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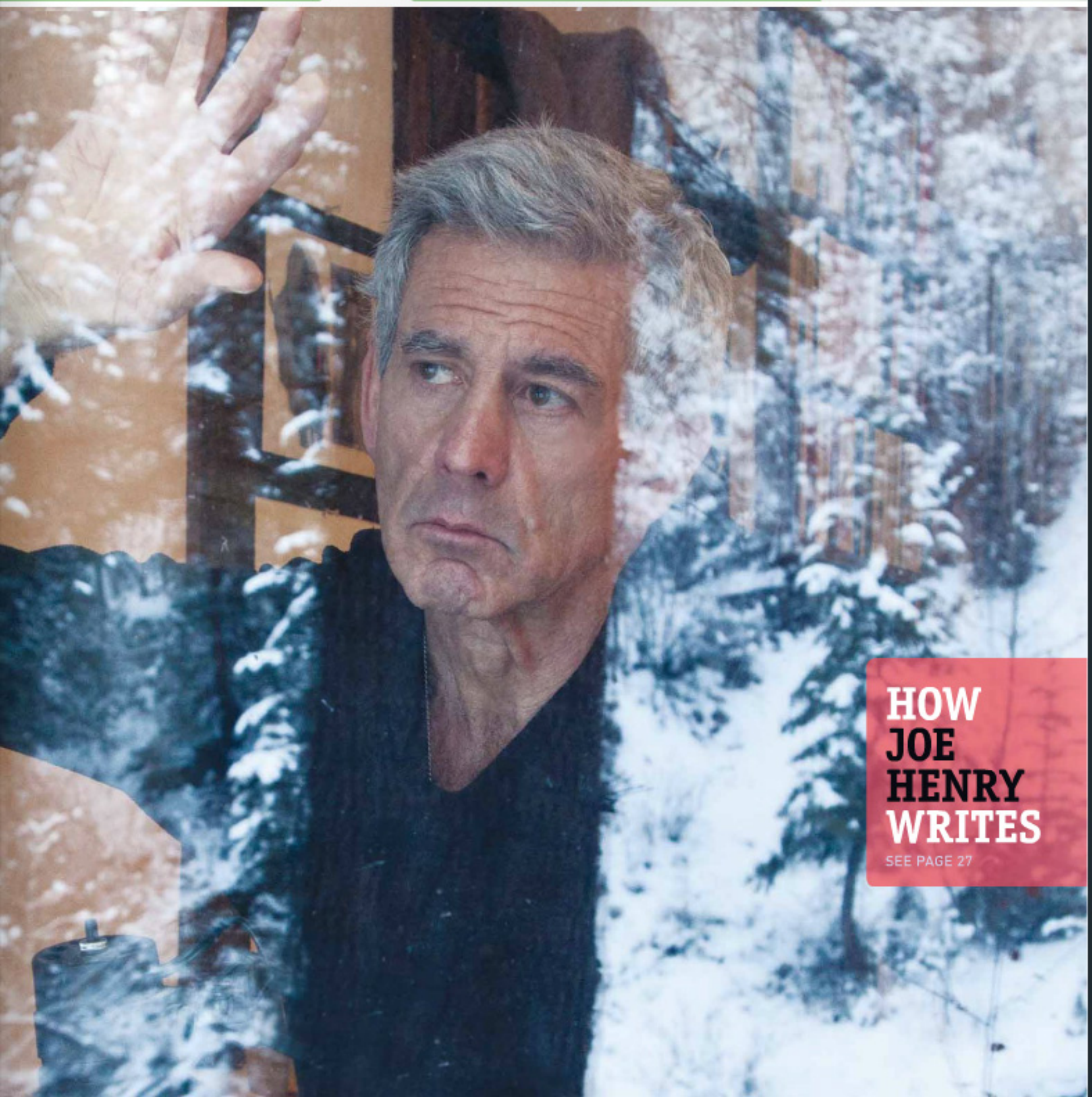

HOW JOE HENRY WRITES

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BUSY HANDS, INFINITE MIND

ROARING FORK WRITER JOE HENRY BREAKS OUT OF HIS "BOX" TO EXPLAIN HIS CREATIVE PROCESS

by HILARY STUNDA

THE ONLY TIME I LEAVE HOME IS IN PURSUIT OF MELODY. — JOE HENRY

PHOTO BY JIM PAUSSA/ WWW.PAUSSA.COM

I ENTERED the small cabin near Aspen, past a worn saddle covered with an old saddle-blanket, a thin shag carpet, and simple wood-paneled walls lined with filled book shelves.

