



WESTERN SON

Teal Blake is leading the way for the next generation of western artists.

By Tonya Ratliff-Garrison

TEAL BLAKE NEVER HAD A CHANCE TO BE anything other than a western artist. It's just in his blood.

Growing up at the base of the Rocky Mountains in Augusta, Montana, Teal was surrounded by western art, cowboys, horses and the American West. His father, western artist Buckeye Blake, always had artist friends like Gary Carter, Vel Miller and Dave Powell hanging around Teal's boyhood home.

"They'd make funny little things, and I was always watching and listening to them," Teal said.

But the 30-year-old's heritage as a western artist comes from more than just his father. Teal's mother, Tona, is also creative and is a designer, writer and photographer. Buckeye's mother was an artist who grew up with a father as an artist. And when it comes to his love for the West and horses, you can credit Teal's great-grandfather, Samuel Coke Blake, who was one of the American Quarter Horse's founding breeders.

"I guess it has all just been passed down to me through the generations," Teal said with a smile.

Living in Montana also had its advantages. Teal was able to regularly visit the museum in Great Falls, Montana, to study the paintings of perhaps one of the greatest western artists ever, Charles M. Russell. Viewing Russell's art helped the



COURTESY OF TEAL BLAKE

Teal's parents, Tona and Buckeye Blake, are both artistic. Tona is a writer, photographer and designer, while Buckeye is a well-known western artist who was the first living person to have a one-man show at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming.

young artist appreciate that cowboys were seldom clean-shaved, their shirts weren't always creased and clean, and horses' manes weren't long and combed.

"An artist sees the big picture, rather than the imperfections," Teal said. "Overall, art is not copying the image in detail, but telling the story with feeling. That's one of the main attributes of western art – it's honest."

With all these influences in his life, Teal couldn't help but try his own hand at western art. When he was 6, he drew bucking horses on some of his dad's illustration boards and made little buttons with them.

"I would then sell them at the rodeo for 25 and 50 cents a pop. I think I made like \$20," Teal said with a smile.

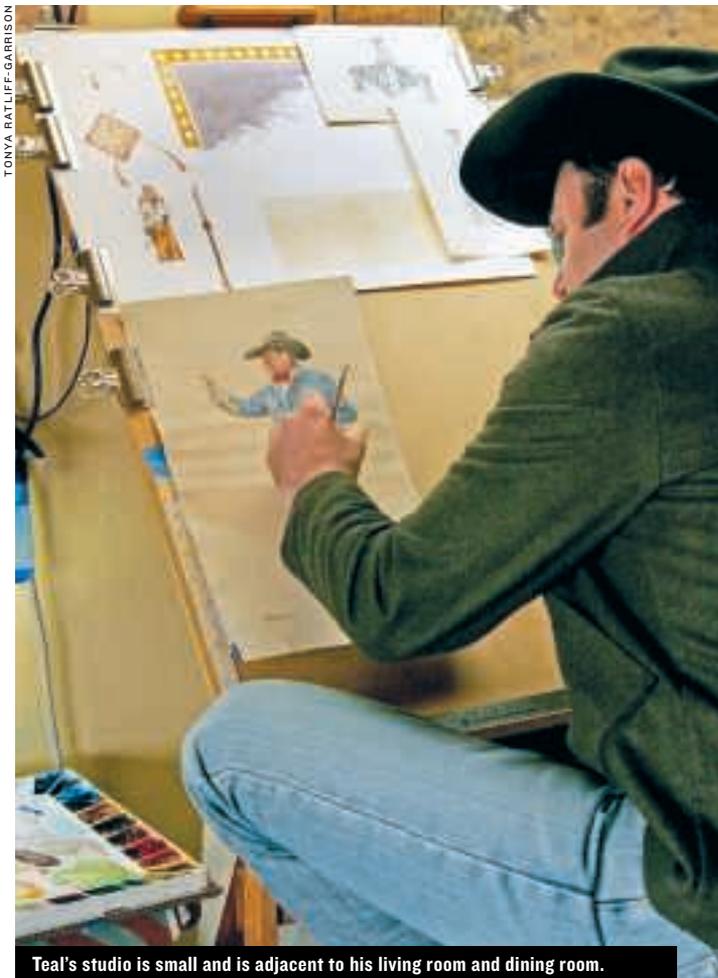
As he got older, Teal continued to sketch on anything he could get his hands on.

"I guess I didn't admit or acknowledge that I was being an artist. I would always do pieces and sell them or give them to people without thinking about it."

But Teal had other goals for his life than art, and one of those was to ride bulls. Although he attended art school at Montana State University, he flunked out his first couple of years.

