

# TRAVEL

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## Ry Cooder's American West

*Roots musician, producer and composer Ry Cooder is steeped in California lore and full of wry scorn for the old Golden State traditions of fakery, greed and self-indulgence*

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When Ry Cooder and I got to El Mirage Dry Lake, it was 43.3°C and heading to 47°C, hot enough to cook your head inside your hat. The Mojave Desert in daylight will cut the gizzard right out of you, Tom Joad once said, which is why the Okies crossed it at night.

I put away the map and Cooder pulled the SUV through the gate and stopped. The gravel road fell away below us and vanished into the bone-white lakebed. The mirage was working: a shoreline shimmered wetly in the distance, made of bent sunlight and sand.

El Mirage Dry Lake sounds like a place one step away from nonexistence, but it's about 160km north of Los Angeles, out among the Joshua trees. It's not far from Edwards Air Force Base, in the Mojave's military-paramilitary sector, where secretive government installations lie low among the jackrabbits — a land of spy planes, space aliens, off-road vehicles, sturdy reptiles and people with freaky desert habits, like racing vintage hot rods on dry lakebeds.

It is, in other words, a critical stop on Cooder's California trail.

Cooder — the rock and blues guitarist, roots musician, record producer, songwriter and composer — is a son of Santa Monica who has spent nearly 40 years exploring all corners of the musical planet, like a sharp-eared extraterrestrial on a lifelong voyage of discovery. (His two-CD career anthology, released last month, has a perfect title: *The UFO Has Landed*.) But even that barely covers it — it's strictly from his solo albums and the haunting scores he wrote for films like *Alamo Bay* and *Paris, Texas*. If you add all the records he has made with other musicians, like Gabby Pahinui, Flaco Jimenez, Ali Farka Toure, Mavis Staples, the Chieftains and, most famously, the Cuban all-stars of the Buena Vista Social Club, you can only wonder where on earth he could go next.

The answer: his own backyard.

Cooder's latest project may be his strangest and most ambitious. It's a trilogy of concept albums, plus a short novel, that resurrects a lost California of places and people that Cooder, who is 61, remembers from growing up in the 1950s. It was a dryer and poorer place then, but rich in things he likes, like simplicity and ingenuity, good musicians, cool cats and hot cars. Time and neglect have bulldozed most of it into oblivion.

"I like beautiful things, and things that are tough and serious," he told me, in a tone that suggested the national supply of such things was running out.

Cooder is steeped in California lore (he's as much a writer and historian as a master of the bottleneck blues) and full of wry scorn for the old Golden State traditions of fakery, greed and self-indulgence. Things that set him off include useless corporate entertainment (a song on his last album includes a character who sweats to death at Disneyland in his Mickey Mouse suit, working overtime), the theft of farmers' water for the California Aqueduct, and Southern California's endless rows of stucco subdivisions, the splatter from the housing bubble.



Bobby Green, second left, and friends getting ready to unload a "belly tanker" at El Mirage Dry Lake, in the Mojave Desert, north of Los Angeles in August.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

But he can be just as emphatic in savoring the near-perfection of an unsmoggy day, the ancient Joshua trees lining the Pearblossom Highway, the harsh loveliness rolling past the window. We were headed to El Mirage, the site where he posed by an Airstream trailer for his first solo album. From the 1920s to the 1950s it was a magnet for white, working-class hot rodders, the kind of people who form the core of his California trilogy, along with steel-guitar players, Okies, Arkies, Mexican-American dance-band leaders, zoot-suited Pachuco hipsters and the occasional space alien.

The kinds of people Cooder celebrates, in songs like *Poor Man's Shangri-La*, are the ones nobody remembers:

*Tell you 'bout a friend of mine that you don't know  
he lives way up a road that's lost in time.  
Don't know his name, or where he's coming from.  
Only thing you know, he's a real gone cat,  
this friend of mine.*

Cooder talks the way his song characters do, in quick, fluid bursts that smack the ear and linger there, all strange and memorable, both sardonic and sentimental. "We're going to El Mirage, which is still El Mirage and will always be El Mirage," he said. "You can't do anything with it. You can't exploit it. You can't figure out any way to make money on it."

Traffic was light, and Cooder's conversation rolled as freely as the SUV, over wide terrain. "It's terribly dry but beautiful," he said as we hit the high desert. "It sure is good for the eyes; it sure is good." He wore bright yellow shades and a broad-brimmed hat, and had brought CDs for the road: country-western guitar pickers and late-1940s Chicano dance music. He'd hoisted an iced-up cooler into the back, full of ginger beer and bottled water and a zip-lock bag of orange wedges from his own tree.

One thing that fills his work, besides a longing for someplace better than now, is cars. "Every woman I know, crazy 'bout an automobile," he sang years ago, and it's a rare record of his that doesn't have wheels in it somewhere.

