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The Bronze Buckaroo: Herbert Jeffries

'Y'all know that Big Joe Turner used to sing here,
And Herbert Jeffries, that brownskin buckaroo,
Back when Harlem rode the range —
And if you think that might sound strange,
Don't bite off more than you're prepared to chew.'

— From 'The La Joya Hotel'

by M.H. PRICE & GREG JACKSON

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South-by-Southwestern heritage is where you find it. And for a few crucial years, there, the off-Hollywood Western underground found an unexpected font of horse-opera thrills and sagebrush sensationalism in a star player who already had claimed a greater stake in show business as a jazz singer.

The phenomenon came and went a long time ago, but it yielded a handful of movies that pack a greater influence nowadays than when they were first shown during 1937-39.

These are the black-ensemble Westerns of Herbert Jeffries. Their staying power has been helped along by Jeffries' longevity as a working entertainer: at the age of 93 at this writing in 2005, Jeffries remains productive.

Fort Worth, where Jeffries often had entertained as a Swing Era touring artist, witnessed both aspects of the singer's career in 2003, when that oil-and-cattle Burg's Cowboys Of Color Museum & Hall of Fame

inducted Jeffries as a figure of lasting significance. The festivities included a showing of three motion pictures representing the bulk of Herb Jeffries' shoot-'em-up series, followed by a concert at Texas Wesleyan University with the campus' lab band. Here, Jeffries' mellow baritone proved as precise and confident as when he had been a headliner with the orchestras of Earl 'Fatha' Hines and Duke Ellington — its timbre darkened in a way reminiscent of the later stages of Frank Sinatra's singing voice. 'Sepia Sinatra', as T-Bone Walker had termed the phenomenon — but of course Sinatra can only have envied such artists' stronger basis in the blues.

Jeffries attended the screening of *The Bronze Buckaroo*, *Harlem Rides The Range* and *Two-Gun Man From Harlem*, prefacing each picture with anecdotes that proved as spellbinding to a packed house as the films themselves. A tall, imposing presence of genial good humor and soft-spoken authority, Jeffries seemed to recall the moviemaking experience with fond immediacy.

'And why not?' Jeffries asked, fielding a question as to why he should regard such an isolated cul-de-sac of his professional pathway with such philosophical clarity. 'We were breaking some ground, here, blazing some trails — first black-cowboy hero in the talking pictures, don't you know?

'Not to say the first black-cowboy heroic business in the movies,' he continued, 'cause there'd already been some little ol' black-ensemble Westerns, back during the silent-picture days.¹ But we were the first in the talkies.