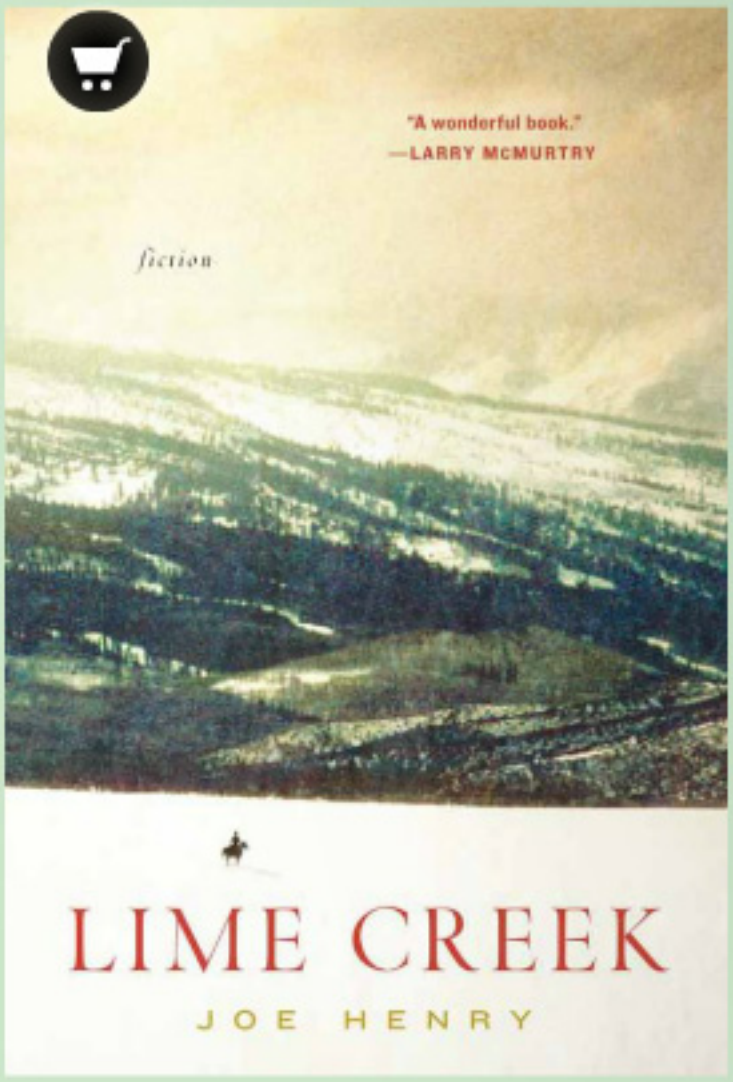
We sat before an expansive window that framed snow-covered branches and the steel-bluegrey river ten feet away.

For the literary ingenue, this would be the chosen place to invoke the muses: an image of a young writer eagerly awaiting epiphany.

But for novelist Joe Henry, it could be a distraction. It's why half the window is boarded and why he writes in a windowless, closet-sized room, the width of a confessional.

Inside what he calls, "The Box," Henry wrote his first novella about a ranching family in Wyoming. Well-known in the music industry as a songwriter for performers such as John Denver, Frank Sinatra and Garth Brooks, "Lime Creek" has a visceral and lyrical cadence that takes the reader on a journey of the heart. It is a story about the Davis family, the relationship between a father and sons, and the bond between brothers bound by ranching and dictated by nature. Simple and profound, Henry explores the human soul through characters whose hard and honest lives are never far from the animals around them and the earth on which they stand.

