



JAVIER MANZANO/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS
James Guercio, with his daughter Kate inside the ranch's main lodge, has a variety of business interests outside the music industry.

Music isn't only thing Caribou's Guercio has turned to gold

Caribou Ranch owner James Guercio would like a book written about the ranch, but it should really be about him. The Chicago native, 62, picked up the guitar at 5, playing traditional Italian music for Sunday dinner. He later toured with Dick Clark's traveling rock revue, wrote hits for Chad & Jeremy, produced the Grammy Award-winning album of the year for Blood, Sweat & Tears and Chicago's biggest hits.

He revived the Beach Boys in the '70s, founded Country Music Television and is a major landowner in Colorado and Montana. He also has his hand in cattle ranching, as well as energy and mineral investments. On the side, Guercio has amassed one of the world's largest private collections of Gen. George Custer's papers.

Guercio has been married more than 30 years to the former Lucy Angle, a '60s and '70s supermodel who appeared on the covers of *Elle*, *Mademoiselle*, *Look* and more. She does extensive volunteer work for groups that range from Meals on Wheels to the Center of the American West.

Youngest son Peter Guercio is a junior at the University of Colorado. Will Guercio, 28, handles the real estate and development portions of the Guercio empire; he brokered the first subdivision approved in Nederland in 25 years.

Daughter Kate graduated from Duke University, was a talent agent in Hollywood for years, then came home for her MBA and now is chief operating officer of Guercio's Caribou holdings.

"My role is to put myself out of work,"

Jim Guercio said.

Caribou Records is being revived with the March reissue of the late Beach Boys member Dennis Wilson's only solo album, *Pacific Ocean Blue*, with a second disc of unreleased Wilson songs.

"It's the only piece of Beach Boys work that somebody else owns (besides the Beach Boys)," Guercio said.

Caribou Films also is gearing up to produce movies from Ivan Dool (The Whistling Season) and Les Roberts (*The Fish Sports Pages*), with scripts nearly complete.

RockyMountainNews.com

See for yourself

- Take a video tour of Caribou Ranch with James Guercio and ranch manager John Carsello.
 - The Rocky's Mark Brown discusses the studio in a video.
 - View an audio slide show of albums shot at the ranch and listen to music recorded there.
- By Laressa Bachelder/
Rocky Mountain News



Caribou Ranch manager John Carsello, on the porch of the mess hall, says musicians would just show up. "The In-a-Gadda-Da-Vida guys, Iron Butterfly, were sitting out there one day when I was driving out. They said, 'Hey, you think we can get in here?' I brought 'em in."

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A musical timeline

- Selected albums recorded or mixed at Caribou Ranch:**
- Barnstorm**, 1972, Joe Walsh
 - The Smoker You Drink the Player You Get**, 1973, Joe Walsh, (Single, Rocky Mountain Way)
 - Down the Road**, 1973, Manassas, with Stephen Stills (Single, *Isn't It About Time*)
 - All American Boy**, 1973, Rick Derringer (Single, *Rock 'n' Roll Hoortle Koo*)
 - Chicago VI**, 1973, Chicago, (Singles, *Feelin'*, *Stronger*, *Every Day*, *Just You 'n' Me*)
 - Caribou, 1974, Elton John

- Chicago VII, 1974 (Single, *Wishin' You Were Here*)
- Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy**, 1975, Elton John
- Trouble in Paradise**, 1975, Southern-Hillman-Turay Band
- Open Our Eyes**, 1975, Earth, Wind and Fire, included the song Caribou
- That's the Way of the World**, 1975, Earth Wind and Fire
- One Size Fits All**, 1975, Frank Zappa
- Blue Sky, Night Thunder**, 1975, Michael Martin Murphy (Single, *Wildfire*)
- Illegal Stills**, 1976, Stephen Stills

- Hideaway**, 1976, America
- A Night on the Town** 1976, Rod Stewart (Single, *Tonight's the Night*)
- Chicago X, 1976 (Single, *If You Leave Me Now*)
- Wired**, 1976, Jeff Beck
- Home Is Where the Heart Is**, 1976, David Cassidy
- Even in the Quietest Moments**, 1977, Supertramp (Single, *Give a Little Bit*)
- Simple Things**, 1977, Carole King
- Pacific Ocean Blue**, 1977, Dennis Wilson
- Nether Lands**, 1977, Dan Fogelberg

- I've Always Been Crazy**, 1978, Waylon Jennings
- Phoenix**, 1979, Dan Fogelberg
- L.A. (Light Album)**, 1979, Beach Boys
- Horizon**, 1980, Eddie Rabbit (Singles, *Drivin' My Life Away*, *I Love a Rainy Night*)
- To the Bone**, 1981, Kris Kristofferson
- Age to Age**, 1982, Amy Grant
- Young Blood**, 1983, Carl Wilson
- Christmas Album**, 1983, Amy Grant
- Michael Jackson recording for Bad**, 1984
- Unguarded**, 1985, Amy Grant

On the cover

- Chicago VI, Supertramp's *Even in the Quietest Moments*, Elton John's Caribou and U2's *Live Under a Blood Red Sky* were all worked on at Caribou Ranch.

