

Classical cowboy

Murphey is at home with a range of styles

By Joan McKenna
Scottsdale Life Editor

"This is Murph," a voice said in a long Texas drawl over the static of a shaky long-distance connection.

Country singer-songwriter Michael Martin Murphey was calling from a pay phone at a crossroads near Cimarron, N.M.

He was a few days into a cattle drive, moving a herd from the high country to warmer pastures for the winter, and had made a slight detour to place the call.

No press agent. No secretary. Just "Murph" and his horse.

Not exactly what one would expect from a musician about to play with the Phoenix Symphony.

Murphey will be headlining the opening of the symphony's 1991-92 Citibank Pops at the Pointe series at the Pointe at Tapatio Cliffs on Friday and Saturday.

He will perform country favorites such as "Red River Valley," "The Streets of Laredo"

**POPS AT THE POINTE:
MICHAEL MARTIN
MURPHEY**

When: 8:15 p.m. Friday and Saturday

Where: Pointe at Tapatio Cliffs, 11111 N. Seventh St., Phoenix.

Tickets: \$10 to \$40

Information: 277-7291

and "Home on the Range," plus his No. 1 pop hit "Wildfire" — all arranged for the symphony setting.

He also will recite three old Western poems, including "Tyn' Knots in the Devil's Tail," by Arizonan Gail Gardner.

The stretch from country to classical is not as big as it would seem, he said, explaining that many great composers, in particular Mozart, drew on street music, or the "honky tonk" of the day, for their work.

While it raised eyebrows at the

time, those pieces now are considered masterpieces, he said.

But his own motivation for merging the two worlds is a little more humble.

"It's fun and it sounds good; no great lofty reason." He added that the American West with its sweeping, picturesque images lends itself well to the orchestra sound.

"Most people think of the symphony as a formal, academic unemotional setting.

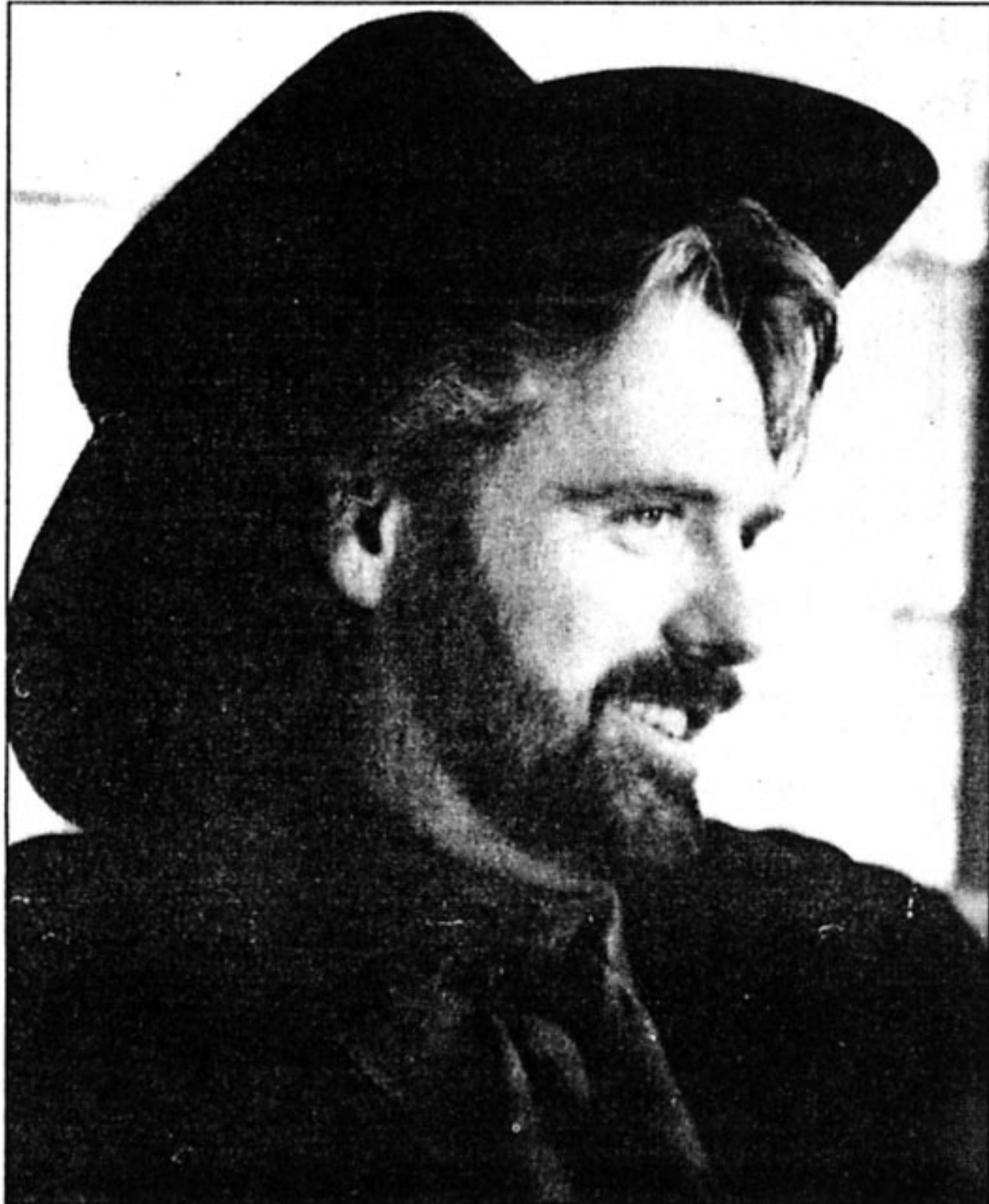
"If we can just get the average guy to come listen to the music and realize it's just music, (he'll be happy.)"