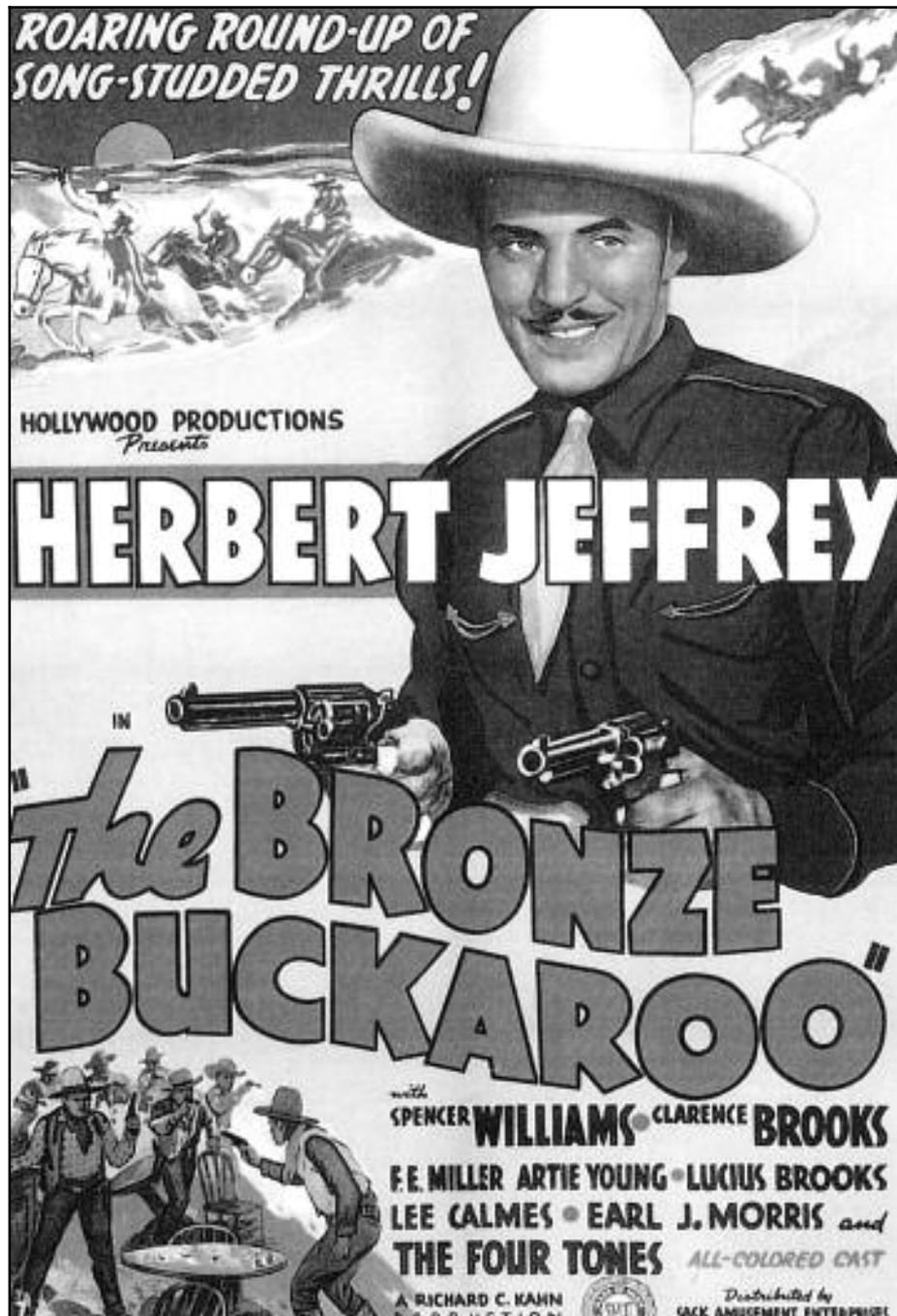
'And I suspect that these pictures of ours proved as proportionately influential, in their small way, as the more extensive output of the bigger-name Westerns starring Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, to name some contemporaries. I became assured that we'd left a lasting mark — years after the fact, mind you — during the 1960s, when Gene Autry made it a point to include some of my Bronze Buckaroo memorabilia in his Western Heritage Museum in [Los Angeles'] Griffith Park.

'Certainly, we were all cut from the same template of Western-movie formulas, the stock-in-trade plots about land-grabbing schemes and old rivalries, and the good-guy/bad-guy standoffs, and of course the "comical sidekick" business.

'And speaking of comical sidekicks, I count it 'specially a coup that my pal Mantan Moreland got to play some backup in my Western series, and also alongside Tex Ritter in his series, at around the same time in history.' (Moreland would receive a *Cowboys Of Color* Hall of Fame memorial the following year.)

Herb Jeffries is more than a survivor of many lapsed phases of

¹ Such an early-day black-cowboy movie is 1921's *The Crimson Skull*, a made-in-Oklahoma 'epic of wild life and smoking revolvers', as its advertising materials proclaimed, featuring the real-world rodeo champion and bull wrangler Bill Pickett. Pickett also starred in *The Bull-Dogger*, that same year.



American show business. At the start of this new century, Jeffries has remained a subtly emphatic vocalist pursuing an active recording career, a keen-eyed and philosophical observer of the pop-cultural treadmill, and a

show-biz insider with both a fondness for earlier times — and better things to do than dwell upon bygones. Except as a basis for constructive reflection, that is.

Jeffries, of Palm Desert, California, wouldn't trade for his tenure as low-rent Hollywood's Bronze Buckaroo — the original Two-Gun Man from Harlem, a more benevolent Stagger Lee of the Borderlands, and proud of it. Here was a hero-on-horseback who rode as tall in the saddle as Gene Autry and John Wayne, and who in the process of fostering a singing-cowboy fantasy also served crucial notice about some greater truths of frontier life that had faded from popular awareness.

For the Anglo-Saxons were hardly the only settlers of the Western frontier, and the cowboys of color — to coin a phrase — played many a leading role in the range-busting sector (outmoded stereotypes of categorical subservience notwithstanding) as ranch-hands, entrepreneurs and cavalymen. As far as pre-fashionable diversity goes, Jeffries' brand of heroism proved consistent with the early-day renown of the Yiddish Broncho Billy Anderson, the movies' first cowboy star-bar-none; and of the Cisco Kid, a Mexican Robin Hood who has been impersonated by both Anglicized and Latinate actors.