ALBUMS COVERED BY COURTNEY & SHOUT



John Lennon spent part of his famous "lost weekend" there. Michael Jackson did some recording for Bad. Billy Joel penned *New York State of Mind*. And Stevie Wonder? Well, he drove a car up at the famous Caribou studio.

Reliving the ranch

Stories by Mark Brown ■ Rocky Mountain News

After a 1985 fire closed the recording studio, some people thought Caribou Ranch shut down. But it remained a working cattle operation where owner Jim Guercio raised his family, kept a low profile and concentrated on other business interests.

Now, some of those businesses are being managed by his children and Guercio is moving back to music with the upcoming reissue of a Dennis Wilson album, *Pacific Ocean Blue*. The time seemed right to end his silence and reopen the gates to the ranch near Nederland that once hosted artists

STAKING A CLAIM

How a sibborn record producer found a musical paradise

James Guercio, first saw the Rocky Mountains in the '60s, while touring as a guitarist for Chad & Jerry, when disc-jockey Hal Moore took him to Central City. ("I walked the streets of Central City and looked at the trees and the mountains. I said someday this would be where I live," Walter, as a producer in New York and Los Angeles, combining undertones about what he could and couldn't do behind the mixing desk, frustrated him.

James Guercio: They'd unionized the studios; I couldn't touch a button. They heard I was caring stuff so they put a union steward in and threatened to fine me. I was 19 and I just said, this is not the creative process.

In 1968 I had heard up in Billings and Bozeman and found a really pretty ranch. We went into this bar, I had kinda long hair, I think it was in Bigfork. These guys said, "You're buying that ranch and building a studio? We'll give you a haircut with a chainsaw. You can't make that up. It was like Deliverance.

Guercio became close with Texas entrepreneur Layton Humphrey, who helped search for a ranch. The pair were stranded at the old Stapleton airport in '69 when they missed a connection. Guercio: He says, "You know, I fight outside of Boulder my uncle owned the prettiest ranch when I was a kid, but he sold it a long time ago. . . . We drove in here, and there were people everywhere. A quick-draw contest. A barbecue. Horses. Firms invited hundreds of 1,000 people, cars everywhere. And everything was painted turquoise. It was going to be (a subdivision) called the Caribou Ranch Country Club Estates.

Layton said, "That's the right place. It's got a college. They're not going to cut your hair with a chainsaw. . . . and you're an hour from Stapleton. It took Guercio two years to purchase the main ranch. Kenny Passarella: Jimmy was a working musician from the start. He's a guy who's a visionary from way back. (He built Caribou) from a musician's point of view. He wanted a place where he could live and at the same time do some recording. Guercio: Was at a point in my life when huge success and said, "You know, people are going to continue to my environment. I'm not going to conform to theirs." They all refused — Chicago, all these guys. We're not going up to the mountains. They eventually out-jut when I first started. I had a lot of resistance. Richie Furray: It was quite the place. Jimmy took care of you. I lived about three miles from Caribou for a long time. The one thing I remember is the meals were incredible. It was five-star dining up there. And the studio itself, you were isolated. You were there to do business. You were there to work. Passarella: It turned into something way beyond belief, a destination recording spot. Those didn't exist.

FIRST NOTES

An earthquake results in a seismic shift in the recording landscape

Producer Bill Szymczyk and Joe Walsh were the first to use the studio, both having just moved to Colorado.

Szymczyk: I was living in Los Angeles in '71 when the earthquake hit. . . . to me that was a sign. Walsh: After the earthquake he just freaked out and moved to Colorado.

Szymczyk: Walsh came through with the James Gang. He said, "I'm thinking about quitting the band and starting a solo career." I said, "Move out there. I'm not sure how he found Nederland, to be honest with you. He just

ranging from Joe Walsh to Etton John, Stephen Stills to Michael Jackson, and produced records that sold in excess of 100 million copies combined. So on a recent wintry day Guercio, Kenny Passarella (bassist for John and Walsh, among others) and longtime ranch manager John Carsello sat near a crackling blaze in the lodge to recall three decades of music history. Rocky pop music writer Mark Brown spoke with several other musicians, including Walsh and Richie Furray (Buffalo Springfield, Poco), about their memories to fill in this recollection.

"It was always a big adventure. They had the mess hall, then all those little cabins. Horses. We had nice chilled French wine in our saddlebags, herds of elk, galloping out in the countryside. Sometimes they'd light a big bonfire. It was very much like summer camp."

