

RANDY LARGE, BETTER KNOWN AS THE BANJO MAN

BY KELLY SMITH AND CHEYENNE HODGES



Last summer I started going to the Steamboat Springs Rodeo as an extra curricular activity. Little did I know that I would end up making acquaintances with some of the most important figures at the rodeo. One of the persons I met was Randy Large, better known as the "Banjo Man." He is, in fact, a rodeo clown. I found myself going to the rodeo more often, learning more, and loving the people and action. Next thing we knew, Cheyenne Hodges and I found ourselves

talking to a sensitive and informative person. After taking multiples of pictures at the September rodeo finals, we were able to set up an interview with Randy Large, the Banjo Man. We asked him to tell us a little about himself.

"Well, to start with, I picked my clowning name in about 1973 from an album by Bob Dylan. It talked about a guy called the banjo man with one black hand; a lot of people thought that fit my description. I also pick a banjo, so my friends

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threw the name at me, and I took that as my professional clown name. Some guys pick a name while other guys just use their straight name. My face is also a combination of things. Part of it is from one young clown that isn't fighting anymore, and the rest is just basically a circus clown with the round eye and the frown. I really like a frowning clown. My outfit also is partially from the circus-type clown, but it changes all the time. I'm still not really satisfied with the outfit, and I think it will continue to change.

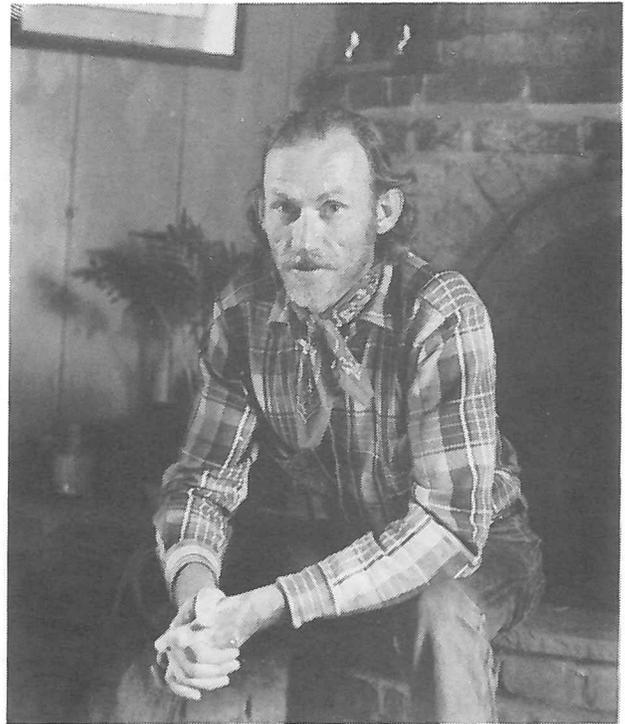
"I really don't know what got me interested in clowning in the beginning; I guess I have always been interested. I talked to a clown years ago, and he told me I was too old at that time, and so I basically forgot it. Then I came to a point in my life that I had to do something again and that dream had always stayed with me, so I just went back to it. I stuck my foot in the door, and then just started walking up the steps.

"There are three basic types of clowns. There are bullfighters, barrel clowns, and also the strict comedians. I'm a bullfighter and a funny clown, but if someone came to me and asked me to do barrel clowning, I'd say, 'O.K., I just need a barrel!' I love it!"

Randy's past was an important influence in his decision to become a clown as well as his performance in the rodeo world. "I was born in Blackfoot, Idaho, on March 23, 1949. A short time later we moved to a log house on my grandfather's ranch in northern Idaho where I was raised. As a result I have been playing with cattle since I can remember. I lived in feed-lots playing on the fences instead of going to school. Then in 1967, I went to Vietnam to fight. I was wounded in 1968, and returned to the states. Vietnam was pretty strange. That part of my life is still around me quite a bit in what I do, but I try to drown it out. I try not to think of the past very much. Vietnam changed my life 100%. Before I went overseas, I was really athletic and then when I came back I was told I would never walk again. It made my will stronger and my drive greater. When I was young, I didn't really reach out for my goals. And it seems that when I came back from overseas I started reaching for goals.

