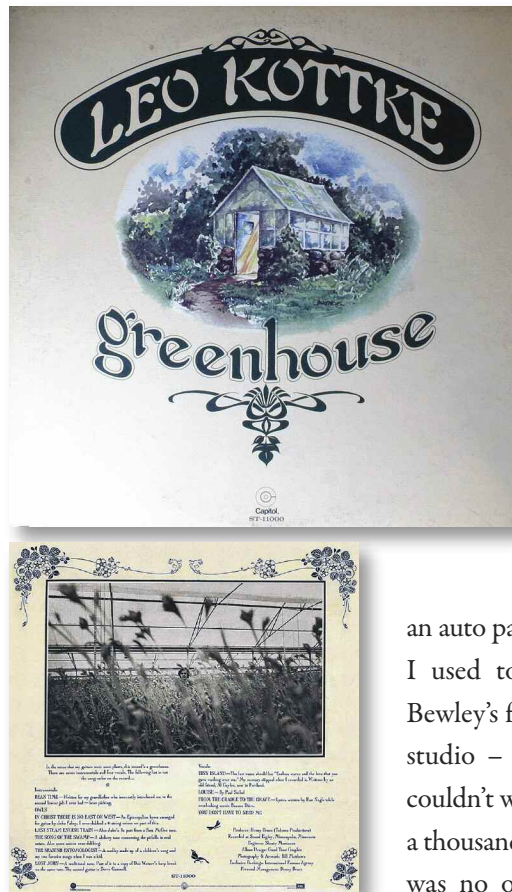
listening to Finbar Furey and Planxty for years and that led me to Ireland to learn more of this wonderfully mysterious instrument. After I arrived, it didn’t take long to figure out – especially in 1977 – that the best music was in Dublin. I found everything went on at this great club, The Meeting Place. All the guys whose records I had been listening to for years were there every night! Eventually I got to know all of them, particularly



William Matthews in the 1970s



Kevin Burke, who was the great fiddle player with the Bothy Band. One day he asked me to help him unload the record collection he was bringing into the Mulligan Record House. I told him I was glad to help and as I picked up a stack of albums – I see the Dan Hicks and the Hot Licks album, *Where's the Money* and I told him, “Oh, I did that cover.” And he said, “Really?” I nod and as we’re picking up more records here’s Dicky Betts’ album, *Highway Call* with Vassar Clements on it, the great Florida fiddle player, and I point at it, “Did that as well.” Again he says, “Really?” So this happened several times, and eventually he said, “You know I am doing an album, why don’t you do the cover?” And I go, “Love to.” And that was sorta the beginning of my getting into doing album covers in Ireland. (Matthews’ first cover design was for Leo Kotke’s 1970 album, *Greenhouse*. He was 19.)



found out that they had space in the building that it was only being used one night a week, so I asked them if they would mind if I used the upstairs for a studio. They told me, “We would love that, we would love to have someone here.” So for the next two and half years, the second and the third floors of that building, right on Essex Street across from what is now the Project Art Centre became my studio. It was just what I needed.

R&R: And this was 1978?

WM: 1977. And in fact it was the area now called Temple Bar – for anybody who knows Dublin. It’s now a very hip and happening spot. At the time it was completely void of anything, just

an auto parts shop and a fishing store as I recall. I used to walk down O’Connell Street to Bewley’s for breakfast every morning from the studio – an eight-block walk, and now you couldn’t walk down there without running into a thousand people, but at the time literally there was no one around. In the late 70s lots of buildings were empty in Dublin particularly in that area. But for me, it was perfect. I got to know all the pipers in Ireland, including the legendary Seamus Ennis.

R&R: How long had you been in Dublin?

WM: Not long really. And at that point I was just kind of making contact with the city and getting to know who the players were. I was going down to the Piper’s Club – Na Piobari Uilleann, the Society of Uilleann Pipers, founded in 1968 – every Thursday night. I



The mystical Uilleann Pipes

R&R: This doesn’t just sound like a trip to learn an instrument, you became part of the place and its culture, yes?

WM: Yes, I had been living in Europe for the previous

two and half years and I had just come from Spain where I lived for a year. I was living in England when Franco died in November of 1975, and in January of 1976 I moved to Spain. I took my motorcycle across the water with my painting portfolio and my open back, A.A. Farland 5-string banjo. I traveled round the country and watched it slowly wake up from Franco's rule.

R&R: How were you supporting yourself?

