

Portrait of a West Texas Saloon Man | PUNCH

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Ty Mitchell pours a Jameson and grabs a Lone Star Light before lowering his angular, 6-foot-4-inch frame onto a rickety chair. “Prohibition was just a childish attempt at morality,” he says, hinting at the Lone Star State’s notoriously strict liquor licensing regulations. The owner of Marfa’s Lost Horse Saloon (https://www.instagram.com/lost_horse_saloon_marfa/?hl=en) is adept at slinging bits of insight like this into the conversation—wisdom picked up from decades spent roping and toiling on Texas pasture. He’s seen enough to know enough. When you meet Mitchell—a lifelong cowboy who’s simultaneously

courtly and scary as hell—you get the feeling that a night spent drinking with him will either end on the back of a horse, watching the sun rise over the Chihuahuan Desert, or with your corpse floating in the Rio Grande.

He pulls a pouch of Prince Albert from his shirt pocket, sets his battered Spradley cowboy hat on the table and rolls a cigarette. His face has been described by journalists as “craggy” and “creased”; both are accurate, yet fail to convey the essence of the man. Mitchell’s right eye—injured by shrapnel when he was in Libya with the Navy—is shrouded with a patch to shield it from high desert dust and wind. It lends him an uncanny resemblance to Rooster Cogburn, the one-eyed protagonist of the 2010 Coen Brothers’ remake of *True Grit*, in which Mitchell played a small role.

Mitchell, 54, has lived many places, including the Brazilian Amazon, and done many things, from carpentry and crab fishing to ranching and bartending. He still runs cattle on a ranch down on the border. His birth certificate is from New Mexico, but he’s spent his life here. But that doesn’t make him a Texan, as nearly any Texan will tell you. An exception: Friend and former governor Ann Richards gave Mitchell a certificate proclaiming him an honorary citizen. It’s a treasured gift, but he’s quick to point out: “Simply being a Texan doesn’t give you bragging rights; you just brag more.”

Following a divorce in 2006, Mitchell made a permanent move to West Texas from Central Texas. “This was my third time out here,” he says. “I like a harsh environment, where it’s beautiful and pristine but will crush you out in a heartbeat. That’s how humans are supposed to live; it’s where humans are at their best. Everything out here will bite you, poke you or prick you.”

While Marfa’s present myth is more rooted in the cosmos and \$3,000 ponchos, Mitchell fits right in with the town’s hardscrabble roots as a late 19th-century water stop for the railroad. Ranching culture, too, still looms large, but the art

community and nascent food and drink scene attract celebrities and bicoastal billionaires, all of whom the Lost Horse welcomes as readily as longtime denizens of the Big Bend.

In 2010, after two years of eyeballing a “For Sale” sign on a shuttered, ramshackle bar, Mitchell bought the place. “It’s almost every cowboy’s dream to own a saloon. I figured somebody was going to open it so it might as well be me,” he says. “When I asked my banker for a loan, he said, ‘Ty, are you out of your ever-loving fucking mind?’ He knew I preferred being at my ranch.”

Ten years later, the only dedicated, full-liquor watering hole in a 2,000-person town is a local institution and global cultural icon. Mitchell’s persona certainly doesn’t hurt (except when it does); Anthony Bourdain featured Mitchell in the Far West Texas episode of *Parts Unknown* in 2018. But it’s more about the soul of this pool hall-honky-tonk mashup, which, according to Mitchell, is not a dive bar. However, he admits the exterior “looks rough as hell.”

From the street, the crude limestone building is noteworthy only for its neon “BEER” sign. Inside, the dim, narrow room is regularly packed with an amalgamation of socioeconomic and psychological statuses. The pressed-wood walls are hung with taxidermied animals, cow skulls and Western artifacts. A tiny kitchen turns out barbecue, and dogs weave between patrons. The sign behind the bar reads, “No working during drinking hours.” It could be the manifesto for this remote West Texas town, where most businesses are electively open Thursday through Saturday.

On a Wednesday afternoon, PUNCH stopped by to chat for a spell with Mitchell to get his take on the border, good advice and why owning a bar is the hardest job he’s ever had.

In 2006, Marfa was still rebounding from post-World War II economic collapse and home to a long-established artist colony, but it wasn’t yet a famous tourist destination. What was it like when you arrived?

The town was dried up, for sure, but there was more sustainability than other parts of West Texas. I had a construction job and Marfa had a butcher shop, deli and more bars, though there wasn't really much reason to come here unless you wanted to do nothing all day. It's still my favorite place to live in this region. I'm not knocking anywhere else; I just don't get the same bang from other towns I once did.

What's the most fundamental change you've witnessed in that time?

Most of the people here are working in the service industry—luckily, it's not seasonal. But they've got nowhere to live; it's growing pains. If it were up to me, I'd outlaw Airbnb [*Mitchell is referring to nonlocals purchasing homes expressly for short-term rentals*]; houses are for living in. You don't turn a home into a business and leave a bed there. That's what hotels and campgrounds are for. We're going to have a town full of vending machines because ain't nobody can work here.