He also hopes classical fans unfamiliar with country will be pleasantly surprised.

The 46-year-old Dallas native has been playing with symphonies for five years — a natural progression in his life, judging by his childhood.

Raised in Texas, he went to school in a "woody" community called Oak Cliff outside Dallas,

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Country singer Michael Martin Murphey, minus horse, opens the Phoenix Symphony's Pops at the Pointe series this weekend.

MURPHEY

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then spent summers on cattle ranches with his uncle and grandfather. He's worn cowboy boots all his life, including through college at the University of California at Los Angeles.

But at the same time, he always enjoyed the "process of writing things down, looking at life on paper," and he majored in classics

(Greek, Latin, etc.) and creative writing at UCLA. He credits violinist Yehudi Menuhin with influencing his style.

And yet his favorite way to perform is on horseback, an idea he picked up from Roy Rogers, and he talks about the differences of trying to sing at the trot and the canter.

Music was Murphey's means of survival at college, and is the only type of job he's ever held. Except for the two weeks he worked at a

Dallas department store during the Christmas rush to accumulate enough money for new tires to get his Volkswagen to UCLA.

Once there, "I got a songwriters contract for \$75 a week. I thought I was rich," he said. "I still think that's wealth."

Simple is best, according to Murphey. He lives on a 22-acre quarter horse ranch in Taos, N.M., with his wife Mary, son Brennan, 10, and daughter, Laura Lynn, 8.

His 21-year-old son Ryan played lead guitar for him all summer but has returned to college for his senior year.

The wilderness is Murphey's studio, with cattle drives providing him solitude and sanity at once.

"It (working cattle) probably is the most enjoyable thing I do besides writing songs. I get a chance to do both on these things. We're in the saddle during the day, then write songs at night till

we're too tired to stay awake."

The Valley is a welcome engagement for him, he said, because it's a "real Western city symphony.

"The people of Phoenix and Scottsdale love the West or they wouldn't be there," he said. "Sometimes when I do this in places like Richmond, Va., it takes two or three songs for them to figure out what we're doing." □