PHOTO BY JIM PAUSSA/ WWW.PAUSSA.COM



NEED TO KNOW

Lime Creek
By Joe Henry
Random House, copyright 2011
Fiction, paperback
Available at local bookstores and for download to e-readers.

THE MIND KNOWS INFINITE POSSIBILITIES, BUT TO ME IT SEEMS AS IF ITS CHIEF JOB IS TO INVENT AS MANY ESCAPES AS POSSIBLE FROM THE HEART. — JOE HENRY

Hilary Stunda:
I went back to revisit "Lime Creek" last night and was struck by that last scene — Luke and Lefty. That infinitesimal moment when Luke makes his transition. He's no longer a boy. He's crying because he knows, and yet it can't be known. It's everything. It's that experience that changes your life forever. Archetypal.

Joe Henry: I think so too. There are no incidences in the book that are made up. That was a real hard night. I put myself back into that place. I'm completely there again. My hands move and I'm just writing what I'm feeling and seeing.

Stunda: **What's the ritual that taps you back in?**

Henry: My life is completely turned around. I write all night. I do everything that will put me in that place where there's no escape —except through the blank page of paper. My writing space is about as big as a closet. That's where I spend all night, seven nights a week. Originally there was a window there that I boarded up.

Did you ever see the film, "Cool Hand Luke"? Solitary confinement in "Cool Hand Luke" is called "The Box." This is The Box. My solitary confinement.

Stunda: **Going into this box and fighting it out. I've read about your boxing and ice-hockey days; now, the catharsis of writing.**

Henry: That's how it all started. I could feel I was probably going to get into a fight this one night and I was sitting at my desk. I had three hours before I had to go to the rink and so I just started writing without a thought as to what I was doing. I didn't stop for a couple of hours. And when I finished, I was as worn out as if I had just been in a fight.

Stunda: **Looking back over the years, has it tempered you?**

Henry: My nature is pretty much an animal's nature. My whole reality is today. I've never really looked back and thought, what if?

Stunda: **That's how it should be for all of us — no "shoulds".**

Henry: That's how every animal except the two-leggeds lives. Every animal other than man only has right now. And that's all I've ever had.

Stunda: **Can you tell me why you spent so many years doing hard labor?**

Henry: I never had a family or somebody to call for help, so everything I did was pretty much to survive. I started working heavy-construction when I was in high school. Jack-hammer. Pick-and-shovel. Punching cattle, underground mines, ocean-going freighters. For over twenty years, my reality was getting up real early in the morning and writing for a couple of hours and then going to work. I just assumed that's how it would be, and that was okay.

Stunda: **When was the moment you didn't have to do those jobs?**

Henry: It started with John [Denver]. We wrote the first song that he recorded. In Los Angeles. I was going back to Wyoming and he said, "Come to Aspen and we'll keep writing together." I'd never heard of Aspen. I told him, "I have to get back to the mountains. Are there any mountains there?" He laughed.

Stunda: **I've been thinking about your style. The cadence of your work. The lack of punctuation. I really like that freedom. It's visceral. Do you think your style has radically changed since you first started writing?**

Henry: I'd never really revised. My first rule is from Gertrude Stein, who said, "Don't get it right, get it written." When it was time to show something to publishers, I had to change over from the raw creation to making what I'd done as clean as I could get it.

Stunda: **Was it tough?**

Henry: It's just a different space. I remember this story about Michelangelo taking one of his patrons, who was commissioning him to do a statue, into his studio. And the patron expecting to see what he's paying him to do. But there's just this huge block of granite. Michelangelo says, "It's in there. I just have to find it." Well, I've created this big block of granite for myself. I still have a lot of work to do.