WM: I was busking, playing banjo and the street and painting. I did some paintings to trade for hotel bills, but I was mostly busking. In Spain, it worked, as nobody had ever heard five-string banjo. It gave me time to see the country and watch the transition. When I first got there, people were still plowing with animals. It was like the 19th century. Franco had really kept the country in a primitive state and not encouraged people



Matthew's view from the window of his rented cottage while in Ireland.

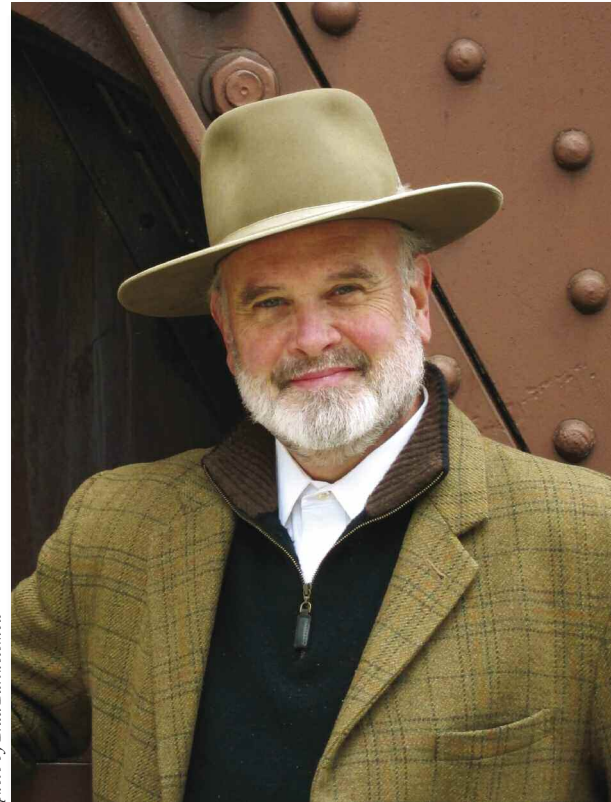


photo by Brad Barbalonew

Artist, musician, renaissance man – William Matthews

to join the 20th century. It was startling yet interesting to me as a painter.

R&R: Did you see an immediate change in the people's attitude or was it slow to evolve?

WM: I did, in a visual sense as I didn't speak Spanish and they didn't speak English. It was the middle of the winter and there were no tourists. To be fair, at the time, there was no one going there.

R&R: You weren't about to do it the easy way apparently.

WM: It's never been my nature to do things in a predictable way. But it's always been interesting!





The paintings shown are from works done during Matthews' recent Irish trip.

R&R: It seems perfect for you though. You seem to so easily move around geographically, immerse yourself and then have this imagery pour out. And no matter the subject, it seems you have a sense of place wherever you are at the moment.

WM: Yes, and I love translating what I see into art. I love the process. It's what feeds me, what pumps through my veins. For example, I just came back from rafting the Grand Canyon with my kids. It was great.

R&R: Really, did you have time to paint?

WM: I did. 22 paintings!

R&R: River rafting and watercolors must be an interesting logistics issue.

WM: Yes. (Laughing) I wasn't painting as I was rafting, but I was painting as soon as we stopped, every spare

moment we had. It's astonishing to me that I got through the entire seven days of rafting and didn't have one catastrophe.

R&R: I don't see you wondering around with Ziplocks...

WM: Oh, I had all of that. Ziplocks and this cool expedition gear! It was all rubber and roll-able, as I had no idea what to expect. My intention was to preserve the paintings, no matter what. That's been my M.O. no matter where I go – even during those early European excursions.

R&R: What caused you to leave Ireland when you did

WM: I had lived in Ireland for really almost 3 years and had made some very close friends. But then, it was time. I hadn't been back to America in almost 5 years. Hadn't touched American soil, and hardly had a phone





conversation with anyone back here. I was estranged from my parents at the time, and was off living in a fairly separated way. Actually, I remember the day I decided to come back. I was out bicycling in County Kerry with my girlfriend at the time and we came around a corner and there was a huge herd of sheep and I heard in my ear as clear as a bell “Its time to go home now.” That was it.

R&R: Really?

WM: This may sound a bit odd, but every now and then I hear voices in my head that have been just as clear as they can be.

R&R: Are they right?

WM: They seem to be right. I mean we all have intuitive qualities. Women are given a lot more credit for being intuitive. But men, I think, are as well. Maybe it’s something artists in general pay more attention to. I know I find myself sensitive on many levels and I listen to those voices. That was one of the first times that I ever heard something as clearly as that.