Henry Bliz, legendary rock photographer, about the 70s recording sessions he shot at Caribou Ranch

wanted to be as isolated as possible. We knew (Guercio) was building (a studio). Oh my God, a studio here, how nice would that be? We went over when he was in the beginning stages of it.

Guercio gave studio designer Tom Hilder a mandate to make the big barn at Caribou the world's best recording facility.

Guercio: I said, "Tom, I'll give you a care package. He just did the layout — the control room and the monitors. He was the top designer in the county.

Walsh: They had one room done, still working on the other. That's when I formed the band Barnstorm. We were the first album that came out of Caribou Ranch.

The 1972 sessions nearly derailed when Guercio headed to Hollywood to produce and direct the Robert Blake movie, "Elextra dilid

Szymczyk: He was going to put it on hold a good six, eight months. Joe and I just ganged up on him and said, "No, no, no, you get something in here for us. He went away to do his movie and Joe and I

moved in.

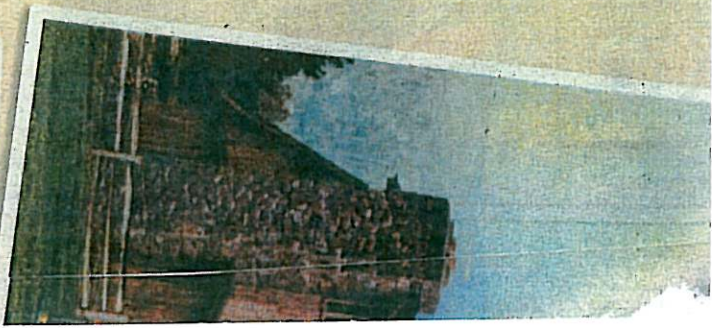
Caribou had yet to become a luxury recording site, though. Passarella: We were recording when the barn was being completed. We were (turning) down the elevator shaft.

Szymczyk: We were on our own. There was no maintenance guy. No studio manager. Nothing. The buildings were there but they hadn't been refurbished. There was a mess hall from when it was a working ranch but there was no one there to cook. We stowed up with our lunch.

Walsh: There was a great artistic community in those days around Denver. Tommy Bolin was alive and well. (Stephen) Stills was in Colorado with Manassas. Richie Furray from Buffalo Springfield was there. A whole bunch of folks. It was a real creative time for all of us.

Guercio brought in a \$250,000 custom-made Olive mixing board that wasn't reliable. Guercio: The Olive was way

Continued on next page



Top: A rainbow hovers, converted into a studio. **Above, center:** Stephen at the ranch, was photo during a break in a '70s album. **Above:** Carl Wilson recording Beach Boys album and photos courtesy of Caribou Ranch

More memories
 ■ John Lennon visited to record *Imagine*.
 ■ Musicians looking to blow Pioneer Inn to jam and party.
 ■ The land where the ranch's

"The one thing I remember is the meals were incredible. It was five-star dining up there. And it you were isolated. You were there to do business. You were there to work." Richie Furray, of Buffalo Springs

THE RANCH
 LASSAS
 CARIBOU RANCH
 GASTIN, WINDS & FIRE
 BILLY JOEL TURNSTILES
 JEFF BECK WIRE

Cover story

“Elton (John) would write a whole album in one week and cut it in one week. No distractions, you’re set up. That was the whole concept.” James Guercio, owner, Caribou Ranch

Continued from previous page ahead of his time. I loved it. The first two things I cut on it were No. 1 records: (Chicago’s) *Foolin’*, *Stranger*, *Every Day* and just *You’re My Man*. (But) Bill Szymczyk said, Jim, this is a science project. I gotta be able to walk in here and walk out. We found a Neve [board] that [Beales producer] George Martin had that came from London... for people [who needed] something that’s bullet-proof.”

With hit singles like Walsh’s “Rocky Mountain Way” hitting radio, suddenly the ranch at 9,000 feet looked ideal for creating music, and not just for its state-of-the-art facilities.

Guercio: Elton [John] would write a whole album in one week and cut it in one week. No distractions, you’re set up. That was the whole concept. It bothered me to be pushing the clock, so never allowed clocks here.

SONIC BOOM

High altitude creates problems and a distinctive sound

John Carrasco: I was showing the band and everybody the control room and you know what Elton said? He goes, “Is this where [Rick Derringer’s] *All American Boy* was done?” I said, yes. He said, “That’s the sound I want.”

Guercio: You could sing an octave higher. The sounds were different at that elevation and never knew that. We didn’t understand this. The engineers all had theories... [Producer] Tommy Dowd great guy, he was an atomic scientist. He’d tell me what I’m telling you. He called and said, “I gotta bring Rod [Stewart] up, he can’t hit these notes. He came up and we put Rod and Britt Ekland in a cabin... if *You Leave Me Now*, Chicago, they had to come up here. Could never hit the notes [at sea level].”

Passarelli: All of a sudden it turned into this destination. People wanted to come and record here. I don’t know if that’s really what he had in mind originally.