"I felt like I was drawing inside the lines, and it was driving me nuts," he recalled. "And I was rodeoing, and probably didn't

Rough String Rider



TONYA RATLIFF-GARRISON

Teal's studio is small and is adjacent to his living room and dining room.

want to be at school very much is what it came down to.”

It was 2002 before Teal finally decided to give art another try.

“I just really kind of started pursuing it and making a run at it, and it seemed like everything fell into place, and it just grew by leaps and bounds,” he said.

Painting His World

TEAL'S ART IS MOSTLY WATERCOLOR OR GRAPHITE AND HIS PIECES are usually not very large, about the size of an 8½ - by - 10-inch piece of paper.

“I do a lot of small ones. I like the little ones,” he said. “It’s not to say my pieces wouldn’t look good big, but the bigger you get with something, the looser you can do it. The small pieces are so much tighter.”

Because he was still rodeoing, it was understandable that many of Teal’s first pieces dealt with the subject of bronc riders and bucking bulls.

“But trying to sell a lot of bull-riding pieces wasn’t going to happen,” Teal said. “It could be a great piece, but the only thing it’s good for is on a rodeo poster. Not many people want something on their wall with Resistol banners in the background, a bronc rein on a horse and a flack jacket on a rider. It’s just not something that sells.”

So Teal altered his focus a little and returned to his western roots. Although bucking horses are still one of his favorite subjects, most of Teal’s paintings today deal with ranch life from range cowboys to working horses.

And to keep his art authentic, Teal regularly goes to ranches. But he’s not just there to observe; he also works. An avid cutter

and roper, Teal knows what he’s doing.

“It’s nice to go back out and just do the basics with horses and just kind of do traditional ranch work,” he said. “I think you appreciate it just a little bit more, and when you get out there, you get inspired by so much.”

Teal knows what he paints. The tack used is correct, the horses have the right expressions for the situation they are painted in, and the cowboys look like they know what they’re doing.

“I think a big part of being a western artist and a traditionalist is you should be a part of it and it should be a part of your lifestyle,” he said. “That’s not to say someone who can’t saddle a horse can’t paint him wonderfully. But for me, I think I’m a better artist because it’s a part of my life.”

Up and Coming

TEAL IS ONE OF THE YOUNGEST WESTERN artists in the industry today. When he was trying to find a gallery to sell his work, his age put him at a disadvantage.

“I think a majority of galleries think an artist should be older,” he said. “My big argument with that philosophy is so many of these places preach that they need to bring up today’s youth because that’s our tomorrow. But when I tell them, ‘Here I am,’ they say, ‘Yeah, we love your work, but you’re too young.’”

However, The Legacy Gallery in Scottsdale, Arizona, and Jackson, Wyoming, did take a chance on the young artist, and they have had successful partnerships.

“They really push my artwork,” Teal said. “But still, the

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– Teal Blake

The Outlaw Diamond Joe



Fence Sitter



Workin' the Night Shift



Texas Half Top





TEALBAKE

Unnamed

hardest thing for an artist is the business side of it. It's really hard. Western artwork is not really a big market in the overall perspective of all the art in the world. It's really small. And to be successful at it, you really have to get your name out there."

That's where Teal's young bride, Joncee, has helped. Much like Teal's mother did for his father, Joncee is helping to manage the business dealings of Teal's artwork.

"I've really been trying to help him get known," Joncee said. "I think once people see his work, though, they really like it. It's different than most western art out there. It's very traditional, but it also has a contemporary feel to it. There are even hints in some of his paintings of his dad's work."

Teal often goes to Buckeye for advice, which is always honest and straightforward.

"I go to Dad for color and lighting and some composition questions, but I feel my style is very different from his," Teal said. "When my dad does watercolors, he does them like oils. He does them very thick. I think mine are thinner and a little paler."

And it's the softer side of his work that most often gets the most criticism from Buckeye.

"My dad is always telling me 'Crank it! Crank your colors! Make it pop!' He just yells it at me. There are artists who paint what they see in a picture or how they really see it, and then there are artists who do crank those colors. I'm not one of those."

Although he accepts the occasional commission, Teal



TONYA RATLIFF-GARRISON

Teal and Joncee stand with Modelo Blue, which Teal showed in the 2006 National Cutting Horse Association Futurity.

mostly paints for himself.

"I'm painting what I want and I'm doing what I want to do," he said. "I think that's where I'm very fortunate. I get to do what I want to do, and I can make a living at it. I really enjoy it, and the best thing about it it helps me pay for my horse habit." □

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Rooster