

Songs of Experience

Dave Madill's highway poetry captures a life on the road.

By Duff McCutcheon



Photo courtesy of the Kelowna Daily Courier.

We can all thank an errant roll of cable falling on Dave Madill's head some years back for bringing out the poetry locked in his brain.

He was working on a construction site when he was knocked unconscious by the falling reel. The accident left him with a spotty memory and a terrible stutter.

"I stuttered so bad that I couldn't put two words together," the recently retired trucker said from his Westbank, B.C. home, near Kelowna. "At the time I had two small children – John and Ruby – so I communicated by writing brief notes to them

and my wife. To make it fun for the kids I started rhyming them, like 'put the dog out or I'll shout.' And that's where it all started."

He's since penned enough poetry to fill three books, the first of which, *Reflections Thru My Windshield*, was published last year by Write Up The Road Publishing, and the Truckers' Bookstore in Tennessee.

As poets go, you'll not see Madill's name anywhere near Byron, Shelley, or Keats on an

English Romantic Literature 302 required reading list. His is pretty rough stuff; but what it lacks in form, Madill makes up in heart, writing about such topics as the aftermath of a fatal car wreck he'd witnessed, missing his kids on the road, and many, many odes to his wife back home.

Madill's writing has an edge. And that's not surprising when you dig a bit into his background. Born in England as a "war baby," and raised in Anton Mills, Ont., Madill left home at 17 to join the Royal Canadian Air Force as an engine technician. In the late-60s, while his contemporaries were chilling out in the coffee houses, enjoying free love, and trying to change the world, Madill became a mercenary.

"To me I was fighting communism in my own way," he says. "Vietnam was going on, and I was next door in Laos and Cambodia working for a couple of different outfits in the employ of the Civilian Military Assistance Command, which was CIA. I served in South East Asia, South America, Africa – I

bumbled around the world. I got wounded a couple of times and decided I'd had enough so I came back to Canada and started driving.

"When I returned, I knew how to do two things: fix airplane engines and kill people. Is trucking less exciting? Well, yes and no. There's one thing about being a mercenary that's similar to trucking: there's hours of boredom followed by seconds of sheer terror. You're driving along the highway, everything's fine and boring, and then everything goes for shit in seconds. It's the same thing."

Madill already had his Class 1 licence after learning to drive on the farm when he was a kid – taking his test on a 1948 International tandem grain truck – so it wasn't too much of a stretch when he started his driving career for real. He ran for Dow in Calgary, as well as Canadian Freightways for a time, and then went to work for Wagoneers in 1971 as an owner operator. "I had a 1966 Hayes cabover, with a 318 Detroit with a 5-4 – she was the queen of the highway in her day," he says. "We were hauling drill mud out of Wyoming up to the oil patch and lumber back down. Most of my trucking career has been in the west."

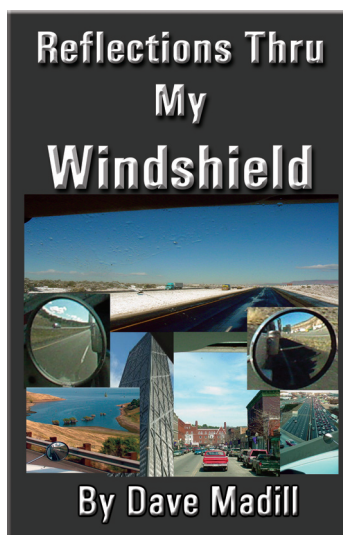
And the west, along with that fateful bump on the noggin 14 years ago, has been a great source of

inspiration to Madill. His favorite writers are all what you'd call frontier poets, like Robert Service and his *Songs of the Sourdough* and the *Cremation of Sam McGee*, as well as the famous Western author Louis L'Amour.

"A lot of my second book [due out later this year] is inspired by the west," he says. "I suppose the things I admire about the Western myths are also true of trucking, like the camaraderie between cowboys – and truckers for that matter. Or the idea of standing on your own two feet – of being a man. Rugged individualism. There's a lot of that in the trucking business; it's one of the last frontiers. What other job is there where you're looking out a picture window where the scenery changes by the moment? There's always something different to see. Plus you're on your own. You're the man, you're the boss, and you have to deal with things as they come, whether that's a snowstorm or a wreck on the road. There's something about that that appeals to me. It's the way I was raised – stomp your own snakes, stand up and be a man, that sort of thing.

"That whole idea is still there in trucking, but I think now it's more buried by the corporate image. The

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hard-bitten owner-op who's riding for the brand, but still independent? He's still there to an extent, but it's not like it used to be. It's something that's paled over the years. Now it's just a job. It's still a lifestyle, but it used to be a way of life."

Besides drawing on Western ideals of individualism and self-reliance, Madill also looks to the landscape for inspiration – especially the harsh, mountainous areas like Colorado and Alaska. "The same goes for northern B.C. and northern Ontario," he says. "There's a harsh ruggedness in those places that really appeals to me – the wildness of it all. You think about the people that went before you and the tales they could tell. I can sit by a lake and listen to the stories that the wind tells me."

If you had shared the road with Madill during his years on the road (he was forced into retire-

ment last year at age 60 after a bout with congestive heart failure), you might have been treated to an impromptu poetry reading via the CB. He says he would often be running with someone and would bounce poetry ideas off fellow drivers to get feedback.

But the citizen's band has always been full of tall tales and stories spun by tired truckers somewhere in the night, according to Madill. "There's a great tradition of storytelling in trucking," he says. "That will never change, though it was probably more so back in the 1960s and '70s when we used them to keep each other awake all night. I wish I could remember more of them – it was fun."

And that's a lot of what Madill's poetry is all about – a culmination of a lot of late nights and long days on the road, intermixed with a trucker's yearning for hearth and home. It's something most of us can relate to.★

Here's a sample of Dave's skill with words.

These are from "Reflections thru My Windshield" available from The Trucker's Bookstore at www.writeuptheroad.com.

What Happened

The truckers on the highways,
Common folk like you and me,
They are what keeps the nation running
And what helps keep it free

You will never see a lawyer, out tying down a load,
Never see a politician four weeks on the road,
Why will they never listen to anything we say?
What happened to democracy; has it been thrown away?

Somehow there must be a way
For us to have a voice,
The time has come, my many friends,
For us to make the choice.

Superior Autumn

I drive along the highway along Lake Superior's shore,
The colors in the autumn, no man could ask for more,
The beauty of the hardwoods touched,
By Mother Nature's hand,
Make me glad to be alive and to drive across this land.

I park – walk through the forest, to a beach by waters blue,
No painting can do justice to the beauty I walk through.
I stand in silent wonder and above I hear a cry,
The lonely sound of wild geese
Winging south across the sky.

I know that if I die tonight and go on to Heaven's dream,
It will not match the majesty of Superior's autumn scene.

Kiss This

DOT has shut me down, but I'm not even tired.
The company says to be on time or else you will be fired.

Shipper says to hurry up, but he took eight hours to load –
The company says I can make that up out there on the road.

They made me an appointment and tell me I can't be late;
I'm already four hours behind when I pull out of the gate.

Smokey says I drive too fast, and to back it off to fifty-five;
Dispatch says, You're running late;
Put your foot on it and drive.

I back my trailer to the dock, and I'm only two hours late
Receiver says, "Don't sweat it son, we don't need it
'til next week."

The life of a long hauler sure is not filled with bliss
I don't mind them screwing me;
But I sure would like a kiss.