R&R: Did you feel as though you were going to something, or was it just a chapter closing and time to turn the page.

WM: Yes. Exactly. A chapter was closing. I had no



idea what I was coming home to...
I had no plans.

R&R: Where did you go?

WM: I came back to Colorado where all my stuff was stored. Then back to San Francisco to see my family. It was very interesting, very much of a prodigal son returning home. My father and I had been estranged for years.

R&R: Not father and son?
Not friends?

WM: No. I hadn't done what he expected, I had not gone to college, in fact, I had not even finished high school. He was appalled with all my decisions, even though they pretty much turned out to be good ones.

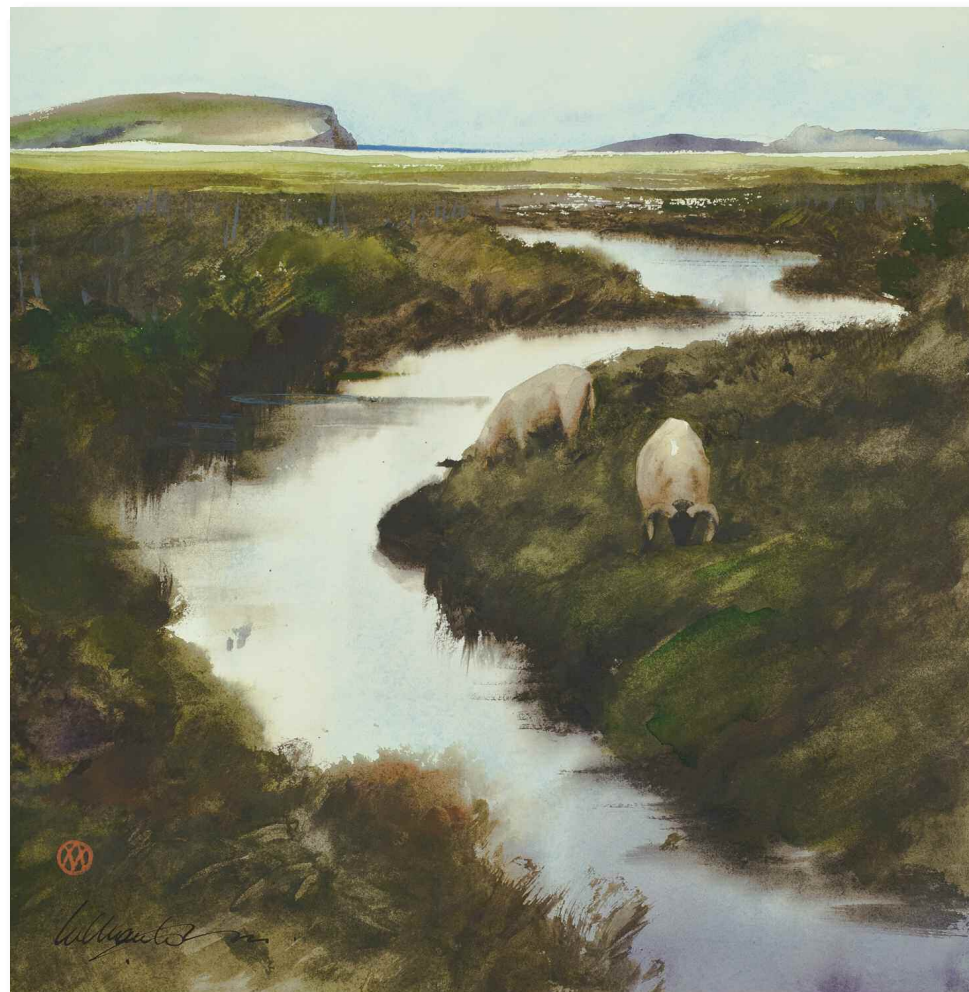
I think ultimately in some way he was really proud and me. But he had never supported any of my decisions to go into the arts while they were happening.

R&R: Were they glad to see you when you came back?

WM: They were. I think they were relieved that I had survived...

R&R: Your father passed away in 1991?

WM: Yes. He was a big personality. He threw a big shadow. Which is probably why I had to leave when I did.



R&R: Where did you go first?

WM: I went to LA to do album covers. That was not far away enough. So I moved to Colorado and it turned out that THAT was not far enough. So I left the western hemisphere!

R&R: So what has this done for you as a father?

