



The Lion Still Rules The Barranca

“South Coast” is one of the West’s most performed songs. Here begins a series of articles that tell the back-stories of some of our listeners’ favorite western tunes.

By William Reynolds

Great songs of the west, the ones that travel through generations, tell stories with timeless appeal. They are “story-songs” that carry the listener to a place where time stands still. Songs like “Strawberry Roan,” “El Paso,” “Tying Knots in The Devil’s Tail,” “Claude Dallas” and “The Sky Above, The Mud Below” are all memorable tales that relate an event or a series of events through words and music that lock a story’s images in an enduring depiction. Over the years, with different performers and through different eras, versions and tempos vary and evolve – but the stories told maintain their intent, and continue through the years to captivate listeners. One such song, performed by such diverse artists as The Kingston Trio, Arlo Guthrie and Tom Russell is, “South Coast.”

Like many of the west’s great stories and songs, it started out as poem. Originally titled, “The Coast Ballad,” it was written in 1926 by Lillian Bos Ross (1889 – 1960) after a walking trip she had taken with her husband, Berkeley-trained, sculptor/artist, Harry Dick Ross, through the Big Sur country on the central California coast. They wanted to see – what was at the time – the blank stretch on a map that lay between San Simeon and Monterey. It was a trip that would inspire Ross to write a poem about a young *vaquero*, the son of a Spanish Don, who, during one of his weekly trips to the little town of Jolon, near his ranch, wins a wife in a card game.

Legend has it that during their walk through Big Sur, the Ross’s came upon the remains of a house in a

remote area of the coastal mountains. In what was left of the structure they found a stone fireplace with the words “Juan Jaro de Castro” carved on the rotting mantelpiece and what was left of a child’s cradle. The place haunted Ross and helped further inspire her story. The name on the fireplace would become “Lonjano de Castro, who happened to be the “son of Spanish grandee,” and she would locate the story near the town of Jolon – a small enclave to the south near the Mission San Antonio de Padua – where the poem’s main character rides “forty miles every Friday.” She would place his little homestead about 60 miles south of Monterey, somewhere in the Santa Lucia Mountains, in the area where Ross and her husband found the old house remains. It was an area rich with the culture of the Spanish and from the old Mission era that had lasted in California from the 1760s to the late 1820s. It was a place, after Mexico declared its independence from Spain and established a program of Land Grants in then



Lillian Bos Ross (1889 – 1960) author and poet. Her friends knew her as Shanagolden. Photo by Johan Hagemeyer, July 9, 1942



Harry Dick Ross, husband of Lillian Bos Ross. He was a UC Berkeley trained sculptor and wood carver and close friend of writer Henry Miller. Photo by Johan Hagemeyer, 1940

New Spain’s *Alta* (“upper”) California, which was home to the glorious, yet short-lived time of the *Ranchos*. A time when a *vaquero* son might receive land from a Spanish father – as de Castro did in Ross’s story.

The poem, and the country that inspired it, ultimately became the basis for a novel by Lillian Bos Ross in 1941, *The Stranger*. (It was later titled, *The Stranger in Big Sur* and was made into a film in the 1960s called *Zandy’s Bride*.) The same year she finished the novel, Bos Ross copyrighted the words of her original 1926 poem as a song with musician Sam Eskin, who created the melody. The song version was titled, “The Ballad of



photo by William Reynolds

Jolon, California. The town of Jolon acquired its name due to its proximity to the ancient Indian village site of Holamna. Its first building, an adobe, was built in 1849. It lay on the old El Camino Real, a main trail to the California gold fields and over the years became a major stage stop, inn and center of a thriving little community. After the railroad arrived in 1886, traffic followed the railroad and the town went through various owners including William Randolph Hearst, who's famous Hearst Castle lay just over the Santa Lucia Mountains to the south. The U.S. Army purchased the property in 1940 and the old adobe was used as a barracks. Today this building is all that remains of an important part of the story of the movement West

the South Coast," later shortened to simply "South Coast." Ultimately, the songs authors would be listed as Lillian Bos Ross, Sam Eskin, with Richard Dehr and Frank Miller. Miller and Dehr created the song's arrangement of Eskin's melody that we hear today. According to former actress and author of the authoritative book on the West, *Ten Thousand God Damn Cattle: A History of the American Cowboy in Song, Story and Verse*, writer Katie Lee, the melody for the song took some interesting turns getting done. "For years before a melody was actually written for the song, folks used to try and sing it to an existing melody. They used "Goodnight Irene," if you can

imagine," she wrote. "I was grateful to Richard Dehr for 'uncovering' the song as Sam Eskin wrote it, as it is far and away one of the greatest folk melodies ever to come along." Additionally, Ms. Lee notes in her book that the original song contained 16 verses and choruses, but most contemporary renditions do not include all of them. Interestingly, many of the later renditions have de Castro and his newly won bride heading home to the *south*. In the original version, Ross has them heading *north* from Jolon, the appropriate direction. Another interesting evolution is that many interpretations finish the song without the realization that the cradle meant something immanent – that when de Castro's wife was killed in the



Mission San Antonio De Padua, the third of the California Missions founded by Fr. Junipero Serra. It is an active parish today and serves the area, including Jolon, a few miles away. Etching by Edward Borein



photo by William Reynolds

horse wreck – he not only lost his wife but the child she was carrying, as Ross' original, last lines tell of his pain:

*But the cradle and my heart are empty,
I never can go there again.*

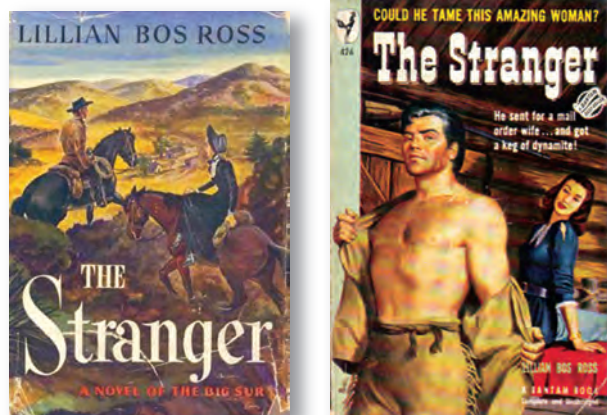
The original chorus of the song did not use the words, "South Coast," but rather "Monterey Coast," repeating in the first line, "But the Monterey Coast's a wild coast and lonely." Ross changed the location to South Coast as well as allowing the editing of some of the original sixteen verses to create the contemporary song's version. Over the years, performers have added their own stylistic touches to the song including the Kingston Trio, Bud & Travis, Arlo Guthrie, Tom Russell, and Dave Stamey among others. Probably the most renowned interpreter of "South Coast" is Ramblin' Jack Elliott. His

unique rendition and guitar work add a chilling quality to the story of poor Lonjano. Ramblin' Jack performed the song in Bob Dylan's 1975 film, *Renaldo and Clara*, actually taking de Castro's name for his own character. Years later Elliott won a Grammy for the album *South Coast* in 1996. As the story goes, he first heard the song in the early fifties, sung by a friend on the front porch of a house in North Carolina during a lightening and thunderstorm.



1974 film version of the book titled Zandy's Bride, after the character Zande Allan. The film starred Gene Hackman and Liv Ullman

Today, Range Radio plays "South Coast" as it continues to be sung and interpreted by a variety of artists who carry on its sense of mystery, hope and desperation, keeping the legacy of Lillian Bos Ross' timeless poem about a wondrous time in the West alive, written along a well worn trail, somewhere south of Monterey. A place where "the lion still rules the barranca, and a man there is always alone."



The Stranger: A Novel of the Big Sur. First Edition of the book inspired by Bos Ross's poem. A later paperback version with a more "popular-style" cover. The book title was changed to *Stranger in Big Sur*.

Courtesy the author



South Coast

By Lillian Bos Ross, Sam Eskin, Richard Dehr and Frank Miller
 (This shows 14 of the 16 original verses and is the most performed version of the song.)

My name is Lonjano de Castro
 My father was a Spanish grandee
 But I won my wife in a card game
 To hell with those lords o'er the sea

In my youth I had a Monterey homestead,
 Creeks, valleys and mountains all mine;
 Where I built me a snug little shanty
 And I roofed it and floored it with pine.

I had a bronco, a buckskin –
 Like a bird he flew over the trail;
 I rode him out forty miles every Friday
 Just to get me some grub and my mail.

CHORUS:
 Well the South Coast is wild coast and lonely
 You might win in a game at Jolon
 But a lion still rules the barranca
 And a man there is always alone

I sat in a card game at Jolon
 I played there with a half-breed named Juan
 And after I'd won his money
 He said, "Your homestead 'gainst my daughter Dawn."

I turned up the ace...I had won her
 My heart, which was down in my feet,
 Jumped up to my throat in a hurry –
 Like a young summer's day she was sweet.

He opened the door to the kitchen;
 He called the girl out with a curse
 "Take her, God damn her, you've won her,
 She's yours now for better or worse!"

Her arms had to tighten around me
 As we rode up the hills from the south
 Not a word did I hear from her that day,
 Nor a kiss from her pretty young mouth.

(Chorus)

We got to the cabin at twilight,
 The stars twinkled over the coast.
 She soon loved the orchard and the valley,
 But I knew that she loved me the most.

That was a gay happy winter;
 I carved on a cradle of pine
 By the fire in that snug little shanty
 And I sang with that gay wife of mine.

But then I got hurt in a landslide,
 Crushed hip and twice broken bone;
 She saddled up Buck like lightning
 And rode out through the night to Jolon.