You live in Marfa, but also have a cattle ranch on the border. Care to comment?

The boogiemans don't live in Mexico. It's not a bad place; it's a rough place and dangerous right now in spots, but America is dangerous in spots. I don't just assume Detroit is dangerous because that's what I hear; I know as much about Detroit as somebody from Michigan knows about this border here. I guarantee you there's good people in Detroit, just like most of the people in this country. Ninety-nine percent of Mexicans are good folks who just want a better life and work hard every day. And all we hear about are the ones raising a fuss and doing all the stupid crap. But look how much stupid crap goes on over here.

What's the best advice someone ever gave you?

My grandpa told me, "Hard times drive people to churches and bars and good times drive 'em to bars, but not so much churches. So, don't be a preacher; be a bartender."

What makes the Lost Horse so special?

We're open seven days a week. Marfa has a real bad habit of only wanting to work three days a week. But [if] people have a bad day on Tuesday, you need to be open. That's what a bar is for. And, you know, a lot of visitors also go home and say, "Oh, I was in this dive bar in rowdy West Texas and I had a blast, and nobody messed with me." They get bragging rights and feel like they've accomplished something, and that's the purpose of this place. I want people to be able to write their own story.

Didn't you once open the doors and cook for the entire town during a whiteout?

I believe in a personal responsibility to your community. If you're the town carpenter and Old Lady Smith needs her screen door fixed and she can't afford it, you got to fix it. You may not make any money, but you'll get a glass of tea out of it. She don't feel like it's free. She's happy. You're happy.

What's a typical night at work like for you?

I open and clean a bit, check the sound equipment and make sure nothing's gone missing that's going to aggravate the bartenders. I make the popcorn and check to see if everything's prepped for the bar—but I won't do their chores. I find a bartender who didn't restock the night before, I'm gonna kick his ass. I go home, get something to eat, watch TV or read a book and unwind, and then I get ready for the mayhem and shit show. When I come in, I look around, size it all up and within the first three steps, I know how the rest of my night's going to go.

How does running a bar differ from, say, working on a crab boat in Alaska?

This is tough business; hardest job I've ever had. Not physically, but all the rest of it. I see the best and worst in people and I have to appease a larger demographic that I would never have spent my time appeasing before. I would have just said, "Get away from me, or I'll punch you in the face," but now I can't do that. And it's made me a better man, a stronger man. And anything that does that is going to be exhausting, but with the ranch, I can go somewhere for a few

days and not worry—something might happen but most likely it won't. I leave this bar, it's ever-living in the back of my skull because the odds are against me. Somebody might get shot, place might burn down, the TABC may come crashing in here pulling their Gestapo shit. Any number of things can go wrong because so many people are involved.

Would you agree that Marfa is a very polarizing place? How do you keep that discord out of the bar?

Well, for starters, I don't put up with no foolishness and everybody knows it. Intellectual conversations are welcome; I like them, I enjoy them. Keep a civil tongue in your mouth, or I will show you the door; personal outbursts are for your own property, not mine. And you can't make somebody else uncomfortable just because they're rooting for the other thing.

Let's chat about livestock.

Oh yeah, every once in a while, somebody brings something weird in here. Ain't nobody brought an ostrich in, yet. Or a monkey. Sometimes someone will bring a horse in here. As long as you've got a credit card, or cash in your pocket, I don't mind.

What's the craziest thing you've ever seen at work?

Before I owned this place, a guy got shot and killed on that pool table right there. But, these stories happen in every small-town bar in America that's been around for a while. There are also weddings [*Mitchell met his second wife, Astrid Rosenfeld, at the Lost Horse when she was visiting from her native Germany*], divorces, births, mayhem, crying, laughing.

What are locals ordering?

Lone Star, Bud Light, Negro Modelo, Zapata and Espolón tequilas, and Jameson.

And the tourists?

First thing they want is a microbrew 'cause a lot of people just go for microbrew shit, for some reason. I don't know why, it tastes like crap, but they go, "Hmmm, yeah, ooh, that's hoppy." But I live for them sonofabitches ordering a Martini; you will leave here in tears unless you got a hell of a sense of humor, because boy, have I got some ammunition to throw at your ass. Don't nobody like a Martini. If they say they like it, they're lying. They just want to be James Bond or the dad in *My Three Sons* or some shit like that. I keep the Martini stuff behind the bar for profiling purposes.

What's the biggest misconception people have about Marfa?

The thing about this place is, you do your own thing. We don't have much to offer a tourist except relaxation, beautiful scenery and a good time. You can enjoy a \$200 meal or a corn dog at the gas station. This ain't Disney World, it's just Marfa. Fuck, we ain't figured it out yet. You can go down to the river, up in the mountains, out to the desert or visit the park. All of that is right here.

What do you love most about living here?

Besides the Big Bend? I've traveled the world and the greatest thing about owning this bar or just being in Marfa is we get visitors from all over the world. I'm very culture-oriented, and I'm very curious. I love other cultures; traveling cured a lot of prejudices I had growing up and enabled me to see that all humans are equal, we're all the same. I can get my culture fix now, just by sitting here.

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