WM: My father never listened to what mattered to me. So what did that do for me as a father? Early on I would say to my kids on Saturday morning "Ok, what do you guys want to do? We are going to have an adventure today and you are going to decide what it is." Or I would ask them along the way "what do *you* think we should



Kevin Burke lives in Portland today. Micheal O’Domhnaill – which is the Gaelic spelling – was a great Gaelic scholar, and he with Donal Lunny, started the Bothy Band. Micheal was one of the great Irish musical minds of all time, collected tons of songs from Donegal where his family was from. He grew up speaking Gaelic before he spoke English. He also lived in Portland. I had known the two of them in the Bothy Band. But they had, after the Bothy Band split up, gone off and done many albums that I did several covers for. They are all great albums to this day. (Willy created the cover

do today?” So that they knew their opinion was always valuable and respected.

R&R: That was a conscious decision by you wasn’t it?

WM: Completely. And I watched them become empowered. I watched it sink in for them. I watched them understand that they have power.

R&R: So back to Ireland. You were there for three years...

WM: During that time, I lived in Dublin, lived in a few different places, and eventually I took a house with fiddler Kevin Burke and guitarist Micheal O’Domhnaill.

for the duo’s 1979 album, *Promenade*)

R&R: Ireland and her people are obviously special to you. Have you often gone back to visit?

WM: I go back fairly regularly. But I hadn’t been back for a period of time, and it was my birthday and my wife Laura said, “What do you want to





do for your birthday?” I said, “I really want to go over and see my friends in Ireland, I really love the place.” So she said, “Ok, here’s a ticket, you are on your own.”

R&R: Bless her.

WM: Exactly! The last thing in the world she needs to do is to go to Ireland and watch paint dry. So I flew into Dublin, rented a car and drove straight across the country through Castlebar and County Mayo and onto Achill Island. I found a little house online and it turned out that it was less expensive than a hotel room. So I had my own three-bedroom stone

house and just moved in. I had the turf man show up about an hour after I got there, bringing me fuel to burn in my little fireplace. It was absolutely heaven! It had this incredible view of the ocean. It was an amazing time. Sheep grazing all around. And absolute quiet, nobody hassling me, the phone not ringing, nothing. I was able to just paint.

R&R: How long were you there this time?

WM: I was in that house for 5 days, solidly painting. And then I left, and went around to visit friends. Let’s see, I visited with my friend, Matt Molloy from the Chieftains, and the Bothy Band – a great time. Saw



Mick Hanly in Carlow. Then up to Dublin to see Donal Lunny and then Paddy Glackin, the great fiddle player, who is now retired. I saw a number of other guys who I hadn’t seen in a long time, and it made me realize that I had deep roots in Ireland and that these were the guys I grew up with. We all lived together and traveled together for three years and barely made enough money to buy pints. Even after all this time, we have tight bonds with each other.

R&R: 40 years?

WM: Yes: Pretty close to 40 years! And I realize, those were essentially the active years of our lives, getting





WM: There is definitely a pastoral quality, but are you speaking in a broader sense, linking my paintings of Ireland with my paintings of the American West?

R&R: Yes, no matter the subject, you are able to get to the essence of what you are painting, and there is a light that comes out of it. You leave things out that are not important to the scene you are depicting.

WM: That's right, I am definitely interested in editing and simplifying. I received an email recently from a friend of mine, David Mulford, who used to be the American

married, and having kids, maybe a divorce, maybe a death – all these things have happened. Many of our friends are gone, particularly in Ireland; people live harder there than they tend to live in other places, even though it appears to be such a pastoral place.

R&R: Do you think at some level that is reflected in your choice of subjects? The paintings you did there show that pastoral calmness. There is a simplification and calmness, and a consistency of the activity depicted.

Ambassador to India. I did a show for him during his tenure in New Delhi, years ago when President Bush was to visit. It was a combination, basically a comparative show, between the buckeroos of the Great Basin and the rural farmers and herdsman in Rajasthan, India. The buckeroos rode horses and the Indians rode donkeys and camels, and where the buckeroos wore great silk neck rags, the herdsman wore colorful turbans. There is an elegance to the Rajasthanian herdsman that is just as regal to me as the buckeroos of the Great Basin. So there is a lot of synchronicity between cultures. It's one of the





things I find when I travel and hopefully a quality people see in my work. I love the diversity I find in the world, the different cultures. It all matters and, frankly, we all matter. I'm not somebody that has one over-arching focus in my work but I keep returning to that thread.