The work itself was the reward, as Jeffries often has said. But Jeffries also experienced the benevolent side-effects of watching his films cross over — as early as 1937 — from their intended berth in black-neighborhood theatres to the uptown picture palaces; of on-the-spot praise from Gene Autry, who had practically invented the cowboy-crooner subgenre that revolutionized the Hollywood Western²; and of the realization that these few films had given black kids a cowboy hero of a decisive ethnic identification. If the advertising campaigns occasionally got his professional name wrong — and some posters identify him as 'Herbert Jeffrey' — then the prominence compensated. (The films also helped to bring Jeffries to the attention of Duke Ellington.)

Fort Worth's Cowboys Of Color accolade makes an apt companion-piece to Jeffries' enshrinement in the Big Band Academy's Golden Bandstand at Studio City, California. Each honor is a fitting tribute to an acknowledged pivotal figure within the Mass Culture who shares his mentor Duke Ellington's belief that, as Jeffries puts it: 'There is only one race — the human race.'

Jeffries was born Umberto Balentino, of mingled Ethiopian, French-Canadian, Irish and Italian ancestry, on September 24, 1911 in Detroit. He became an accomplished horseman — inadvertent preparation for the movies — while spending summers at a grandfather's

² Gene Autry's breakthrough picture had been 1935's *The Phantom Empire*, a science-fiction/western musical that served to shift popular interest away from the harder-edged Frontier Gothics of Ken Maynard, Buck Jones, and a pre-stardom John Wayne. In the process, *The Phantom Empire* opened up opportunities for Texas-bred Western swing music to infiltrate the Los Angeles-based motion-picture industry. See M.H.P. and George E. Turner's *Forgotten Horrors: The Definitive Edition* (Midnight Marquee Press; 1999).

farm. He discovered his singing voice in church.

In 1933, as he tells it: 'I was working in Detroit, in this cabaret, when Louis Armstrong came in one night and heard me sing. He gave me a note to give to his friend Erskine Tate, who had a big band in Chicago.' Jeffries caught a Greyhound, Chicago-bound.

The Tate connection brought Jeffries an offer from the pianist-bandleader Earl 'Fatha' Hines. A series of touring engagements through the South with Hines gave Jeffries an idea for a movie.

'I had seen how blacks could see only white cowboys in segregated movie theatres,' Jeffries says, 'so I thought: "Why not put movies about black cowboys into those theatres? It could be good for business, and good for the kids."'

An approach to the low-budget producer William J. 'Jed' Buell (1897-1961), who tended to prize ticket-selling gimmickry over substantial production values³, clicked for both men: 'I wasn't there fifteen minutes before Mr. Buell fired off a call to Alfred Sack, his film distributor in Dallas,' Jeffries told me. 'And Al Sack said: "I'll take all of 'em you can send me.'"⁴

Jeffries had not intended to present himself as the star player — just to sell the pitch and take a hand in production. His mixed ethnicity, which had equipped him with a fair complexion and blue eyes and naturally straight hair, might have seemed seem a disqualification. So what happened?

'I won the lead by default, you might say,' Jeffries explained. 'Of supporting players, we had found plenty. But a black leading man who could ride and sing and act — that wasn't easy to come up with. Not at all. One guy, now, he might sing, but he'd be afraid of horses. One might ride all right, but he couldn't handle the other requirements. It went on and on like that. Discouraging, I mean.

'So Mr. Buell said to me: "Okay, then. So what are we going to do?" And I said: "Well now, nobody can tell whether my eyes are blue in a black-and-white movie. Just brown me up, and I'll tie my hat on so that nobody can see my hair." And as for the riding ability, well, I'd been riding since I was eight years old, so that pretty well settled it.'

His makeup, he said, 'wasn't done in any exaggerated way. They bronzed me up just enough. We weren't going for blackface caricature

³ Jed Buell prized gimmickry all right. His company also is responsible for a dwarf-ensemble Western of 1938 called *The Terror Of Tiny Town* — a proto-Munchkins fantasy of some imaginary Wild Frontier. At around this same time, Buell had formed a short-lived producing partnership with the English-born comedian Stan Laurel, who was seeking a studio-management berth apart from his star-player situation with Oliver Hardy at Hal Roach Studios. A brush with greatness for Buell, but pure-dee slumming for Laurel.

