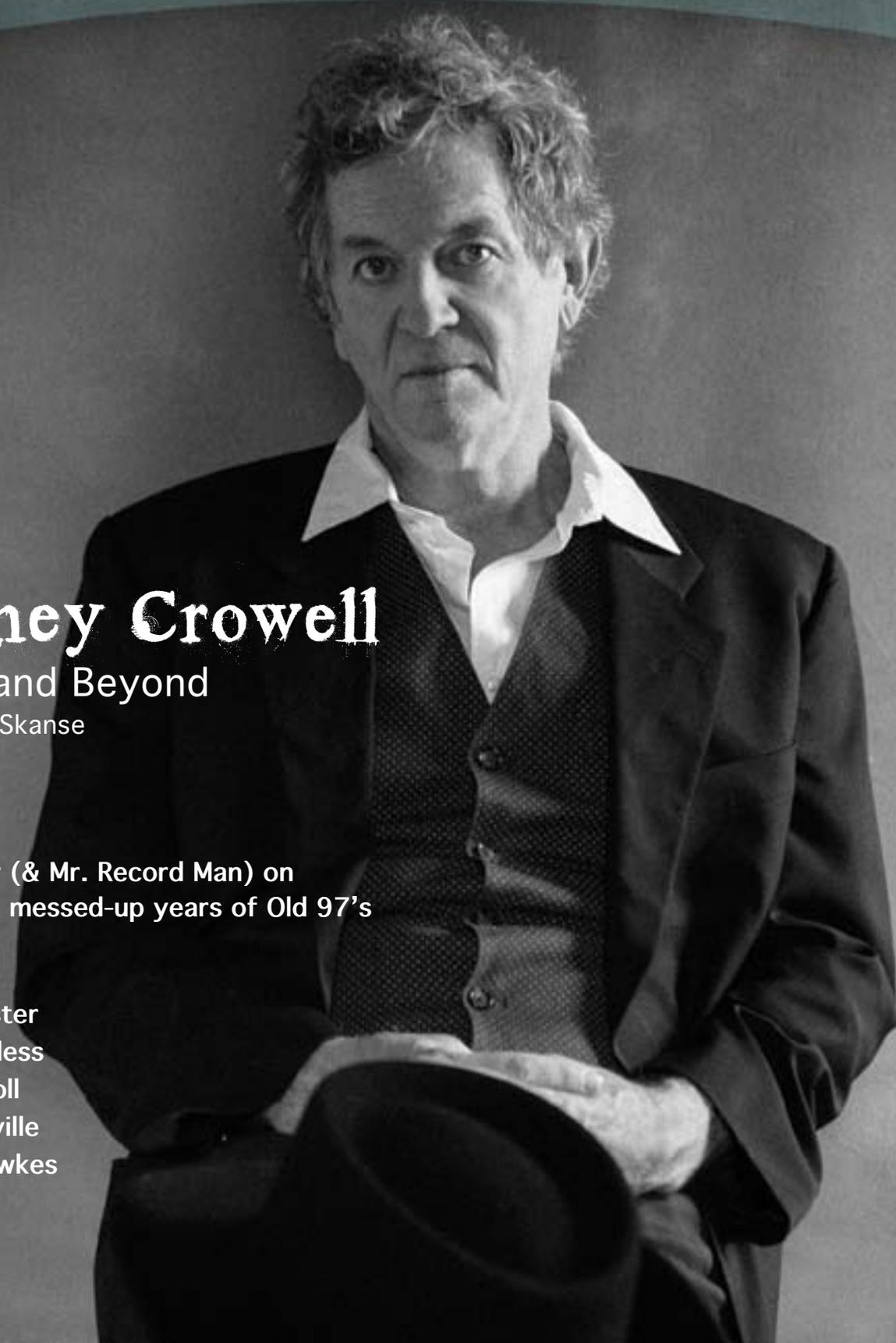


Americana Roots & Roll

LONESTARMUSIC

May/June 2014 | vol 7 • issue 3

A black and white portrait of Rodney Crowell. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored collared shirt and a dark, patterned vest. He has curly hair and is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. He is holding a dark hat in his hands in front of him.