Guercio: I realized after I had all this investment that we had to have cooks and we had to let people in. Even though Stephen [Stills] thinks we overcharged, we never made a penny. After the Army Grants and some of these acts that had no money... what we should have done was taken points.

Altitude had its drawbacks.

Passarelli: [Gleesman] Freddie King is coming up with his bus. Three hundred pounds, he’s a big man. I’ll never forget. He said, “Yeah, I’m going to need the oxygen mask right away.”

STIR CRAZY

Not everyone prized the mountain solitude

Szymczyk: If anyone wanted to go boogie at night you were in deep [trouble]. You had to go down the highway to get to Boulder. The J. Galls Band, they were just complete city guys. I had to convince them, “Come on guys, come out there.” They were not at all for the idea to come to Caribou to mix for a week and a half.

By day three they were bitching and moaning. Why do you have us here? There was nothing to do but eat, sleep and work. For some that was the drawing card, for others it would drive them



Bassist Kenny Passarelli, who recorded with Elton John and Joe Walsh, credits Guercio with turning Caribou Ranch into the first destination recording spot.

nuts.

Some bands ducked down to the Pioneer Inn in Nederland to jam with local bands and blow off steam. One night the late Dan Fogelberg brought up a woman from the bar in his new Toyota Land Cruiser. The woman’s boyfriend found out and called, demanding she immediately leave.

Passarelli: She was so freaked out that she grabbed his keys and jumped in his new Toyota. She didn’t make the turn and ended up in the lake [on the property]. One of the owners of the Pioneer Inn had come up with Dan from the bar [with] \$2,000 in cash from the bar and receipts. Somebody had to go down there [in the lake] and get it. They had to put them in the dryer with the clothes — drying \$2,000 from the Pioneer Inn.

Carrasco: Dan’s going, “Oh no, my car’s ruined! But I started... I said, ‘We have to do a Toyota commercial!’”

Henry Dilz (legendary rock photographer): The ladies were particularly nice feature of that place. You could become friends, you know? Those little Colorado hottie girls. There was lots of fraternization going on. These girls lived up there. They served breakfast, lunch and dinner, made your bed and put wine in your room. They were there later in the evening in case you wanted anybody to talk to.

Passarelli: The studio was the party place. The cabins, sure. But when you weren’t recording you were upstairs playing pool, trying to clear your ears out a little bit, just having a grand old time up there to say the least.

Elton John and his band drove down to the Red Barn in Boulder for burgers one day. At the time he was the richest rock star in music history.

Carrasco: He said, “I’m going to go in there and freak them out. He’s got his apple glasses on with the diamond studs. And all the people are freakin’ out. We were in the parking lot, watching through the window. He came out with two stacks of hamburgers and hot dogs.”

IT REALLY HAPPENED

From Steve Wonder driving to Michael Jackson’s secret sessions

Stories abound from the studio’s heyday. When it was constantly booked with the biggest names in music: Earth, Wind & Fire, John Lennon, America, David Cassidy, Steve Wonder, Stevie Nicks and more.

Kate Guercio (daughter): As a kid growing up I never knew that they were any different. I loved riding horses and I’d take people horseback riding... not really knowing they were really famous. It was quite a unique upbringing, but I still had chores.

Guercio: Michael Jackson was here during *Thriller*. We were able to keep it quiet for about a week.

Carrasco: People just show up at the gate. The *In-a-Gadd-a-Da-Vida* guys, from Butterfly, were sitting out there one day when I was driving out. They said, “Hey, you think we can get in here?” I brought them in.

Passarelli: In 1975 we took a helicopter to see the Rolling Stones at CSU. Jimmy arranged a helicopter. It was unbelievable.

Elton John joined the Stones onstage for what was supposed to be a song or two.

Guercio: Elton wouldn’t get off the stage. [The Stones’ road manager said] “Jimmy, get him off the stage!” [The sponsor] “It’s Elton John! It’s a great piano player.” “Well, we want him off the stage!” Carrasco: They threw us all out. The road manager came backstage and said, “Everybody from Elton John’s band and the Caribou Ranch, you have to leave!” But we used their limos to go back up here. We pulled through McDonald’s on the way back, a limo entrance through McDonald’s.

The main lodge and its multiple bedrooms are filled with stuffed hunting trophies from the turn of the century. Guercio: Chicago used to call this ‘Slaughter in Bambl Land.’ My wife

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collected all of the animals and put them here because she didn’t approve. There was a guy down the road who was a big game hunter. Some of these are weird — a baby grizzly mounted. He killed a baby grizzly. I have me the creeps.

Carrasco: The girls used to play pranks on the bands. They took the wild boar and put it in Billy Joel’s bed. Liberty DeVitto, Billy Joel’s drummer, used baby powder. They replaced it with powdered sugar. He starts sweating through his shirt. It was great stuff.

