

*Man in His Domain*



# Compton Cowboys

The morning sun is just beginning to peek out over the horizon, dyeing the sky over Compton a soft pink. Roosters are crowing, announcing the start of a new day on the quiet house-lined street. As I step out of my car my first thought is that I must be in the wrong place; there's no way this is the address of a cowboy ranch.

I hear an unfamiliar *clop clop* approaching, and I turn to see a young black man in a hoodie, tatted and with dreadlocks, trotting down the center of the street atop a dark horse—a restless Tennessee walker whose name I'll later find out is Ebony. The man regards me coolly as he saunters past, exhaling a small plume of smoke. He looks no more out of place against this

urban backdrop than the cars that cruise alongside. I feel as though I've stepped into an old Western film, albeit one in which the cowboys and cowgirls look less like John Wayne and more like me.

The Compton Cowboys, a group of 10 friends who grew up riding together, operate out of Richland Farms, a two-acre spread tucked behind the houses on this unassuming block. Formally launched less than three years ago, the outfit has made a name for itself in and outside of Compton by reintroducing—yes, reintroducing—cowboy culture to black urban communities.

"The ranch you're on is 30 years of work," says Randall Hook once he has brought me past the gates of his family's rambler and into a broad backyard lined

with stables. Also known as Randy Savvy, Hook is the managing member of the Compton Cowboys. "My brother and I were born into the horse thing," he says. The rest of the group consists of friends, family members and curious locals.

Hook inherited Richland Farms from his aunt Mayisha Akbar, a longtime equestrian. In 1988 Akbar founded a youth-focused program called the Compton Junior Posse, which served as a precursor to the Compton Cowboys; it was where many of the current riders met as children trying to escape the dangers of their neighborhood. (Akbar was forced to hand over the reins after she suffered a stroke.)

"It's crazy out there in the streets," says Hook. "I don't even like standing in front of my house. You end up growing up with people, and they get killed or go to jail. You see somebody, then you just never see him again. Riding takes you away from the bullshit of the world and just helps you grow and develop yourself as you naturally would. When you're in the ranch, the bullshit can't see you."

Lil Ant, a Compton Cowboy and former member of the Acacia Blocc Crips gang, says the ranch helped him transition back into society after completing a two-year sentence for drug dealing.

"I'd rather hang with the horses; that's my passion now," he says. "Once you've been in jail, you can't go back to the same thing. I had to change it up. I love my horses, so I picked that."

He eventually purchased a Tennessee walker named Sugarfoot for his young children, who have since become avid riders.

In Compton, Richland Farms is much more than a ranch; it's a major pillar of an underserved community that's often plagued by violence. It's a refuge for Compton youth looking for a place to belong that isn't gang-affiliated, and it's a resource for those same youth to learn leadership skills and

build self-esteem. In the confines of this spread, with its 16 horses, three cows and one affable llama, members rehabilitate the often-donated horses and train for rodeo competitions and the show-jumping circuit. Watching it all, I feel transported. I feel safe.

Keiara, the only cowgirl in the Compton Cowboys, competes in rodeos throughout the state. She's often one of the few riders of color out of several hundred. "No one acknowledged me until I started winning," she says.

Hook speaks proudly of one of the program's mentees: "We've got a young kid that came in real rough. Wild, young little boy. He's only been in this for two years now, and he's already winning rodeos out of state as a teenager. Talk to him now, he wants to be a professional bull rider. He wears his belt buckle to school."

He goes on: "His mom, she hit me up, saying, 'You saved my son's life. Thank you.' If you're able to change one life, you've already made it."

The Compton Cowboys' slogan—Streets Raised Us, Horses Saved Us—feels especially fitting in light of stories like this. But horses don't pay rent. How can the Cowboys keep the stable doors open without compromising their

**Where have all the cowboys gone? South Los Angeles, it turns out. A Compton-based nonprofit reframes a whitewashed way of life**

BY ANITA LITTLE



Opening pages, from left: Compton Cowboys CeeJay, Randy Savvy, Keiara, Stona Mane, Tre Hosley, Lay, T-Man, Carlton and Lil Ant. This page, from top: Lay, T-Man, CeeJay and Randy Savvy at Richland Farms; Tre in the paddock; Stona Mane, Lil Ant and T-Man saddling up.

mission amid the city's constant socio-economic stampedes?

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When Hook became manager of the ranch, he was saddled with a deep financial responsibility. "I'm always pressed for operating dollars," he says.

Taking care of horses isn't cheap: Akbar typically raised \$30,000 a month in funding, mostly from wealthy white patrons, to keep the operation running. The biggest challenge to her successor is making the ranch financially independent. Hook, who had recently earned his master's degree in music administration when he took over, decided they would rely less on others' largesse than on the ranch's cowboy coolness—raising revenue through storytelling and branding.

"You can go door to door and it'll take you some time, but you can get the word out," Hook says. "Or you could do one fucking commercial, and now you're in front of millions of people in 60 seconds."

