

# TRUE CALLING

*Retired professor realized one day he was meant to be a performer*

BY JOHANNA KING  
For the Journal

“I’ll sing you a true song of Billy the Kid, I’ll sing of the desperate deeds that he did.”

Way out in New Mexico, long, long ago

When a man’s only chance was his own 44.”

Ramblin’ Ralph, the “world’s oldest living cowboy,” sings the Woody Guthrie ballad as he plucks out a tune on his autoharp and spins a tale of days spent riding alongside the state’s legendary outlaw.

He’s quick to tell his audiences the song is distasteful; there was a whole other side to his fellow cowboy, his friend, whom few really knew or understood.

Just as there was a whole other side to the troubadour’s alter ego, Ralph Estes, who spent most of his life as an accountant, business professor, author and social activist.

Estes may be better known around these parts as Ramblin’ Ralph, who performs as part of the New Mexico Humanities Council’s Chautauqua programs, which are designed to bring history to life.

When channeling the cowboy, Estes is fulfilling his dream to sing, play music, tell tales and entertain. It’s a far cry from teaching business, balancing books or fighting injustice in Washington, D.C. And it’s just where the 72-year-old Estes wants to be.

“He didn’t want to do what he was doing anymore. He, by golly, wanted to sing. So he made a complete lane change to do something he always dreamed of doing,” says Martha Buck, Estes’ wife of 21 years.

Estes, who has lived with Buck for the past couple of years in a Corrales home with spectacular views of the Sandia Mountains, remembers the life-changing moment.

He had retired as a business professor at the American University in Washington and was working on corporate

reform through the Center for the Advancement of Public Policy when he and his wife joined two other couples for dinner.

One of the guests brought out a guitar, and the group spent much of the evening singing traditional folk songs, including “You Are My Sunshine.”

“I realized driving home that night, ‘Gee, I really enjoyed doing that, more than anything else. Singing with friends.’ It was an epiphany,” he says.

Soon afterward he hired a voice coach, and in his late 60s began pursuing a career in music.

## In the background

Despite spending most of his life traveling along the paths of business, education and social activism, Estes says music always has held a special place in his heart.

“I’ve always surrounded myself with music,” he says. “It’s always been a love of mine. I couldn’t play, and I couldn’t sing, but I made up for it with enthusiasm.”

Growing up in the hills of Kentucky, he remembers listening to the Grand Ole Opry on a small, battery-powered radio, holding a wire in his hand for better reception.

He remembers buying a record player with his first Air Force paycheck and hauling it with him when he was stationed in Japan.

After moving to Texas to head the business department at the University of Texas at Arlington, he recalls being inspired by country singer Jimmie Dale Gilmore and enthralled by music’s influence in the Lone Star State.

“It’s the best place in the states, or maybe on Earth, for music,” says Estes, who, during his stint in Texas, also served as president of the Texas Civil Liberties Union and Accountants for the Public Interest.

“Every time there was a meeting of some type,

someone had a guitar and we were always singing,” he says.

Estes also recalls buying a classical guitar with S&H Green Stamps in Fort Worth and trying unsuccessfully to teach himself to play.

Estes says he bought an autoharp from a friend and asked the friend to teach him to play it a couple of years later.

“He told me, ‘You take your thumb and you strum it till it bleeds, and then you keep on strumming until the bleeding stops,’” Estes says.

## Packed away

When he moved to Washington, he packed up the instruments.

“For 15 years, they stayed in their cases. They didn’t do music in Washington. They listened to music. But they didn’t ‘do’ music. It was so sad. I couldn’t re-create the Texas scene.”

During that time, Estes says, he was dedicated to professional activism. The business professor worked with social activist Ralph Nader, testified on Capitol Hill and wrote books, such as “Who Pays? Who Profits?,” “Corporate Social Accounting” and “Accounting and Society.”

He refers to that time as a dark period — at least musically.

“I wasn’t happy. I felt like an impostor. I felt like I wasn’t accomplishing much.”

## Creating a character

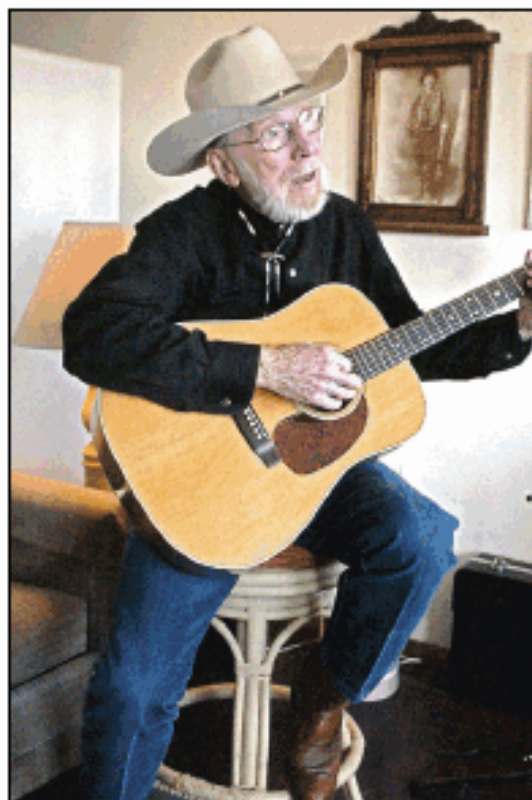
After that musical dinner with friends, Estes found a voice teacher who became a mentor and inspiration. He became friends with people in the music business, helped with bookings and occasionally was asked to fill in at performances. He put together a solo act about a cowboy born in 1859 who went “up the trail” with several cowhands and met Wyatt Earp, Calamity Jane, Wild Bill Hickok and many other famous Westerners.

That cowboy was Ramblin’



OPPOSITE PAGE: G. CRIDER/JOURNAL

Ramblin’ Ralph, Billy the Kid’s sidekick, is Ralph Estes’ persona in a program he developed for schools and senior centers.



Retired business professor Ralph Estes says music always has held a special place in his heart.

Ralph, who became Billy the Kid’s sidekick in the show Estes developed for the Chautauqua program.

That program includes presenters dressed as historical figures. They’ve brought their educational performances to schools, senior centers, meetings and other venues, according to the New Mexico Humanities Council.

Estes performs as Ramblin’ Ralph about once a month across the state, including in

Lincoln, where he has shared the story of how he and Billy found themselves in the middle of that county’s notorious feud.

Now that he’s living his dream, Estes encourages others to pursue theirs.

“When you finally step out on that stage, in front of all those others who are waiting to step on the stage after you, you’ll realize they aren’t waiting for you to fall on your face. They want to see you succeed.”