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A Cowboy Quartet

The Tumbling Tumbleweeds March to Their Own Drum

By Mandalit del Barco

Onstage, they wear matching red plaid cowboy shirts, white kerchiefs, 10-gallon hats and suede cowboy boots—unsullied from any bona fide work on the range. None of them has ever actually rustled up cattle or even spotted a lonesome prairie dog. But at a watering hole in Altadena called the Coffee Gallery Backstage, the four men of the Tumbling Tumbleweeds sing about prairie life.

"Riding the range together / My saddle pals and I," they croon in an old ditty by Leonard Slye, also known as Roy Rogers. "We ride, ride, ride through the saddle / O'er the barren plain / All day we round up the doggies / Headin' for the big corral / We'll always be together/ Til we ride down that last long trail."

During their two-hour gig, the Tumbling Tumbleweeds perform tunes from 1930s and '40s Western flicks, originally sung by silver-screen cowboys like Roy Rogers and the Sons of the Pioneers. Accompanied by a sole acoustic guitar, they sing in four-part harmony, at times stopping

to whistle, howl like coyotes and dance a few jigs. Their wholesome sight gags are worthy of a Disneyland frontier floor show.

"We consider it our obligation to corn-feed our audiences," quips baritone Robert Wolfskill, the quartet's founder and director. "We like our show to be as family friendly as possible."

The 45-year-old administrator for Childrens Hospital grew up in Los Angeles watching old cowboy movies. And to this day, he collects Roy Rogers movies at his home in Sierra Madre. Wolfskill has roots in the Southwest, as the great, great grandson of a French Canadian who fought with the U.S. Cavalry in the Indian Wars before settling in New Mexico with a Chiricahua Apache wife.

"This music transports you to another world," Wolfskill says. "All the pioneers and the immigrants that came out West... It was just that promise of hope that the West seemed to hold for people, that dream that just seems to continue on."

Wolfskill's own dream was to form a vocal group like the Sons of the Pioneers and name it after one of their most popular songs. A few years ago, he assembled his posse of singing pals. He met "Big Daddy" baritone Cade Parenti, 29, when they performed together in



a local musical theater production of "Damn Yankees," and he discovered fellow thespian and tenor Chris Acuff, 31, on the stage of "Fiddler on the Roof."

"Chris could never resist doing a little hoe-down jig [during one of the dance numbers]," Wolfskill says.

Finally, he plucked R.J. Mills, 22, from a Starbucks in Monrovia where he played guitar. Unlike Wolfskill, the younger Tumbleweeds didn't know much about Western movie music, but they soon learned that their family histories have Western ties as well:

Long Beach native Parenti has kin from the Black Hills of South Dakota, where his great uncle owns a cattle ranch; Acuff settled here from West Tennessee ("I have family that rode with Jessie James," he says, "shooting up and robbing banks"); and Mills is Tex Mex, the son of a South Texas mother and Mexican father.

"We might not be cowboys on the outside, but when we do this music, the cowboy inside of us just comes out," says the baby-faced Mills, who earns a living running the "Backdraft" attraction at Universal Studios.

Acuff, who lives in Hollywood and works as a branch manager for Wells Fargo bank, says they learn the songs by listening to old recordings and watching Disney movies. Then they make up their own harmonies. All four note, however, that they sing Western music, not country.

"We don't cry in our beers," explains Parenti. Instead, their songs are about dogies (orphaned calves), deserts, cacti, sunsets and camaraderie on the frontier.

But they were chagrined to discover that some of the songs were disrespectful to Native Americans and Mexicans. "We've had to change the lyrics in order to fit today's perception of political correctness," says Parenti. "We've really had to curb some of these cowboy songs."

For some numbers, the Tumbling Tumbleweeds replaced the term "Redskin" with "Injun," which Acuff admits is "still kind of on the



fringe." They eliminated a derogatory word for a Chinese person from the song "Hold That Critter Down," and they took out an entire verse of "Pecos Bill" about smoking cigarettes.

Wolfskill says they hope to evoke "that time of wholesome goodness when things were a little bit slower and simpler."

In other words, a more idealized, romanticized version of the cowboy. The old Hollywood version.

So while they don't get to saddle up much in car-crazed L.A., the Tumbling Tumbleweeds do join in the Western Music Association's jamboree every month at the Autry National Center.

Parenti, who sells freight-container space on ships to Hawaii, admits it might seem unusual for a city-dweller his age to be so enamored of a musical genre he acknowledges is dying out. That's exactly why, he says, "we're here to bring a little bit of it back."