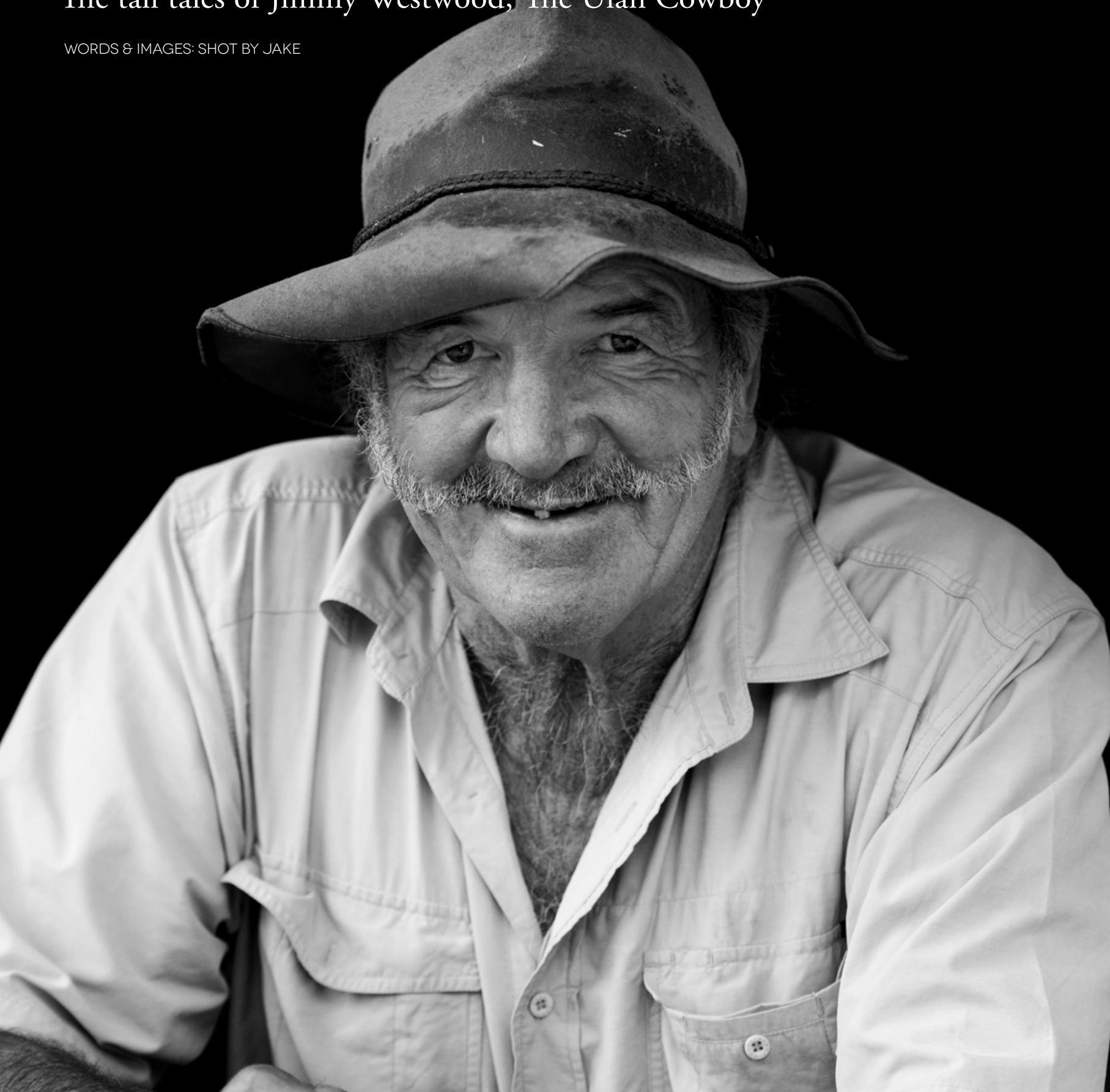


FOREVER YOUNG

The tall tales of Jimmy Westwood, The Ulan Cowboy

WORDS & IMAGES: SHOT BY JAKE



On July 6, 1963, almost 50 years ago in Windsor, Jimmy Westwood promised to love Rhonda Sullivan “until death do us part”. Rhonda, a starry eyed convent girl, was only 15 and her beau was barely two years older. Revised laws have since ensured this could never happen again in Australia. The sceptics said their young love couldn’t possibly last but with their Golden Wedding anniversary celebration coming up in July at the Tudor Hotel in Tamworth, the Westwoods are sure to have the last laugh.