And yes, the rumor was true: Stevie Wonder drove a car at the ranch while recording with John.

Guercio: Let him drive my Jeep.

Everybody went “Aughh!” had the wheel [without anyone knowing]. I said, “OK, go a little bit, no, too far!” It was the greatest thing in his life. He never forgot that.

Passarelli: [Wonder would] walk around with a Polaroid taking pictures.

Guercio: He said, “Jimmy, is this true?”

Guercio: “Yes, Stevie!”

Carrasco: Stevie helped one of the girls change a flat tire. All the other guys are standing around watching her try to do it. Stevie comes out of the cabin and changes the tire for her.

Passarelli: What about when Al Green came up here?

Guercio: He wouldn’t get in the station wagon. He said, “I ain’t getting in no wagon. Where’s my limo?” Al Green rides in a limo!

MUSICAL MUSE

More than one song was inspired by the ranch

Passarelli: Elton John’s Caribou was all written here.

Carrasco: Maurice White [of Earth, Wind & Fire] wrote *Shining Star* up here, walking around looking at the sky. Eddie Rabbit’s *Driving My Life Away*, *Step By Step* and *Love a Rainy Night*, three No. 1s in a row, all written up here. Running Bear, that’s the house where Don’t Let the Sun Go Down on Me was written [by John]. Billy Joel

wrote a lot of songs. He wrote *New York State of Mind* up here because he was up here. Been high in the Rockies under the evergreens.”

Guercio: U2 mixed their Red Rocks thing [*Under a Blood Red Sky*]... they came up to hang out and then they ended up staying and mixing that Red Rocks show.

The cover of Supertramp’s “Even in the Quietest Moments” features a snow-covered grand piano on top of a Caribou mountain.

Carrasco: That’s Lake Eldora, right behind the ranch. We actually hauled the piano up there and blew snow on it. Passarelli: That piano in the other room — Elton wrote the entire *Rock of the Westies* album in nine days. He sat with the lyric pages at that piano.

Carrasco: The Beach Boys coming up here and recording *Wildfire*, *You Were Here* [with Chicago] was incredible — all in the studio at the same time, stuff you just wish you’d had a motion-picture camera. When the Beach Boys did that take of *Wishin’ You Were Here*, they tried all night. And Carl [Wilson] said, “OK, we’ll do one more. Right now.” And that’s the take you hear on the song.

FIRST ENDING

How drugs and a fire ended a musical era

In March 1985 a fire started. While most of the studio was unscathed, the control room was a near-total loss.

Carrasco: It was an electrical fire from a space heater in the kitchen. It started in the insulation and just smoldered from there.

Guercio could have rebuilt, but the thrill had faded as the music industry grew more decadent.

Funny: They didn’t really respect what Jim had going. I guess musicians can be like that. They can trash the place out. I think I got frustrated with that as well.

Passarelli: There were some creative things that came out of [drugs]. But it also had bitter end and destructive end. People were spending too much on records. Budgets were too high because people were too high.

Guercio: I had kids to raise and there were a lot of drugs showing up. I just didn’t want it. Then we had the fire. I said, “Take a break.”

Though the studio proper closed in 1985 Army Grants “Guarded” was the last album recorded there, that wasn’t the end of music at the ranch. Producer Pat Leonard brought Jeff Beck up in the 90s and set up a ProTools rig in a cabin. Guercio: He had all these delays — the drummer’s in London, the bass player’s in L.A. He had it all synchronized. They’re playing [elsewhere], and Jeff Beck is sitting on the front porch.

The legend is that songs and albums made at Caribou sold 100 million copies.

Guercio: I never realized it up, but that’s low. Chicago says they did 100 [million], and we did 50 [million] of them there. [That doesn’t count Elton John, Joe Walsh, Supertramp or others.] I thought with our track record we were the highest-rated studio in the world, but I never proved it.”

Musicians have urged Guercio to reopen Caribou, to no avail.

Guercio: We might know, Al [King]. You could do post-production, you could do film. Spielberg and these guys are having the same problems with union mixing. We could light all up here.”

The real issue is the current state of the music industry. Guercio: There is no [musical] business. Everybody’s out of business.

Lennon's visit had the staff on their toes

By the mid '70s, the staff at Caribou Ranch was pretty blasé about having big names around. But when John Lennon visited for four days in July 1974, everyone struggled to keep their cool.

"It was very funny. There were a lot of stars up here," said ranch manager John Carsello. "But when John came up, we all couldn't believe it."

It was during Lennon's 14-month "Lost Weekend," when he was separated from Yoko Ono and included his infamous ejection from the Troubadour for drunkenly heckling the Smothers Brothers. He was accompanied to Caribou by girlfriend May Pang for a long weekend to add guitar and vocal to Elton John's take on *Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds*.

"We had a great time," Pang said in a recent phone interview. "John enjoyed that. It wasn't his show. He could do it for someone else then walk away."