That's how he met Bobby Green, who is far too young to remember those days, but an inventive old soul all the same. Green, a Los Angeles bar owner, is a member of a hot-rodding club that dates back to the 1930s, when lakes like El Mirage first became meccas for racers. Soon after we arrived at the western edge of El Mirage, we met up with Green, who was preparing his custom-built

"belly tanker" to run at the Bonneville Salt Flats, in Utah.

In a few minutes we were all rolling onto the lake bed. The ride was bumpy and then less bumpy and then smooth and then real smooth: a pool table in all directions.

A Predator spy drone, out of Edwards Air Force Base, buzzed overhead, presumably checking our faces against terrorist databases.

There was more to see, but Ry had things to do, so he left me in the care of the lanky, affable Mr Jalopy — "a very interesting individual," Cooder said.

The next day Jalopy and I went to lunch at the Halfway House Cafe, a 1930s roadhouse on the old Sierra Highway, halfway between Los Angeles and Palmdale. It's a Kash Buk kind of place, a hangout for old test pilots and desert rats, where you can get a good steak sandwich and a beer.

After lunch we walked in the desert to examine a bricked-up mine shaft and to collect sand for gold panning back at Mr Jalopy's workshop. Watch out for snakes, he told me as he walked ahead through a gully. Turning over rocks for reptiles, I found an old, neatly torn and folded girlie picture, perfectly preserved after escaping some trucker's wallet. I refolded it and put it back.

We headed to Chavez Ravine, once a poor Mexican-American neighborhood and now the hilltop fortress of the Los Angeles Dodgers. The view of downtown from the hillside, across to Chinatown and City Hall, was just like the one captured in 1949 by the photographer Don Normark, who stumbled across the neighborhood one day. It was a collection of shacks and vegetable plots, like a hidden farming village, and looked to him like a "poor man's Shangri-la." The nickname and his haunting book of photographs are all that remain — in the late 1950s Chavez Ravine was buried, literally, and the stadium built on top of it.

Cooder wrote a song about how old-timers locate themselves, by a memory plumb line down through the playing field, "to the town underneath all that cement":

*Second base, right over there.  
I see Grandma in her rocking chair  
and if you want to know where a local boy like me  
is comin' from:  
3rd base, Dodger Stadium.  
3rd base, Dodger Stadium.*

My last stop was Shakey's stomping ground, the old borax mining town of Trona. It's the worst place on earth, Mr Jalopy told me, semiseriously, citing its heat and remoteness on the edge of Death Valley, and the acrid smell from an old chemical plant. Recent newspaper coverage bore him out. The population has plunged from a steady 6,000 to 1,880 in the 2000 census. Retirees and young people have been moving away; methamphetamine addicts, parolees and arsonists have been moving in.

If you do go to Trona, it probably won't be for the atmosphere but for the pinnacles, otherworldly geological formations just out of town that are a magnet for movie directors. When we entered the town just before high noon, it seemed locked up, like a Western town afraid of bandits. A drive-in was open, though, and a friendly woman there called the local historical society and got us an appointment for a museum tour.

We arrived at 2pm, just as Marydith Haughton pulled up in her white Buick LeSabre. Haughton is 72 and tiny. Born and raised in Trona, she had the finely furrowed skin of a desert creature, white permed curls and eyes as blue as the Mojave sky.

Walking with a cane, she inched from room to sweltering room, turning on lights. I fiddled with an air-conditioner. "Turn that sucker up," she said. Sweat collected on her glasses. The museum was a time capsule of Trona's good old days as a company town. Old photographs lined the walls, cases displayed mining equipment, mineral samples, glass telephone insulators. Near a chair from the old hospital hung a varsity jacket from Trona High that had belonged to Haughton's husband.

"It was a good place," she said.

I drove out of town, past its all-dirt ball fields and all-dirt graveyard. I had a little chunk of hanksite in my pocket, a local mineral sample Haughton had given me as a souvenir. My favorite song from *I, Flathead* was playing over and over in my head. It's *5,000 Country Music Songs*, the story of a failed country singer. He marries, leaves the city for the desert, buys an old Cadillac and a trailer home and dreams of being the next Hank Williams. He keeps mailing songs to Nashville, but they keep coming back. He has his wife's love, but once she gets sick and dies, there's pretty much nothing left.

"Take what you want after I'm gone," sings Cooder, to the man who has come to clear his belongings away.

*It was only just a little place that we called home  
sweet home.  
It was one old house trailer.  
Two rusty Cadillacs  
and five thousand country music songs.*



A guide to fast-car events near El Mirage Dry Lake, in the Mojave Desert, north of Los Angeles. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



Old times and an old race car canopy at El Mirage Dry Lake, in the Mojave Desert, north of Los Angeles. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE