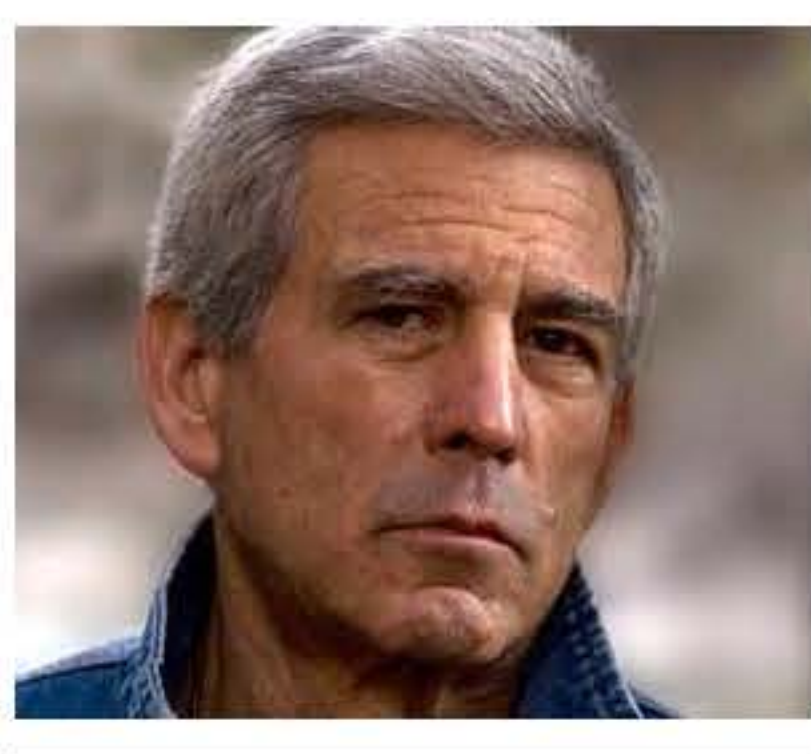


Mountain Time

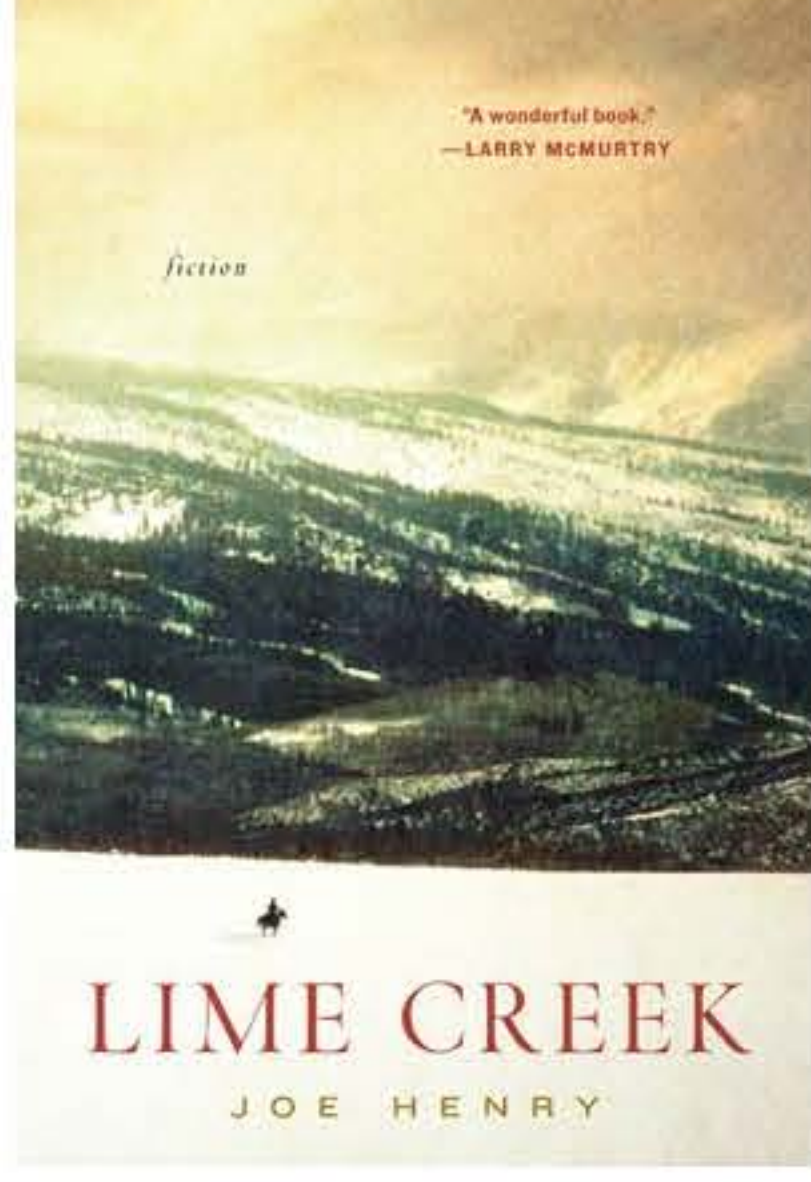
By Erik Philbrook
Internationally- renowned, award-winning songwriter Joe Henry publishes his first novel – 20 years in the making