It was a nice break for Lennon, particularly because the U.S. government was trying to have him deported for his antiwar stance. "It was at the time he was trying to get his green card and they were trying to throw him out,"

Carsello said. "I remember him saying, 'Yeah, I hope they let me stay in New York. It reminds me of home.'"

Certainly the Caribou staff made Lennon feel at home, Pang said. "Everybody made us feel really comfortable. Elton wanted to be sure that John had fun. That's exactly what John did have."

"The boss said whatever John wanted, let's make sure he gets it -- the boss meaning Elton," Pang continued. "You could see everyone was all excited and they were afraid to say anything."

Carsello's sister and mother happened to be visiting that weekend and ate dinner in the mess hall with the crew.

"It was (guitarist) Davey Johnstone's little boy's birthday. So we all sang *Happy Birthday*. My sister goes, 'Now I can say I sang with Elton John and John Lennon,'" Carsello said.

"He had a great sense of humor. He was fantastic," said owner James Guercio, though Lennon nearly roasted at night. "Elton cranked the heat and we had to help him open the windows. I said, 'You can move wherever you want' but he said, 'Elton wants me to stay here.'"

Guercio was in a delicate position, because he'd helped Paul McCartney mix the 1971 *Ram* album; Lennon felt several of the songs on that album were digs at him. Lennon had also gone on the record years before dismissing Guercio's "sterile" and "antiseptic" production of the second Blood, Sweat and Tears album and its hit *Spinning Wheel*.

"He was eating breakfast one morning and I said, 'Listen, John, let's clear this up.' He said, 'Oh no, I knew this was going to happen. . . . I knew you were going to bring that up,'" Guercio said with a laugh. "I said, 'No, John, you're right. I had a dysfunctional group. I had to find a singer. It was totally antiseptic.'"

That broke the ice, though "we were kind of guarded because I didn't want to get into Paul. It was definitely tense."

Lennon and Pang set the town on its ear when they borrowed Carsello's car for a trip down to Nederland for toothbrushes and a visit to Boulder to buy cowboy boots. "He freaked everyone out in town," Carsello said, but he signed autographs for anyone who wanted one.

"John was not opposed to just going



PHOTO COURTESY OF CARIBOU RANCH

The only known photo of John Lennon's session with Elton John.

out. He enjoyed all that -- the quaint country, just walking down the street. He loved that part of Americana," Pang said.

The recording sessions were quick. Halfway through *Lucy in the Sky*, the guitars and vocals take on a reggae feel. "That was John's idea. John always liked ska and reggae music," Pang said. "He did that and (the single's B-side)

One Day at a Time."

Pang said: "I was not prepared (for the altitude). I don't think John was prepared.

In the recording studio I said, 'John, what's this?' He said, 'That's an oxygen tank.' I didn't understand that the air was this crisp and thin that you might need it. When John was recording, every so often they'd take some oxygen, get some breath in."



LARISSA BACHELOR/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

A cowboy painting by the late Dan Fogelberg hangs behind Pioneer Inn owner Bunny Spangler.

Pioneer Inn eventually warmed to musicians

The sign outside the Pioneer Inn made John Carsello hesitate: "No longhairs or unkempt beards allowed."

The grocery store next door had a similar sign: "No more than two hippies at a time" allowed inside.

But the disapproving looks the Caribou Ranch manager got when he stepped inside the Pioneer Inn convinced him he was at the wrong place.

"We thought, 'we're really gonna love this place,'" he said in a recent interview about that first visit.

"(The locals) hated longhairs," said Bunny Spangler, who bought the Pioneer Inn in 1972 and has run it since. With Nederland's population at fewer than 500 people, "they didn't want any changes. The people in the town at the time were the old miners and the cowboys."

The Pioneer Inn, formerly Harry's Place, is a classic rough-hewn-wood Colorado bar. There's Pabst Blue Ribbon on tap, regulars who run a tab with a promise to pay later and great cheesburgers. Turn-of-the-century antiques and architecture fill the place. One former bartender "got tired of people asking where the restroom was" so he tattooed "RESTROOM" on one arm and used it to point the way, she said.

"We've always had a cast of characters here," said Spangler, who took down the "longhairs" sign and brought a bit more progressive attitude to the place when she took over. Another sure sign of change: It became the home away from home for the sisters who recorded at Caribou Studios. Recording at Caribou "was a minimum of distractions, except for the Pioneer Inn," recalled guitarist Joe Walsh.

"This was the one place they could go in town," Spangler said.

"When the bands wanted to go out for a beer, I brought them here," Carsello said. "They ended up jamming with the local musicians."

"The Pioneer Inn was the club, incredible jams. It was a nonstop happening, especially on a Friday night," said bassist Kenny Passarelli.

If these walls could talk, they'd hardly know where to start.

"Tommy Bolin played here," Carsello said. "Tom Scott and some of the guys with the L.A. Express. Of course, Dan Fogelberg,

Stephen Stills, Chicago, Three Dog Night, Joe Walsh, Supertramp. They would just jam with the local band that was playing. Dennis Wilson would sit in on drums. Fogelberg did actual shows, as did Stills. The Chicago guys would come in and jam, especially (the late guitarist) Terry Kath."

They'd just move the tables out of the back room and bring in guitars and amps through the back door.

"Joe Walsh actually worked behind the bar here for about 45 minutes before someone recognized him," said Addison Waite, the night manager. "He said, 'OK, I'm out of here' and went out the back door."

The Inn long sported a cowboy painting by Fogelberg, which Spangler now keeps at home. "I got nervous when people started asking me how much it'd sell it for."

"He was a good friend of Bunny's," Carsello said. "She took care of his dog" when he was on the road.

The musicians came because it was no big deal, just the local bar. No one bothered them.

"That was a crucial point. Everyone was absolutely respectful," Spangler said. "Those people came in, they enjoyed how much time they wanted to spend here and nobody bugged them."

Perhaps for that reason, no known tapes or photos of the performances exist. "We were so busy (with recording) at the studio we didn't think of it that way. This was a place for them to cut loose," Carsello said.

"It was sort of like family. You just didn't," Spangler said. "This was their private, private life. We were so honored that they came and played and had a great time."

Despite the closure of the recording studio, the bar's still a hangout. Wednesday nights see The Big Pick, a jam with various bluegrass musicians, and live music happens on Friday night, too. The Pioneer Inn even has a Myspace page, located at myspace.com/thepioneerinn.

"Robert Plant comes in now," Spangler said. "He loves to come up here and sit at the bar. Nobody says anything to him."

Before it hosted rock stars, the Pioneer Inn was Harry's Place, a classic rural Colorado bar.

COURTESY PIONEER INN



"Joe Walsh actually worked behind the bar here for about 45 minutes before someone recognized him. He said, 'OK, I'm out of here' and went out the back door." Addison Waite, Pioneer Inn night manager

Land around ranch used in many ways

During the early 1900s the land on which Caribou Ranch sits was one of the country's largest Arabian horse ranches. Later, it was a potato farm.

When James Guercio purchased the land in 1971, he started at 2,700 acres. During the next 30 years he added surrounding parcels to expand it to about 4,500 acres at its peak.

The acquisitions had their ups and downs. At one point Guercio was bidding for a 160-acre parcel. "I had a contract for \$160,000 for 160 acres. It was a lot of money in 1974."

Then someone started bidding against Guercio, who finally got it, but for \$250,000.

The seller "signed it over and I said, 'WHO WAS IT?'"

That's when he found out the bidder was Stephen Stills, who'd been recording at the ranch. Guercio recently remembered how he confronted the musician.

"Why didn't you pick up the phone, you SOB? You cost me \$100,000!"

A contentious 1996 deal with Boulder County to relinquish open space and watershed reduced his Caribou holdings to slightly more than 2,000 acres. But he retained tight control over the open space.

"They can't build a kiosk telling people where to walk without my approval. It's very restrictive. The public gets to use these trails several times a year."