R&R: For all the traveling you have done, that thread is really the commonality of the human experience. And, not to mention, the fact that everywhere you go, there's a gorgeous sunset you can go out

and walk into, or there's a pastoral field with stock that you can visually participate in. If music is a universal language, then paintings such as what you do, can also travel and help equate the human experience.

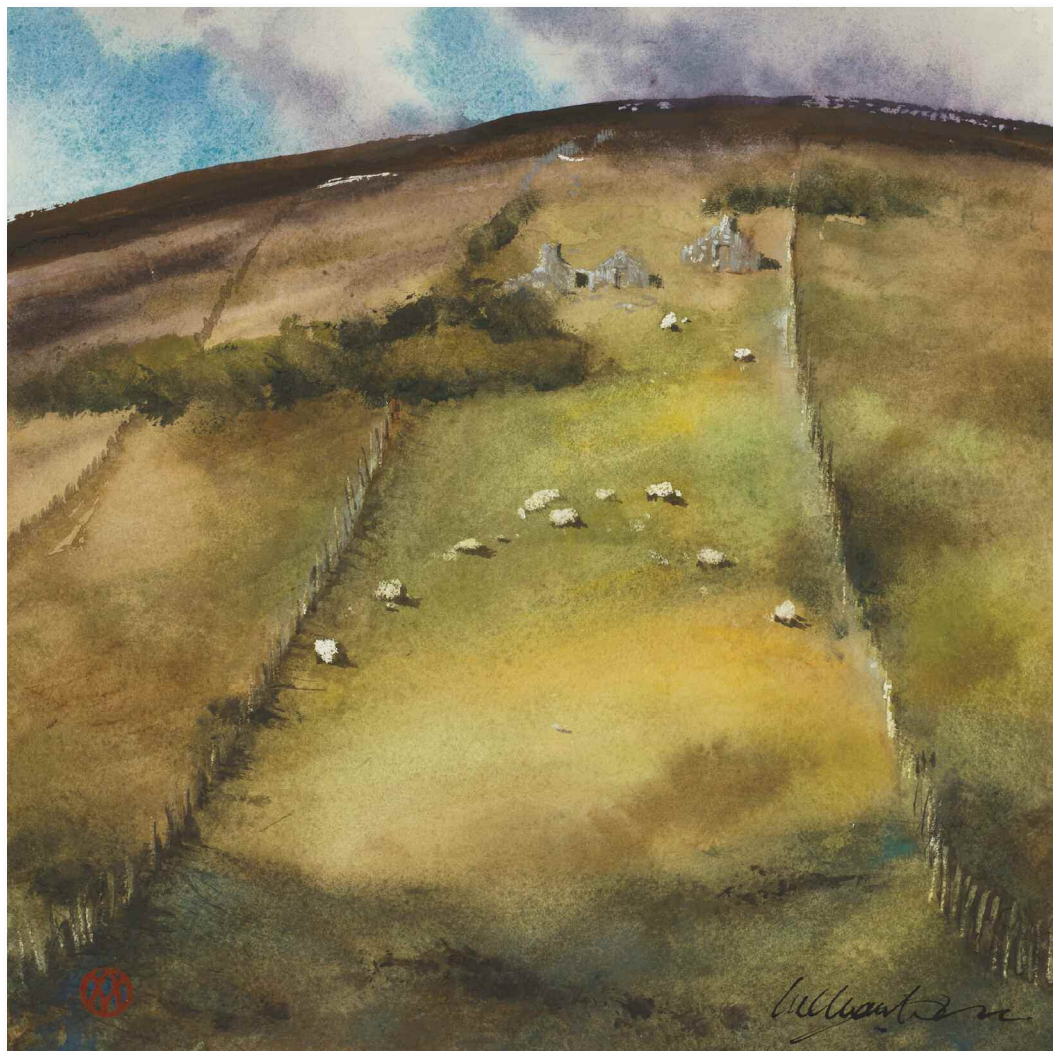
WM: Exactly. No matter where I go, I find, particularly with rural people, they are interested in their families' and their animals' well being – all getting a good meal and thriving, growing into the next generation. That's universal, whether its India, or Ireland, or Nevada. It's an instinctive way of living.



R&R: What's next for you?

WM: I do what I do and I do what I can. I don't necessarily change. I like the idea that this time right now is a smooth patch of life's water and enjoying each adventure. I have the most amazing wife and we have so much fun together. We have great kids – whatever it is we do together turns out to be fun and just wonderful.