"When I was younger, we rode bulls on the ranch. We would be vaccinating, and we would just climb on them when they were down. So we did it a little bit different than they do in the rodeos. I've never ridden in the rodeo because I'm a little too old, a little too busted up. I don't really think I'd wanna ride professionally; it has no interest to me."

But the clowning part of the rodeo has held Randy's interest for years. "The first time I seriously thought about becoming a rodeo clown, I think I was about 27 years old. I visited with a young rodeo clown in Montana and told him I



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wanted to start clowning. He discouraged me because of my age. I finally just thought that the age didn't make any difference. It was then that I started fighting.

"I really can't remember what my first fight was like. I don't think it stuck out that much to me. I visited with a lot of clowns, and it was real neat. Before when I'd go up and start talking to clowns about fighting, they'd talk to me a little bit, but they wouldn't open up. Now they have started accepting me into their world. I watched and learned that way for a while, and then I just got out into the ring and said, 'Here I am! Let me have it!'

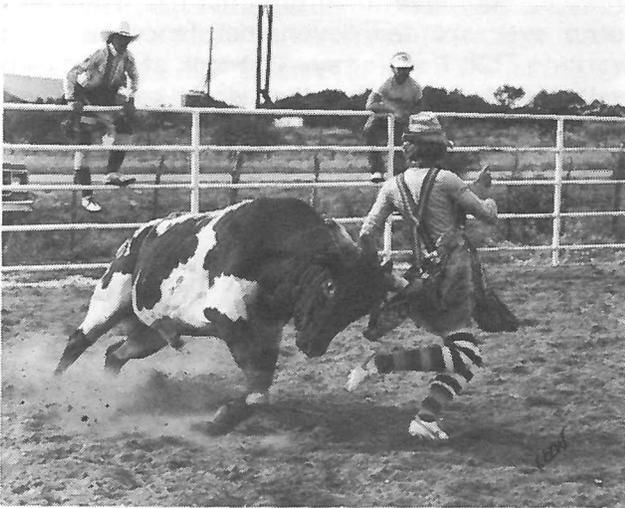
"Then I went down to Texas and went to a bull fighting school. This school cost \$250 and lasted for four days. In four days we saw about 150 bulls coming at us, depending upon how many we wanted and could handle. We had classes, we watched videos of our work, and we would just practice. We would go in the morning and talk about clowning and what was expected of a clown, moves, make-up and preparation of bombs to use in skits. Then we would fight bulls and go back and watch it on video. That was basically it, mostly fighting bulls. They didn't really get down to the real functions of clowning, or the techniques of each clown. That's all mostly experience. You just pick it up over the years.

"In the four days you really learned whether you wanna be there or not, whether clowning was for you or not. You go out and you challenge yourself. It can make you or break you when that

first gate opens, and that first bull comes at you. A gate might open a hundred times and that might be the end of it for you. I've seen guys who for some odd reason just freeze and they don't know why. I'd say most of the students get hurt pretty good and it's usually the end of it. We had one kid get hooked pretty good in the leg, and I knew that he was not gonna fight any more.

"After that I went down to California to a school that was for three days. That is all the training you get, three or four days. Your teachers are there, right with you all the time. Say, that there are ten bull fighters at the end of those three or four days, especially the last half of the last day, most are fed up with bulls. They want no more to do with them.

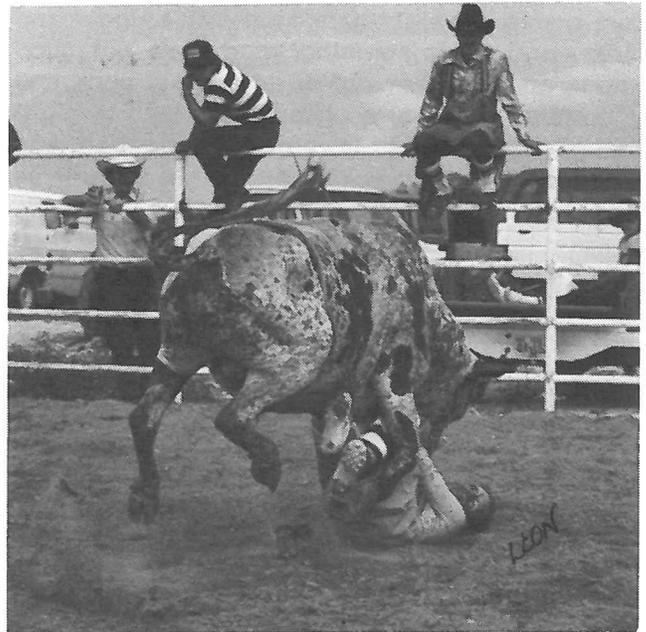
"Many don't make it. This isn't because of the instructors, because they are the best of professional clowns. I studied under two of the best clowns in the United States last year. Rick Chatman was the world's bull fighting champion last year, and Tom Foley was the world's best barrel man for the year. Under those two I covered the different types of clowning. In all I'd say that I have sat back and trained and studied for nearly a year. When I went to school, I