⁴ Alfred N. Sack's Dallas-based company would hit its stride during the 1940s with Spencer Williams Jr., as the producer-director-writer-star of a string of black-ensemble hits including *The Blood Of Jesus*, *Go Down Death!*, *Juke Joint* and *Dirty Gertie From Harlem, USA* — see *Forgotten Horrors 2* and *Forgotten Horrors 3*, from *Midnight Marquee Press*.



here.⁵

The short-term result was a self-contained series that went no further. But the films would have a greater long-term effect. Dorothy Dandridge's short musical showcase, 'Cow Cow Boogie' (part of the Soundies movie-jukebox series of the 1940s) combines jazz with cowboy trappings in a manner very much like the musical interludes of Jeffries' films. And Jeffries' adventures patently influenced Mario Van Peebles' black-ensemble hip-hop revisionist Western of 1993, *Posse* — to such an extent that Van Peebles inserted excerpts from Jeffries' pictures into the closing-credits sequence of *Posse*.

And, in a larger sense, Jeffries had suggested possibilities for star-casting without heed for any stifling color bars.

'Today, we have actors such as Denzel Washington, who can take on any role that suits them,' says Jeffries, 'regardless of whether a role requires a particular ethnicity.' (The outlook here is a bit rose-colored, for ethnic stereotyping persists alongside color-specific casting as a rule. It seems significant, however, that Jonathan Demme's 2004 remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* features Denzel Washington in a leading role that Frank Sinatra had occupied in John Frankenheimer's 1962 original.)



⁵ Herb Jeffries recalled here the particulars of his strategic darkening for the movie cameras: 'Max Factor's Egyptian No. 24 — that's what did the trick. Same makeup base that was used later to turn Chuck [Charlton] Heston into that Mexican fellow he played in [1958's] *Touch Of Evil*. A very versatile makeup formula.'



Herbert Jeffries, 1995.

Jeffries' cowboy-movie backup ensemble included the comedy team of Flournoy E. Miller and Mantan Moreland. Moreland had been a prominent figure on black Texas' long-gone jazz-and-comedy nightclub scene. Spencer Williams Jr., graces Jeffries' series as a prominent bad guy. Williams would spend the 1940s in Dallas and Fort Worth as a writer-director with Al Sack's movie company before landing the role of Andy Brown on the network teleseries, *Amos'n'Andy*.

Harlem On The Prairie, *Two-Gun Man From Harlem*, *The Bronze Buckaroo* and *Harlem Rides The Range* pointed toward a longer-running series, but a fifth such oat-opera was abandoned in pre-production as Jeffries' singing ambitions claimed priority.

In 1939, Jeffries visited a Detroit nightclub as a paying customer



to hear Duke Ellington and his Orchestra.

'I was standing in front of the bandstand, in that full Western-movie get-up, a walking advertisement for my movies,' Jeffries recalled. 'Duke spotted me and suddenly said to the audience: "Well, looky here: if it isn't the Bronze Buckaroo in the flesh!" Then to me he called: "Why don't you come up and sing a few songs, Herbert?"

"That was surprise enough, but then Duke called me backstage and asked: "So what are your plans looking like?" I said, well, I guessed I'd go back to Hollywood and make some more of those cowboy movies. And Duke grinned and said: "That's too bad, 'cause I was going to offer you a job." I said, well, then, I guessed it was time for me to change my plans.'

Jeffries joined Ellington's orchestra at a peak of its game, scoring a hit with 'You, You, Darlin'' and following through with 'Flamingo', which would rack up sales of more than fourteen million copies over the long term. Jeffries left Ellington in 1942 to join the Armed Forces Radio Services, recording programs onto 16-inch transcription disks (expressly for military-base broadcast to the wartime troops) and touring military installations with concert-package ensembles, including the boisterous announcer Ernie 'Bubbles' Whitman and Jeffries' movie-biz cohort Mantan Moreland.⁶ Jeffries' postwar career ranged from record-label management to acting assignments and nightclub work, and a lengthy stint as a club owner in Paris.

During the 1980s, Jeffries and Frank Sinatra met. The crooner asked Jeffries — four years older than Sinatra — how he managed to stay so robust and youthful-looking. Jeffries answered in golfing lingo, to which both he and Sinatra could relate:

'I've been working on the back nine,' Jeffries told Sinatra. Or so Jeffries recalls the encounter. Makes for a good anecdote, anyhow.⁷

From an interview originally published in the May 2, 2003 issue of *The Business Press* of Fort Worth

⁶ Numerous compact-disk compilations from the Armed Forces Radio Services series have been issued since the Nineties, generally under the blanket-title of *Best Of AFRS Jubilee*.

⁷ The 'back nine', as in the last nine holes (10th through 18th) of an 18-hole golf course. The playing is more challenging out there.