Over the past year and a half, the Compton Cowboys have focused on becoming a self-sustaining enterprise, signing advertising deals with companies from Guinness and Adidas to Zara and Boot Barn, with even more in the pipeline. Their website boasts a wide collection of original merch—COMPTON COWBOYS emblazoned in Old English lettering across beanies and hoodies. The group has a self-titled book coming

in mid-spring from HarperCollins. And an upcoming feature film based on their lives, written by Prentice Penny, the showrunner behind HBO's *Insecure*, will be backed by Fox Searchlight Pictures. The Cowboys are well on their way to household-name status.

Hook is struggling to decide whether becoming a pop-culture phenomenon will actually translate into the longevity they need to preserve their way of life—a way of life both well established and almost entirely erased.

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Most Americans would be surprised to learn that black riders are nothing new; they were an integral part of the Old West. The Compton Cowboys are simply a continuation of a centuries-long legacy that has been painstakingly excised from our country's history.

Roger Hardaway, a professor of history at Northwestern Oklahoma State University and an expert on the Old West, has dedicated much of his scholarship to unearthing the forgotten story of black cowboys. He paints a picture of Texas, a former slave state where countless stray cattle, abandoned by owners who left to fight in the Civil War, roamed the Great Plains.

"They belonged basically to nobody, so you could make some money rounding them up," Hardaway says. "This created thousands of cowboy jobs, and a lot of African Americans took those jobs. They had room and board all taken care of, and they'd make maybe \$15 a month, which was a lot of money for somebody who was single."

For recently freed male slaves, becoming a cowboy was the best job they could hope for. They migrated west in droves. At the height of the industry, before the advent of the railroad eliminated the need for long-distance cattle drives, an estimated one in four cowboys was black.

"It was a magical transition to go from a Southern farm to a Texas range," says Hardaway.

It wasn't just the Old West: African Americans also made their presence known in the high-society culture of horse racing, often placing in the winners' circle at the Kentucky Derby in the event's first three decades. But by the early 1900s Jim Crow had forced them out.

In Hollywood one would be hard-pressed to find a nonwhite cowboy in any of the classic Westerns offering steely-eyed Eastwoods and Elliotts gripping six-shooters and glaring at the camera from beneath wide-brimmed Stetsons. This despite the long-held belief (disputed by some historians) that *The Lone Ranger*, the iconic saga that spanned radio, TV and the big screen starting in the 1930s, was based on the true story of Bass Reeves, a freed slave who made his fortune hunting outlaws in the Wild West.

"In the Hollywood context, the removal of black cowboys serves to deny the important black contributions on the cutting edge of frontier expansion," says Artel Great, a historian of black cinema and a film studies professor at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. "The image of the valiant white cowboy dominates the nation's social imagination, encouraging viewers to reverse the harsh and bitter truths of America's violent history."

Great adds that we should reinterrogate the term *cowboy* itself. "Black ranch hands were not called cattlemen like their white counterparts but rather were pejoratively deemed cowboys, perpetuating the racist practice of referring to black men as boys."

There's something powerful and subversive about the image of a black body atop a horse. As I watch the Compton Cowboys

practice in their small paddock against a backdrop of graying sky, I immediately understand why such images were scrubbed from America's tracks, screens and history books.

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But the whitewashed narrative of the West is shifting. The past few years have seen a resurgence of African Americans reclaiming the ranch aesthetic and making it their own. Solange and Beyoncé have used cowboy imagery in their recent projects: "Daddy Lessons," Bey's hit from *Lemonade*, features the singer's first foray into the country music genre, and Solange's visual component to the album *When I Get Home* borrows symbolism commonly associated with her home state of Texas. Megan Thee Stallion, Cardi B and other tastemakers helped make chaps the fashion statement of 2019. And of course there's Lil Nas X, the artist whose single "Old Town Road" likely

played the biggest part in the black cowboy's emergence into the internet mainstream.

This all coalesced with the birth of the #YeeHawAgenda, a viral hashtag created by Bri Malandro, who's often described as a "pop culture archivist." Malandro tells me she didn't learn much about cowboys in school, least of all black cowboys, and wanted to discover the history for herself.

"My first introduction to the American West may have been watching *Walker, Texas Ranger* with my grandmother," Malandro says. "Once I saw how people were reacting to the black cowboy aesthetic—like it was something they'd never seen before—I started to archive those moments."

So the Compton Cowboys find themselves in an opportune moment—but as Hook repeatedly says, they're not just hopping on a trend.

"People think we're new, or they think we're the ones co-opting a popular culture. We've been doing it; our life is this. We just grew up, and we just happen to be here now in line with this moment that's happening."

All the recent attention is fine and dandy to the group, but more than anything it's a means of securing the future of the Cowboys. Hook spends a lot of time thinking about what lies ahead for his band of riders. Much of his cowboy philosophy seems to revolve around being a good steward—of animals and of the community.

"Being a cowboy means being responsible for all things nature," he says. "Being responsible for the stuff that's here before us, paying it forward to the next generation."

Judging by the bright-eyed look of a young boy I see running up to the stables as I'm leaving, that's already happening.

Below: Kee living the brand—merchandise is an increasingly important part of the Cowboys' business model. Opposite: A lone rider surveys the sun rising over Compton.