"BULLFIGHTING ALWAYS COMES FIRST."

thought that I was in fairly good condition but with 4 or 5 bulls running at me at once, I found that I wasn't. The school was pretty decent, but you get banged up real good. Bullfighting also has to be natural because you're only in there 8 seconds and there's a lot involved in bullfighting. You really have to be on the ball.

"The purpose of the clown is to get the bull's attention, to bring him around. If the bull isn't lively enough, you have to get him to run and buck and turn. If he is turning in the wrong direction you have to fix that. You are mainly there to help the cowboy get a good ride and stay safe. Getting the bull's attention is often hard to do. That's why Rex Dunn and Bob Romer, the bull dancers, get down on one knee when the bull



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comes around. They'll get right down in their face and slap it to make the bull come to them. Otherwise, the bull will just say, 'Oh! That's another clown, another strapped leg little guy, I don't wanna mess with him.' They would really like to just go back to eating their food.

"But there are bulls that are so tough that people don't want to ride them. The riders last year that had to ride C3PO here in Steamboat didn't really want to get on him that much because he was a hooker. Everybody knew it. Lots of these guys know the bulls as well as the clowns or the stockmen do. If the bull is going to come around and hook you, you don't want to be there. It's fine that the riders know some bulls this well, but you shouldn't depend upon it. Even if you fight a bull for quite a while, you don't want to think you know that bull because about the third time out with that bull, when you think that you know him pretty well, is when you are going to get hurt. They do fight, it's bred into them, because of being a bull. Every time the bull comes out of the gate, I play him the way he comes out.

"What I basically do is turn the bull. If a bull is



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coming out in a right-hand spin with a right-hand rider, and he is spinning good, he's got good action and you stay out of it. You set back and you count to eight seconds. At the end of eight seconds you have got to come in on that bull, and turn him to the left, taking him out of the spin so that the cowboy can come off the bull. The cowboy takes his free arm and free leg and then goes right on over himself and unloads. Then it's my job to distract the bull until the rider can get out of the ring.

"The hardest part of my job is clowning with the people, the laughter. Fighting bulls is hard, and I have a long way to go and lots of things to learn. But to me comedy is gonna carry me through. I'm really starting to fall in love with comedy since this last year. A real special rodeo clown, R.J. Satterfield, taught me in his own way the joys of being a funny clown. I've been away from it for a couple of months since the rodeo here ended, and I've started thinking of stuff for my acts. Everybody isn't a natural comedian.



"COMEDY IS GOING TO CARRY ME THROUGH."

"Comedy isn't taught in a school. You have to have a flair for it and pick it up. It's experience. It's practice. People often have it hidden in them and once they put on the makeup they can become whoever they want. You can hide behind the makeup. You can do things under the makeup that you can't do normally.

"Despite the fun of comedy, it's hard to get it right all the time. Sometimes I want to be comical, but I'll feel too serious to be funny and it won't come off right. Everything in the ring changes all the time, even the clown. Some nights you have a slow night and you can't get into it and others you can. Some nights the stock are really into it and some nights everybody is into it. Each one's really different, so it's really hard to say how it will turn out. When I'm in the ring, what I did or what I should have done better goes through my mind.

"Clowns are mostly trying to cover spaces and time slots when everything gets kinda dead. Sometimes you just have to start acting crazy right then and there to make this gap. Before you go into the rodeo, everything's laid out. You know where all your major acts are. The hard part of comedy is the impromptu acts, but if these turn out well, they are the best. I think that some of the short sprint jokes that we do are the funniest. I like the kind that just fall into place very unexpectedly.