Talking Willy Matthews with Hans Teensma

In the rapidly changing world of graphic design there are names that stand out as influential masters. One of those few and far between types is Hans Teensma. Hans, like many of the folks who

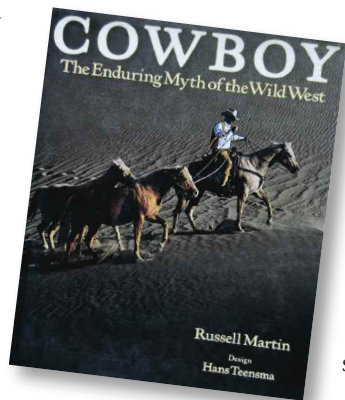
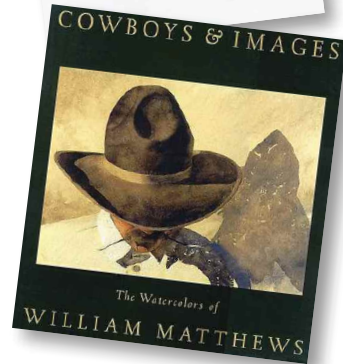
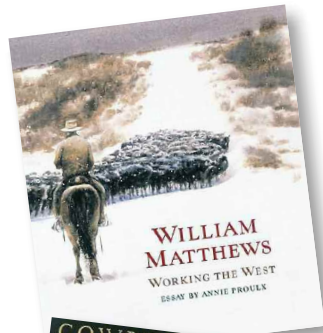
work on this publication, comes from way back in the PC era – meaning “pre-computer” – in a time of tissue layouts, roller waxers and rubilith. Teensma is a master typographer – one of a disappearing

species who understands the innate elegance of type. Even if his name were not familiar, it would be hard to believe that readers of enthusiast magazines have not been touched by his work. He was an art director/



designer helping to create the look of *Outside* magazine and for the groundbreaking *Rocky Mountain Magazine* – a publication that greatly influenced the design of this journal. When he is not designing books – including both of William Matthews’ books, *Cowboys & Images* and *Working The West*, he is the art director for the environmental journal, *Orion*.

“The Matthews/Teensma meeting came in 1981,” he told me from his company Impress’ offices in Massachusetts. “I guess it was around ’81 when we met,” he indicated, “or maybe just before that, but we had a common approach in design, especially for classical typography. We were both in Colorado and we ended up sharing an office together on Blake Street in Denver. It turned out to be a great idea as I had just been approached by the publishing house of Stewart, Tabori & Chang to do my first book, a 400 page look at the American Cowboy.” (*Cowboy: The Enduring Myth of the Wild West* was



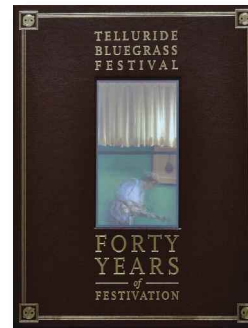
written by Russell Martin, with Teensma’s design and is considered a classic of the genre)

Teensma spent four years in Denver, loving every second of it. “I was sucking it all up. They called me the Dutch Cowboy as I emigrated

from Holland to California at the age of nine. I had an affinity for everything cowboy, I just loved it. So with the book with Russell Martin – who at the time was writing for *Rocky Mountain Magazine* – we became fast friends. Willy was not involved in the cowboy book but he watched me put the whole thing together, with thumbnails covering the walls of our studio. Willy did, however, have the opportunity to

meet many of the contributing photographers as they came through the office – John Running, Kurt Markus, Jay Dusard, and Bill Allard were just some who stopped by. For both of

us, it was an amazing and fortuitous period. I watched him do the very first Bluegrass poster for the ’83 Telluride Bluegrass Festival. I think it ran in ’84. But the new book we just did on the Festival’s history shows all 20 of his posters, it’s just a delight.” (The book, *Telluride Bluegrass Festival: Forty Years of Festivation*, is a glorious limited edition volume, published by Planet Bluegrass.)



“That project was wonderful,” Teensma continued, “each page is a visual treat. Back then in that little

second floor office, his painting was becoming amazing. You could see his fascination with the land, and the real people that worked on it. Willy sees the essence of what matters. He sees the beauty in things that are ordinary, a quality he shares with the Dutch masters. Being a Dutchman, I am a fan. Those paintings were the entertainment of the era. People would just sit and stare at the art and dream about what the artist had revealed to the viewer. One could get lost in it. Willy’s work is like that, he gives us the truth and the beauty he sees.”