YOUNG JIMMY WESTWOOD grew up quick and keen, displaying a strong level of independence and maturity from an early age. He left school in 1960, aged 14, to start work. There was no opportunity for an education; times were tough and a man, no matter what age, had to roll up his sleeves and have a go.

Even in those early days, Jimmy Westwood developed a reputation for working hard and playing even harder. For months he chased a young eye-catching brunette around town on his old pushbike but she wasn't the slightest bit interested.

Then one damp winter's day Jimmy changed his tune. He wanted to impress this young lass and so turned up at her house on his great black stallion, Thunder. The idea was to take her to the footy but the big horse slipped on the wet gravel and Jimmy came a cropper, hurting his leg badly. They hobbled home in silence, Jimmy leaning on Rhonda for support and clutching Thunder's reins.

As Rhonda tended to his wounds she knew she had found Mr Right. She could see her life in his sparkling eyes and made up her mind "to marry him and have six kids and heaps of horses". Her classmates laughed and told her she was dreaming. Eight months later Rhonda discovered she was pregnant and the scandal swept all over the town of Riverstone.

A school assembly was called and there was talk of sending the wayward Rhonda off to a home for unmarried women and having the baby adopted out. Jimmy wouldn't have a bar of it. So baby Jim entered the world, surrounded by love but not much else. The Westwood clan had begun in earnest.

It was never going to be easy but Jimmy was never afraid of hard, physical work, which made him the ideal bricklayer. He was a brickie for more than 40 years, starting at Mount Druitt and Green Valley when the new suburbs were virtual paddocks.

The restless pair made many moves over the next few years including a three-year stint on the Central Coast before heading to Glen Innes. "I survived one winter in the hills but it was too bloody cold," Jimmy said. "It was the only place I laid bricks with snow on my whiskers."

In 1975 Jimmy and Rhonda set up camp at a property at Ulan near Gulgong. There was plenty of room for their six horses but within 15 years horse numbers multiplied tenfold as Jimmy ploughed a ton of energy into the harness racing game. He drove his first winner in Tamworth in 1976, breaking the track record. Over the next 30 years he won another nine Tamworth starts, the winning moments frozen in time in fading photos that adorn the old homestead's hallway.

FOUR-LEGGED FRIENDS AND LIFE ON THE LAND AT ULAN

Horses have always played a big part in Jim Westwood's life. "When I was born Dad took my mum to Liverpool hospital in a sulky and they named me after his horse, Jimmy the Jib. I was 11 pound two at birth and the staff couldn't believe the size of me," he recalled with his trademark dry grin.

His father, who opened bridges in Sydney for the passing ships, used to call him Jimmy Jam Tin. He died when Jimmy was only 10, leaving his widowed mother, Minnie Jo Westwood, with 11 children to raise. She battled along, however, and when she died in 1994 she had 51 grandchildren, 103 great grandchildren and 12 great, great grandchildren to her name. She had a phenomenal memory and could recite all Melbourne Cup winners along with all her progeny's birthdays and birth weights.

Living at Ulan provided some great memories but the pair was so remote that visitors were few and far between. The electricity hadn't yet found its way to their 1800-acre block of untamed land adjoining the Goulburn River National Park. Sometimes they felt they were living much the same way as their ancestors 100 years ago. The six kids were growing up fast and life was never dull.

Six years ago they reluctantly sold their property to the coalmines

and moved to Movable, a charming, historic property tucked away between Gulgong and Mudgee. The place was first settled in 1854 by Richard Rouse and it was one of his shepherds who discovered gold at Red Hill several years later to spark the big rush and the subsequent establishment of Gulgong.