Stories by Mark Brown/
Rocky Mountain News

MUSIC

Stars came out before Caribou

Originally Lazy VV ranch's Arabians lured celebrities



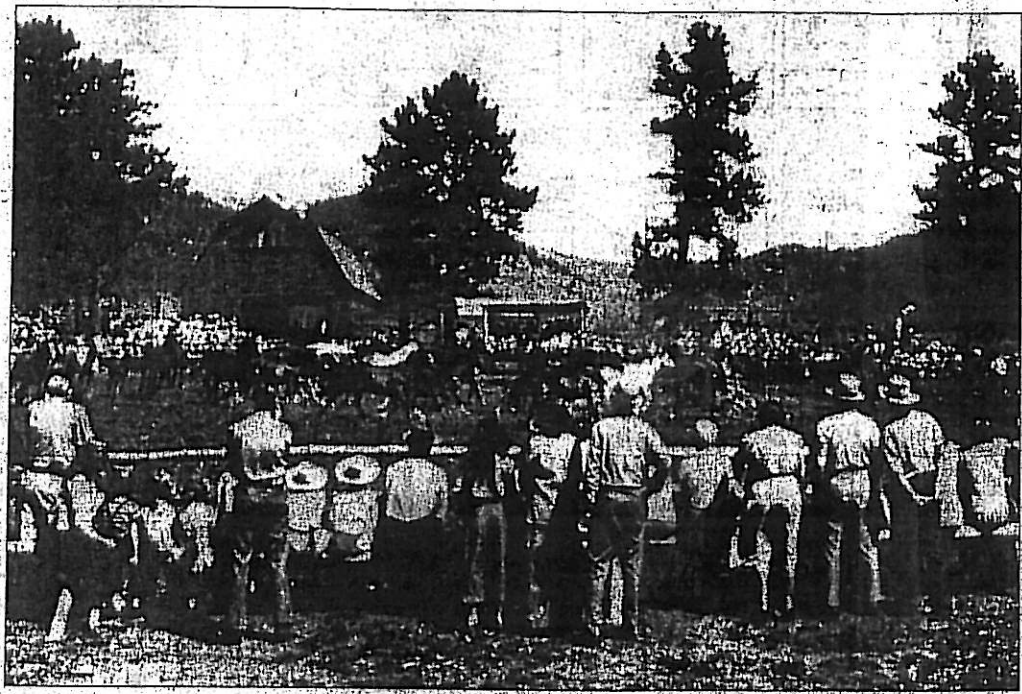
Mark Brown

With Caribou Ranch opening its gates for the first time in years for our special report last week, music fans were reminded of the big names that came there: Elton John, John Lennon, Joe Walsh.

Brian O'Meara was also reminded of the big names who came there: Ernest Hemingway, Gypsy Rose Lee, the Prince of Iraq.

Caribou's musical legacy is amazing; there's been an outpouring of e-mails and online chats from rock fans after owner James Guercio and his crew sat for the first extensive interviews in years about the albums recorded at the spot outside Nederland.

Caribou also was a celebrated destination in its original incarnation as an Arabian horse ranch and cattle operation. Known as the Lazy VV ranch (after the Van Vleet



A hand-colored photo of an Arabian horse and rider shows off the festive robes worn at a Sunday horse show at the Lazy VV Ranch.

A Sunday show draws a crowd of spectators. In the background is the barn that later was converted by James Guercio into the Caribou Ranch recording studio.

THE WESTERN COWBOY AND ARABIANS IN THE ROCKIES

RockyMountainNews.com

More Caribou

See a slide show of the Lazy VV Ranch in the days when it was an Arabian horse ranch. And check out our special report on the Caribou Ranch recording studio by going to the entertainment page.

family), the ranch was a destination for celebrities and made history long before its '70s recording-studio days. O'Meara spent his summers on the ranch as a child.

"I thought I was going to grow up to be a cowboy," said O'Meara, president of the car dealership that bears his name and a third-generation Coloradan. "I thought I was Hopalong Cassidy."

His maternal grandfather, L.W. Van Vleet, was a bean wholesaler who supplied Campbell's Soup and others. He decided to expand into cattle ranching in the 1920s, buying the ranch and stocking it with horses to work the herds.

"He wanted the smartest horse he could find. He thought the Arabian horse was the smartest

horse on the planet," O'Meara said.

That led to a 1928 trip to Egypt to bring back a contingent of the animals, which were a rarity in the United States. And people scoffed.

"You can't bring an Arabian horse from 120 degrees in the desert to 9,000 feet," he was told, O'Meara said. "He brought them here and, of course, they did fine. It became one of the biggest Arabian horse ranches in the world."

It became world-famous, with Warner Brothers filming three short documentaries there, including Arabians in the Rockies, a 1945 short showing the ranch and its horses in glorious color. There would be cattle drives down Boulder Canyon into town.

Celebrities followed.

"He entertained world-class people — Ernest Hemingway, (author) Mari Sandoz, Gypsy Rose Lee. Many of the opera singers at the Central City Opera," O'Meara said. "From businessmen to plumbers to brain surgeons to aviators. It was like a dude ranch, by invitation only. He'd bring in these eclectic people."

But the common man could get in, too.

"They had a horse show every Sunday (during warmer weather). Before the Denver Broncos and the Internet and TV, there was nothing to do. They'd have 5,000 people every Sunday watching the Arabian horse shows," O'Meara said.

Anyone wanting to relive a bit of that history can visit the car dealer

ship at 104th Avenue and Interstate 25, which has a couple of walls of memorabilia devoted to the ranch. You'll see photos, news stories and magazine spreads from the time, as well as the original chaps, saddles, hats, lassos, spurs and other equipment used on the ranch.

Caribou's recording legend spans the world — fans from as far away as Spain weighed in with love for the music made there after reading the story of the place. Some Internet and e-mail excerpts:

■ Rob: "I'm jealous that you got to see the studio — and the place where Elton wrote the *Blue* album — which I remember waiting in a very long line at my local record shop in ..."

when it came out in 1975."

■ Steve: "Thanks for opening the gates to Caribou Ranch. I was ecstatic to see that someone finally got access to the ranch, and brought some of this historic piece of Colorado music history to light. I have lived in Colorado all my life, and have always been interested in the musical history of this state."

■ Frank: "A great read that provides a fitting closing chapter (or maybe not?!) to the legendary, mysterious legend that is truly one of rock's high points — pun intended. Didn't know the full breadth of artists who had recorded/worked there."

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