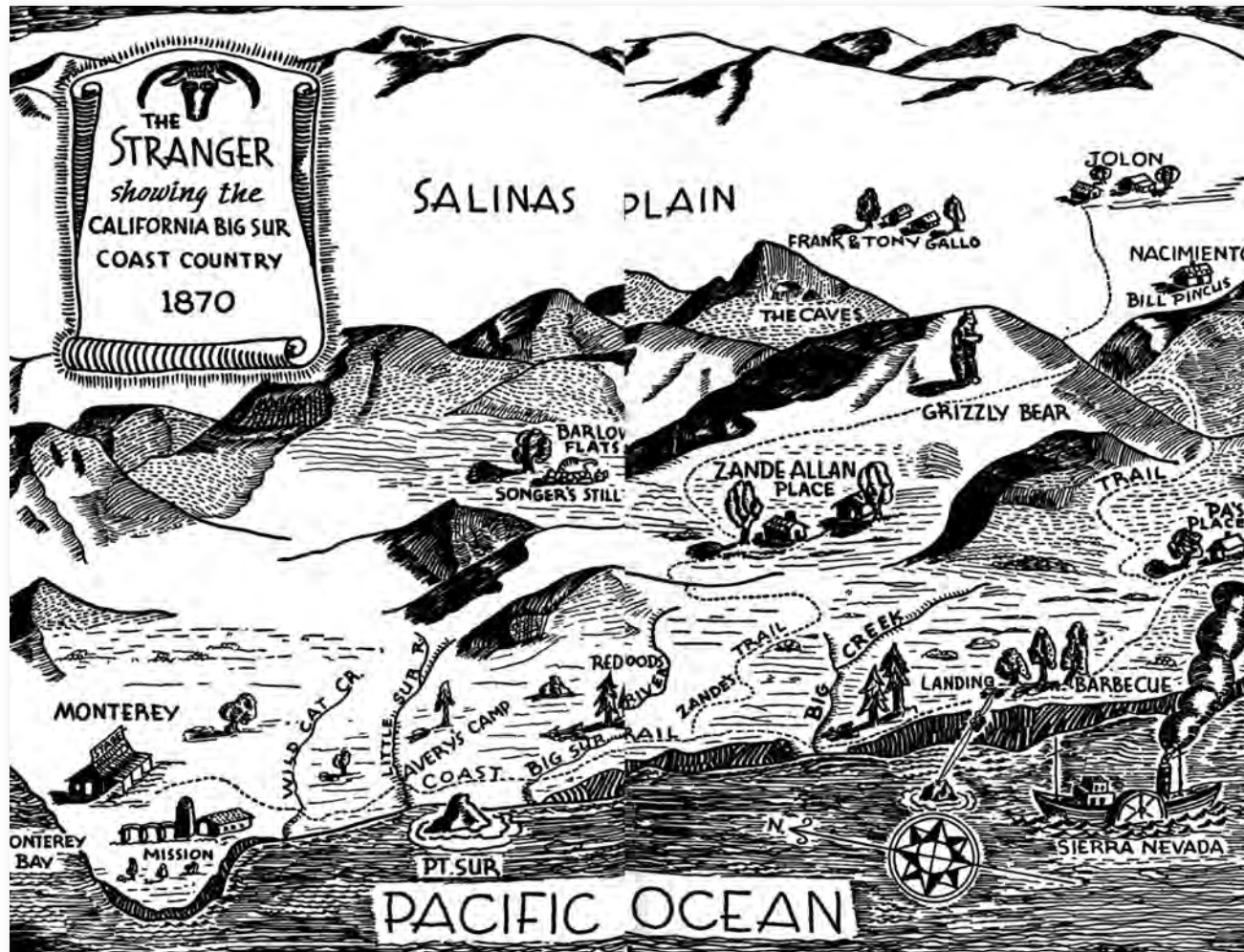
(Chorus)

The lion screamed in the barranca;
 Buck bolted and he fell on a slide.
 My young wife lay dead in the moonlight
 My heart died that night with my bride.

They buried her out in the orchard.
 They carried me down to Jolon.
 I've lost my chiquita, my nino;
 I'm an old broken man, all alone.

The cabin still stands on the hillside,
 It's doors open to the wind,
 But the cradle and my heart are empty –
 I can never go there again.

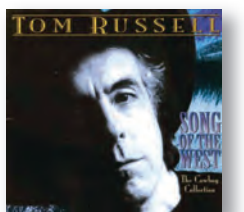
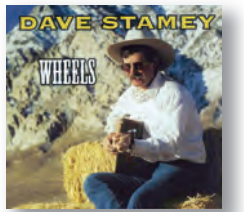
(Chorus)



Map of the Salinas Plain from the opening spread of Stranger in Big Sur gives a sense of the country traveled in the song



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Many artists have performed "South Coast" over the years. Each giving it their own touch, but Ramblin' Jack Elliott's unique version helped earn his album, South Coast, a Grammy in 1996