BOOK COVER COURTESY RANDOM HOUSE

Stunda: **How did "Lime Creek" evolve?**

Henry: In the course of writing, whenever I came across something that seemed like it was it's own little thing, I would pull it out with the thought that if I ever had the chance to show someone what I was doing, I'd have some excerpts. So when I finished, I had what seemed like two groupings. The first one became "Lime Creek". Last night, actually, was the first time in four years that I went back to page one of the whole thing, because for the past two or three years I've just been revising, endlessly. And then, this year, I've been revising what I hope is going to be the next thing.

Stunda: **What's it like to go back and read the first page?**

Henry: I was blown away. There's hardly any punctuation or capitalization or paragraphing. It'll be interesting to see where it'll lead me because I love what is in there, but I'm sure they won't let it be.

Stunda: **You mean stylistically?**

Henry: Yeah. It's not really style. I've never really written with the thought of where it's going to go. My whole writing life has just been to unload my soul.

Stunda: **I think that's why the style works. It's in keeping with the integrity of that offering — of your soul. It would be strange to inflict any constraint upon the rhythm.**

Henry: Through my formal education, I have a foundation in grammar and composition, but then, as an artist, you go to where you need to go to express your vision. That's what I do. I hadn't used punctuation in twenty years. I was wondering, is it still there? As an experiment, I started to revise the first thing with perfect, flawless punctuation to see what it looked like.

Stunda: **What happened?**

Henry: When I finished, I hated it. So I evolved a compromise between that and my original stuff that doesn't have any punctuation at all; hardly any paragraphs. It just keeps going.

Stunda: **"Lime Creek" cuts through all the B.S.**

Henry: I've always thought that the essence of a human being lives somewhere between the head and the heart. Between thinking and feeling. In Western culture, that's the dichotomy between classicism and romanticism. Classicism is the head; romanticism is the heart. The mind is limitless. It never stops. The mind knows infinite possibilities, but to me it seems as if its chief job is to invent as many escapes as possible from the heart. Which, I believe, is the only truth. The head can lie. It can tell the truth. It can invent anything. It can even invent devices that seem to be so all-consuming, so diverting that people finally get to run away from themselves, escape the heart, forever. Or so they think. But the heart is the rock. The heart is the truth.

Stunda: **Does inspiration for a song differ from what inspires the novel?**

Henry: It all comes from the same place. As a lyricist, I never wrote anything that I didn't feel I wanted to talk about. I have as big a history of what I've turned down as what I've done.

PHOTO BY JIM PAUSSA/ WWW.PAUSSA.COM

Stunda: **Your winters are reclusive; summers you write songs, collaborating. Are there certain people who you feel safe to create with?**

Henry: The only time I leave home is in pursuit of melody. I used to have that with John Denver. I'll get with a musician or a composer to see what comes out. I'm waiting to hear that little thing that perks up my ears. When that happens, I start hearing words. Then I'm off and running.

Stunda: **Call it a highly developed intuition — tapping into others' creativity and whether you're going to jive with it or not.**

Henry: With John Denver, I would write a lyric and he would immediately start hearing music. Almost everything that he and I did was written that way. Our psyches were close enough so that if he wanted to say something but didn't know how, I would be able to express it for him.

A lot of our songs started with him saying that he always wanted to write a song about something, and as soon as he said what that was, my mind would already be writing the words. When I first came here, one night he said, "I've always wanted to write a song about the wind." I said, "Done. Just go to bed." He had a little typewriter for me up in his loft where I was staying. The words came out in about 20 minutes. I typed it up. I still have the little piece of paper with those words on it. There are six or seven words crossed out. The next morning we're having breakfast and I put this piece of paper in front of him called, "Windsong". He glanced at it and pushed it aside. We were putting in his garden at the time and I'm thinking, "I can't believe he doesn't like something." Afterward, we're in the kitchen and he says to Annie, "Read this. Joe wrote this last night." He turned and grabbed my shoulder and said, "It really pisses me off!" I say, "What?" And he says, "I always wanted to write that."

We laughed and he picked up his guitar. An hour later he said, "Listen to this ..."

Hilary Stunda lives in the Roaring Fork Valley as a writer, and is a frequent contributor to The Aspen Times Weekly.