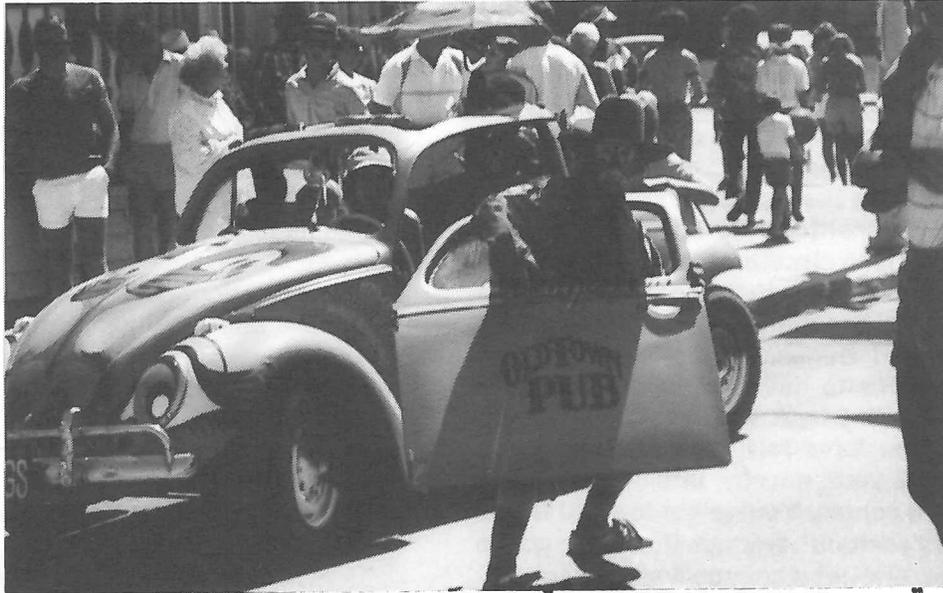
"To me a hard performance night is when absolutely nothing wants to work right. This is usually on the full moon nights. The stock won't work right, they don't buck as good, the bulls don't work as good and everyone is in a strange mood. I can even feel it in the audience.

"No matter what the night is like, the clown is always in the most danger. He is exposed to anywhere from 4 to 14 bulls a night where as the rider only sees one. I have had many injuries. Nobody will insure us. It is true, that it is very dangerous. Lots of times you don't have time to think, you can get in a wreck really quick. Eight seconds is a long time!

"You just have to be quick and stay out of trouble. You have to be athletic, too. You can't jump over six and seven foot fences without working at it. People say, 'Oh! look at that clown walk that fence!' What they don't know is that I'll be down there during the day when no one's around walking that fence. It just takes work. You want a good act that varies each night and will attract attention.



"YOU'VE GOT TO PLAY THE GAME & GET WHAT YOU WANT OUT OF THE GAME."



"I DON'T CARE ABOUT ANYTHING ELSE... I WANT THAT CHAMPIONSHIP."

"The crowd, the stock contractor and reporters are all important. They spread your reputation, which in turn gets you jobs and increases your experience while bringing you closer to the national championships. The jobs may be with the same stock contractor, if he likes you, and on the same circuit, and you may travel with the cowboys. I have been through Texas, Wyoming, Colorado, Oklahoma and California. As you travel, you pick up lots of slang. To be hooked is to be horned and being freight trained is trying to outrun a bull. But you can't outrun them, it's impossible. When the bull runs right over the back of you, that's being freighttrained.

"Despite their differences, all clowns are equal. All clowns are basically bullfighters. As you get older, or you change to a comedy clown, you might not do any bullfighting, but as long as you're in that ring, you're all considered to be bullfighters. You never know when you'll fight. You can be standing out there looking stupid, and turn around to a bull looking straight at you. You have to be able to fight at any time. All clowns are bullfighters. The bullfighter protects the cowboy, and the barrel clown protects the bullfighter, and your funny clown is a backup clown to protect the bullfighter and the cowboy. When it is needed, everyone just protects everybody else, whoever is in trouble. It would be great if you could be a champion at all three, but I think you have to single down to one or two of them. Right now I cover all three categories, but bullfighting always comes first!