Having thrived as a songwriter for much of his life, providing lyrics for well over a hundred recordings by a wide range of artists, from Frank Sinatra and John Denver (with whom he wrote 18 songs) to Olivia Newton-John, Roberta Flack, Garth Brooks, Rascaal Flatts and many others, Joe Henry is about to become a first time novelist. It's a moment many years in the making. Although as a younger man he received his MFA from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, where his classmate was John Irving and his teacher Kurt Vonnegut, his fiction-writing career was kept at bay while Henry, well, lived -- working around the country as a laborer, rancher, a professional athlete and as a lyricist.



Joe Henry
Photo by Jim Paussa

Inspired by his personal experiences living and working in Wyoming and Colorado, *Lime Creek* (Random House) tells the story of the Davises, a twentieth-century ranch family living a sometimes harsh, sometimes heartbreakingly beautiful life in the West. True to his often naturalistic, inspirational and always deeply emotional songwriting style, Henry has created a novel akin to beholding the Rocky Mountains themselves – an awe-inspiring experience that quiets the mind and stirs the soul. That he does so with prose that evokes such masterful writers as William Faulkner and Raymond Carver is a testament to his remarkable literary gifts. *Lime Creek* has already garnered praise from one of the great western authors of our time, Larry McMurtry (*Lonesome Dove*), who said, "*Lime Creek* is a wonderful book, subtle in texture, rich in sorrow. I hope it gets the readers it deserves."



[Purchase Lime Creek on Amazon](#)

From his home in western Colorado, Henry spoke to *Playback* about publishing his long-in-the-works novel.

What was your ambition in writing this novel?

It never had anything to do with ambition. In my head was a voice that said, "Start writing your novel." But then the animal part of me says, "Yeah, but you're not going to be here long enough to finish it, so why waste your time." One of my failings, I guess, as a human anyway, is that I've never been able to look much further than the day I'm in.

So it just never happened. But it was always hanging over me. Then one year, on one of my "decade birthdays," I made my annual trek to my favorite mountain, which is about 60 miles from where I've lived all these years. It's a little less than 14,000 feet high, and on those big birthdays I've always climbed that mountain. My birthday is in the spring so it's in the middle of a really heavy snow time.

I've never had a tent, so I would dig a hole in the snow and spend the night in that hole, and then finish climbing the mountain the next day. On this one particular birthday up on that mountain, the weather turned real bad and I knew I was probably not going to live to see the dawn. It was very bad. But when the first light finally came and I knew I was going to make it, I told myself, "If I get down, I only have two choices when I get home: I either jump in the river (by my house) and drown, or I start writing this novel."

And so I did get home and I didn't jump in the river. I went to sleep. When I woke up, I started writing.

How did you divide your time between songwriting and writing your novel?

I've always split my creative life between writing the manuscript in winter and then in the summer being strictly a songwriter, a lyricist, trying to get with people whose music inspires me, in New York and LA and Nashville. Sometime during the third winter of writing on my manuscript, I realized that where I had started was probably going to be the end of the whole story. And so it took me another 20 years to get back to the beginning of that ending.

What kept you motivated to work on something for so many years?

I never really had a choice. I've had two masters all these years. One's my body -- I've never stopped working-out. And the other is my soul -- I've never stopped writing. And no matter what the state of my health is, I have no choice but to be in the gym when I'm supposed to be. And no choice but to show up for work with my pencil every night.

That's admirable.

But it's not. It's like looking at a dog and saying, "it's really admirable that you're a dog." I have no choice and so I can't really take any credit. I just give thanks for what I've been given and I try to do the best I can with it.

You've worked on this book for so long. Is it hard for you to believe that it's truly completed?

I didn't realize how soon the physical book would be finished. I don't use a computer, so I asked a friend of mine to send an email to Random House to see if there was any possible way to still make three little last changes to the manuscript. I even said that if I have to pay a stiff penalty to make those changes, I'd gladly pay it. Meanwhile, I'm dealing with the river. I live eight feet from the one river that comes out of the mountains where I live, and we've had a big winter this year, with a great deal of snowfall that still hasn't begun to melt. When that snow begins to go, the river can become dangerous. And so on that same day that I had requested those final changes to my book, I'd had 60 sandbags trucked to my house. I'm outside unloading sandbags and piling them against the side that faces the river. When I finished and came back around front, I saw that I had missed the FedEx guy, who'd left a package on my doorstep from Random House, which I opened. And it was my first book.

Tell me how your writing career began.

I had an athletic scholarship to play ice hockey in college. I was a clean player, but with a very short fuse. If someone got me with a dirty play, usually my response was quick and to the point, so to speak. This one afternoon, before having to play that night, I could just feel that something was gonna happen. I was sitting at my desk with a pencil and an open notebook in front of me, and without thinking, I just started to write. I wrote without stopping for over two hours, and when I put the pencil down I felt as drained as if I'd just been in a fight. And so that was a big discovery for me. And I just kept writing.

When did you first start writing lyrics for songs?

After graduate school, with an MFA degree with honors and about \$3.00 to my name, I ended up working underground in the mines in South Dakota. On my job application, I marked down an eighth-grade education. At the end of that summer, I drove East to caretake someone's estate and six dogs, and to play on a semi-pro hockey team. On the way, I had to go through the town where an old friend lived, and I told her I'd stop by to say hello. I thought if I got there about 9 o'clock, I could say hello and be on my way. After she had put her baby to bed, we were talking in the living room while her husband sat on the couch playing his guitar. I'd never met him before.

He kept playing the same melody over and over until I finally said, "What's that song you're playing? It's really beautiful." He said, "Oh, it's just something I made up." I grabbed a magazine off the table and a ballpoint pen and ran up into their attic. About 20 minutes later, I came back down with eight or nine verses to that melody, and he went nuts. I ended up staying there for 10 days. Every night his wife would go to bed with the baby, and he'd play something, and I'd go up in the attic and write words to it. So that was how my songwriting started.

When did songwriting become your bread and butter in earnest?

After a bunch of twists and turns, I ended up about a year after graduate school in New York and in a professional boxing stable. They had one guy for each weight division. I was the light-heavyweight (still am). And the only rookie too. And so for about a year, my whole life was either in the ring or preparing to get in the ring.

I think that every human life has specific moments that are pivotal, that will affect that life for its duration. I had broken my nose 9 or 10 times playing hockey and fighting. Before my third nose operation, hopefully to improve my breathing, the surgeon had told me that my fighting days were over. When I woke up in that room in Lenox Hill Hospital, my first music publisher was sitting there waiting for me to open my eyes. And when I did, he had an open *Billboard* magazine that he placed on my chest with a full-page ad for the first record that had my lyrics on it. So in that moment, my life of athletic violence ended at the same time that my songwriting career began.

How did you and John Denver begin writing together?

I'd been running a cattle ranch in Arizona, and I'd been writing with someone in the Kingston Trio who was a friend of John's. They would talk off and on and the friend would mention me. When John came to Arizona to give a concert, we met. A year later, I'm working on a construction gang in L.A. A publisher friend had told me he wanted me to work with some of his writers before possibly signing me. One evening after working on a jackhammer all day, I'm writing with this guy and when he goes to the men's room, I call my answering service. There's a message to call the Kingston Trio guy at this L.A. number. He tells me he's in the studio with John, who's recording his new album, and John would like me to stop by. My co-writer has returned and he asks me what that was all about and I tell him. He says, "You're going, aren't you?" And I say that I was in a recording-studio once and couldn't have him any more out of place. He begs me to go and take him, because he's a club singer and his whole repertoire is James Taylor and John Denver songs. And RCA just happens to be two blocks away.

We go over and open the door to the console room just as John begins to sing on the other side of the glass. I've got my hand on my forehead, I haven't shaven all week, and my t-shirt's torn. The head of RCA and John's manager and publisher and producer and his wife and it seems enough people to fill that little room all turn as two of them move to throw us out -- just as John starts to sing. He sings the same verse twice and comes into the console room and waves at us as his producer says, "You need another verse if this song is gonna be on this album." And John says, "I've been trying but I don't know what to say." They leave for dinner, and I can't get John's melody out of my mind, and until I write some words on the paper shopping-bag that's next to me as I drive. I type them up and go back and leave the paper on the console. I come back later that night and John says, "Hey Joe, we just recorded your song."

How would you define your relationship with John?

We had a real creative brotherhood. In all these years, I've had about five or six incredible collaborations where every time I'd get in a room with that person, something good would happen. But the most amazing collaboration was with John, because everything we did was nearly instantaneous. There was hardly any working on it. He loved to write to my lyrics. We'd usually talk about something and then split up, and that night a lyric would come out of me. I'd bring it back and he'd pick up the guitar, and an hour later we'd have a song.

Can you talk about the theatrical productions of *Lime Creek* that you've done over the years?

This book, *Lime Creek*, is dedicated to Roscoe Lee Browne and Anthony Zerbe. From the first time that they ever saw my (non-lyrical) work, they were taken with it. They did a wonderful theatrical presentation of world literature, called "Behind the Broken Words," for over 30 years, and eventually they started to include a selection from *Lime Creek* in their show, the only selection from an unknown writer. They would do writers like Dylan Thomas and Edna St. Vincent Millay and Yeats and E. E. Cummings and T. S. Eliot, people you studied in school, and then this one unknown author, Joe Henry.

Whenever Roscoe would give a reading someplace, he would always include material from this unknown poet, he'd call me, and Anthony would do the same. Anthony was the director of a new play festival in upstate New York, and as I was in the midst of one of those really fruitful musical collaborations, Anthony said that he wanted to try an evening of pieces from my manuscript along with some of the songs that I'd been writing. So that was the first stage presentation. And it evolved into what he called, "Prelude to Lime Creek." He named it that because in his mind he figured that some day he would be reading my work and a book publisher would leap up and say, "I will publish what you're reading." That actually happened the very first time, with Roscoe would read some of my early work that got George Riplinton all excited, but the *Paris Review* never closed the deal.

How did the songs figure into the theatrical work?

Originally, the songs that were used were always incidental, but they would be positioned so that they would still in some way add to the dramatic pieces. When the show was bound for the Denver Theatre Center, which is a big complex like Lincoln Center, Gary Burr and I wrote a series of new songs to support somehow each of these dramatic pieces. But we wrote them as if they'd be stand-alone songs, so you wouldn't have to know that they were directed toward something.

That "Prelude to Lime Creek" performance was really special and sold-out the theater for over a month. The preter people told us that it was one of the only times that people were coming up to the box office and saying that they were coming back for the third time. The other presentation that Anthony devised was around two stories that are both in this new book with John. That performance is called, "Lime Creek Christmas." Anthony did it for a couple of years with John Denver, and then for a couple of years with Garth Brooks. Garth and Anthony did it a number of years ago with Beth Nielsen Chapman, at the Grand Ole Opry.

Have the songs that were written for these theatrical productions ever been released?

None of the Gary Burr songs have been cut, but the Denver Center told us that audiences kept asking for them. Eventually Gary went into the studio with his band and cut a CD. It was only sold at the theater that time, but I was told that somebody bought a copy online for about \$200 recently, and wrote a review saying how much he loved having it because the original that he'd had had gotten so scarred up from passing it around.

Were they all original songs written for the production?

The "Prelude" songs were, but "Lime Creek Christmas" includes one song I wrote with John Denver, "A Baby Just Like You," which we wrote for Frank Sinatra, at his request, and he put it out as a single. There's also the song that I co-wrote that closed the Atlanta Olympics, called "The Flame." And then when Garth did the show, we added "Belleau Wood," which Garth and I wrote together about Christmas Eve on the battlefield, and it pretty much brought the house down.

Would you ever want to release these songs as a collection associated with the book?

Oh yeah. We thought that with all the Christmas packages that come out, it would be truly unique to release a recording that had Anthony reading these stories and a female and male artist do the songs. I'm not really aware of very many things that are both spoken-word and music together, but we've always thought that it could be a great Christmas recording. But I don't really seem to pursue the business side of things. I pursue the writing.

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