The property had been divided into four blocks and the Westwoods secured 310 acres including the old homestead that is at least a century old. Back then the building served as the Piampong Telegraph Office, supporting a nearby school and sports ground. Rhonda was most impressed with the electricity that had eluded her for 33 years.

"In the early days, when I was raising the kids, it was all candles and lamps before we finally got an old generator. I'll never forget the day Jimmy got me a washing machine with a petrol motor," Rhonda sighed. "Looking back, I guess you could say it was pretty hard living. I rarely got to town but you just had to accept it and get on with it. I don't really know how I did it but I am proud my kids grew up tough in the bush and all but one finished year 12."

In her new abode Rhonda had to be educated in the use of microwaves and other electrical appliances like washing machines. She's cooked on a fuel stove most of her life which means she's pretty handy in any billy-boiling competitions.



Meanwhile, Jimmy was still horse-mad, with his time divvied up between his stable of 23 trotters, sons Jimmy and Ben and daughters Suzanne, Sharon, Simone and Samantha. As the years rolled by, 20 grandchildren and seven great grandchildren came into the equation.

Over the years there were moments of sheer fun like being in the film *The Right Hand Man* starring Hugo Weaving. His acting debut was cut on the editor's floor to only a few seconds but there he was driving the horse-drawn undertaker's hearse!

Jim also took part in the re-enactment of the big gold heist at Eugowra 150 years ago when Frank Gardiner and Ben Hall made away with 12,000 pounds of the good stuff, most of which was never recovered.

Life was as good as it gets but it all came to a shuddering halt on July 28, 2011 – the day Jimmy snapped his neck while breaking in a young horse. Jimmy was in the sulky when the horse took fright and started bucking. “He stopped at the gate but I didn’t,” he said with a shake of his head.

Fortunately, Rhonda wasn’t far away and instinct told her not to move him. “If Jimmy had tried to move he would have died or become a paraplegic,” she said. “They flew him by chopper to Westmead and his head now supports four screws, two plates and a coil of wire!”

Now fully recovered, Jimmy Westwood has an even greater appreciation for the sanctity of life. More than ever he loves throwing on his black hat, donning the boots and living the life of The Ulan Cowboy, a name that has stuck for more than 20 years.

He still makes sporadic appearances at the Tamworth Country Music Festival, which he and Rhonda first attended 36 years ago. They have never missed a festival since and love catching up with old mates each year. Jimmy has released four self-funded albums that encapsulate the true essence of the battler and man on the land. A good sense of humour comes out in all of the albums and easy listening is guaranteed.

The entertainer in Jimmy emerged a long time ago after he stumbled upon the Wild Mick James Show at the Locomotive Hotel in Tamworth.

“It was the Drunk’s Talent Quest and one of the rules was that you had to have a beer in your hand – even though it was 8am! After a while I became part of the show and actually won the competition for three consecutive years back in the 1980s,” he said.

“In its heyday there was a thousand-dollar prize for the winner but all I ever got was a few free beers from Mick, that outrageous, rum-drinking, bush showman who somehow managed to pull off these amazing shows.”

Jimmy was a late starter when it came to finding the confidence to sing those old bush ballads in front of an audience. Although he wrote his first song at age eight, *The Ballad of Jimmy Westwood*, it was another 40 years before he finally broke out into verse before a stunned Mick James at his beloved Loco. Mick promptly brought him back to earth, as was his way, but the seed had been planted.

Jimmy never looked for stardom and never wanted it. His gnarled old hands and honest attitude to work were always his best assets. The days of toiling on an 11-storey-high work place in Balmain or a mile underground at a coalmine face are thankfully over and this quietly spoken bush battler has time to reflect at the end of another long day.

“A comedian once told me that you can’t have everything because there wouldn’t be enough space to put it all,” he said rather seriously. “The main thing I’ve found,” he added, after a long pause, “is having a wife as your strongest supporter and best mate.”

Big Jimmy Westwood takes the last swig from his Reschs Real Bitter and looks up at the myriad stars in the evening sky.

I don’t know what he’s thinking but I know our conversation is over and I retire to bed thinking that Jimmy and Rhonda Westwood are genuine, living proof that a fairytale romance never ends and that the best things in life are not things. **CWL**