"Each type of clowning except comedy has national championships, and so each type has its own heroes. I'm planning upon winning the championships and I have a plan. I keep updating and improving my acts. This is lots of work! I've got props to build, costumes to make and I've got a horse, Shamrock that I've got to

keep training. He is a smart colt that has a flair for doing tricks. I'll eventually do a lot of skits with 'Shammy the Wonder Horse!' I also plan to train a duck to use for my acts.

"Ranch work helps teach me basically how the bull will move. I watch the bulls and try to understand them. You think about the rider a little, but basically you think about how you are going to play that bull, or what you have to do. You try to be ahead of the game. You remember what a certain bull acts like, and you rely on that a lot, but you don't get hung up on it, because a bull is an animal and you can't predict him.

"Pain doesn't outweigh the thrill or the excitement of what I want to do. My physical abilities are very special and important to me. I value them greatly, because when I came home from the war, I spent five years in hospitals, on braces and wheel chairs and crutches. Now, to be able to run and walk means so much more! Normal people take that for granted too often. If my body holds out, I want to retire at 50. That is part of my plan. I've got lots more to enjoy until then!

"The rest of my goal is to reach the championship in four to five years. That is where I am strictly headed. I get myself in trouble lots because the only thing I see is that tunnel. I don't care about anything else. I want it! I want that championship. Once I get that championship, I want to clown around and enjoy it. But then it's hard to say whether or not you ever retire because about that time someone will call you up and ask you to clown, and you will say, 'Oh yeah, I just want to put on my makeup,' and away you will go.

"Webber Snipe who is probably 85 or so and is the granddaddy of clowns. He still clowns in Denver. William Peck at 50 is still fighting bulls and is one of the top in the United States.

"I want to be a world champion. I am going to

make it. That is something that I talk about and dream about all of the time. I'm thinking about it right now. To get myself prepared I want to go back to school this winter to fight bulls. I want to go to Texas, and a school in Kansas City. I want to go watch the clowns at a couple of rodeos where I have been invited. I want to watch and visit other clowns in the U.S. Next year I'll do the rodeo season. Then I'll go up into the northern circular and eastern circular and just travel in a circuit for the next two or three years.

'This year, I put my mind and my money into a funny car named Buggs. He appears to drive himself and seems to have a personality of his own. My skits with Buggs were my favorite this past season. You have to have good acts. You gotta put all of your energy into it. The good reputation then comes. You've got to want it and you've got to reach out and get it. You've got to play the game, and get what you want.

"When you reach the championships, high pay is part of what you get. The championship matches are strictly between the bullfighting clown and the bull. The top 12 bullfighters in the United States right now are getting about \$2,000 a fight. That's for a minute's work. When I first went in to fight, I fought for nothing, just to get in there. You have to make the cowboys accept you. I worked probably for a month before they started accepting me. Then they start to teach you what you need to know. Basically they will just stand back and watch and make sure that you want it bad enough that you are going to

stick it out. You get more experience as you go along, and you move slowly upward. You do a lot in clowning just for the knowledge.

"A clown needs variety so you can come in with something new all of the time, so that people don't get bored. If you are going to do the same thing over and over, and this photographer or that writer sees you do the same skit ten times in a row, he isn't even going to bother to talk to you, or even think about you. This is very bad for one's reputation. If you can shuffle his mind here and there and keep his mind working, then he's going to like you, and help you. I think that every move that you make as far as your profession goes is important. Publicity is a big part of your profession. The media is a very big, important part of your career. The trick is to get them working for you. Using these ideas, you can move up the ladder.

"I don't remember the very first time that I ever dreamt of being a clown or felt a need to fulfill that dream, but it always amazed me. I love doing it all. The clown has everybody. He has the crowd, he has the cowboy, he's got everybody in his hand. You know, he can get yelled at and cussed out, but he still manipulates a lot. The neat part about it is that you get to show the funny side of you, or the make believe side of you, and everybody just goes, 'Ah! there's that silly old clown again!' Then you get to show the serious athletic part of you that it takes to be a clown. I love it, and I always will. I've gotten my foot into the circle. Now I just have to continue, one step at a time.

