The Last of the Wild Ones ©1994 Joe Adams, Rona Altrows

A herd of wild horses used to roam the vast Canadian Armed Forces reserve near Suffield in southeastern Alberta. In 1994, the wild herd was rounded up, ostensibly because they were competing with indigenous wildlife such as antelope. A few horses did not survive the roundup; the rest were sold at auction; rumours persist that some of them ended up in pet food cans, despite the authorities’ insistence that this would not happen. A controversial event, and one which inspired Joe Adams, with Rona Altrows’s encouragement and help, to pen a song viewing the event through the eyes of the captives.

The song was something of a work in progress even up to Joe’s death; the lyrics I obtained from Rona had some differences from those given to me by Joe earlier. This version is a composite of the two, strongly influenced by my memory of the way Joe used to sing it. [JL]

Our ancestors would be proud, Of their genes running through our veins.

The mares and foals are in the draw, With their backs humped against the wind; As the morning sun comes down, They’ll start the morning graze again; But this may be the last day, For I sense changes coming in.

The guns and tanks are quiet now, But they’ll be back here in the spring.

I hear the snow machines a-coming now, And a machine flying overhead; Before this day is o’er, I fear many will be dead, For whenever man comes near, There’s always the smell of death.

In fear the herd is running now, Even the weak and the lame, And as I try to circle back, In my chest I feel the froth and pain, As some crash against the corrals, Again and again.
I see them jammed into the chute,
And the white of fear in their eyes,
As the burning rope comes down,
To take the old and weak to die;
No more they'll be able to roam,
Under these Alberta skies.

Chorus: Our forefathers showed us how.
When man tries to beat you down:
Just let your spirit soar,
And head for higher ground.

Joe Adams—Ave atque vale

I first met Joe at a Continuing Education workshop with Barry and Lyn Luft, some 12 or so years ago. My memory is quite clear, because I remember his autoharp—it was the oldest I had ever seen—and also I was recovering from an illness, and was so relieved to be a part of the music scene again.

Now, "folk people" always bump into each other again and again, attending the same functions, folk clubs, house concerts, &c., so Joe and the people who are my good friends today were no exception. We had the common bond of music, and our group became close. We worked together on Bulletin mailouts, attended concerts, pot luck suppers—always with music afterwards. We even celebrated our birthdays together. We were a family.

I remember Joe bringing to me a pile of yellowed newspaper clippings—words of songs he had saved from years ago. He asked if I could use any of the songs, for by then we were enthusiastic members of the Singers’ Circle, performing music and songs for each other once a month. We also enjoyed our weekly jam session with a small group. I realized Joe was really serious about collecting and loved the music deeply.

You never knew what to expect from Joe at The Circle. Sometimes a really profound song, or perhaps one that was just plain silly and funny. When he first sang one of his own songs, we were so impressed; we hadn’t even known this talent existed. I thought his songs were so honest, and with strong visual images.

Another part of Joe that made us deeply respect him was his attitude to his illness. He accepted it with dignity and great courage. I know I can feel sorry for myself at times, but I never heard Joe complain. It was so difficult to stand back and not help him get up from the chair, or put on his jacket. Sometimes he might just allow a little assistance from one of us, casually given, but for the most part we had to let him do it for himself—he was such a strongly independent man.

Every year, at Christmas time, we all gather at James Prescott’s house. Whatever the weather, we wander around the neighbourhood singing Christmas carols, returning to the house to feast on James’s famous hot soup and fruit salad, supplemented with a small donation of party food from each person. It is a special time. Joe used to brave the elements, although we knew the snow and cold stiffened him, causing pain, and icy sidewalks were difficult to negotiate, but he came anyway. Later, when he could only manage part of the walk, other people cared for him so much that someone would always accompany him back to the house early, to help prepare the table for the others.

I visited Joe in hospital on many occasions, and sometimes wondered how he would ever recover. Somehow he always did, and then carried on as usual. This last time, we both knew it was different. I am so glad I was able to tell him how much we all loved him. I am positive he has found peace and, at last, freedom from pain. Joe’s wife, family, pets and friends were of prime importance to him, but I feel his love of music gave him the energy to cope with life. With others, I will try to keep his songs alive. I will never forget him, and was so honoured to be one of his friends.

Joe Adams-Ave atque vale

For toys and rodeo we’ll be used,
Until we’re of no more need;
They’ll try to strip our spirit,
To bring us to our knees;
But no matter how we’re enclosed,
Our spirit will be free.

Daphne Rackstraw and Joe Adams jamming, November 1991