Rodney Crowell

Above and Beyond

By Richard Skanse

Rhett Miller (& Mr. Record Man) on
20 grand & messed-up years of Old 97's

plus

Radney Foster

Lydia Loveless

Adam Carroll

Ray Bonneville

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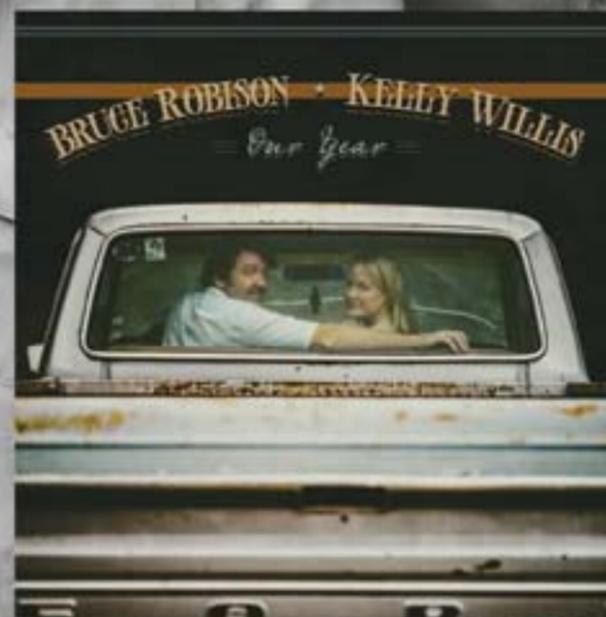
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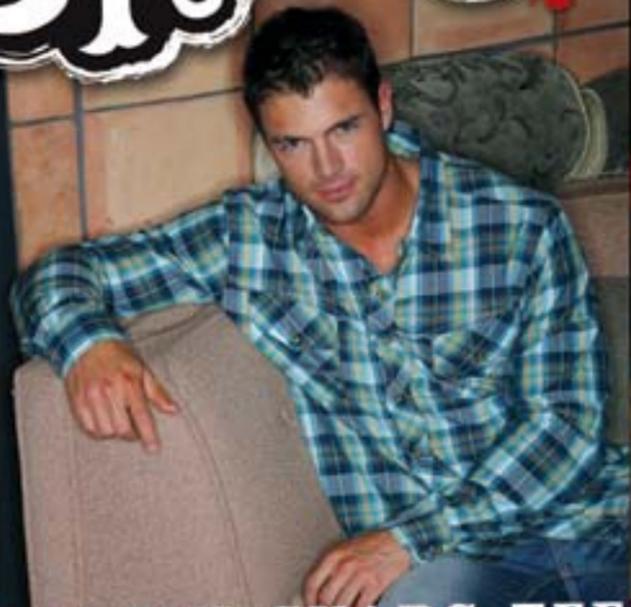
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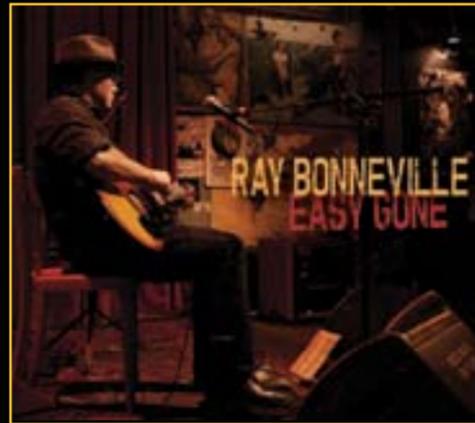
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AFTER AWHILE

Notes from the Editor | By Richard Skanse

It was four years ago this month that I finished editing my first issue of *LoneStarMusic*. I like to think that as a team we've come a long way since then, but I was proud from the start to be welcomed into the LSM family and especially proud that the first cover story I got to write for the magazine was about the Kerrville Folk Festival. The passing of festival founder and longtime producer Rod Kennedy at age 84 on April 14 makes the anniversary of that issue bittersweet. Inside this issue, Michael Corcoran pays tribute to Kennedy and his storied career in his "True Heroes of Texas Music" column, while longtime Kerrville performers and frequent *LoneStarMusic* contributors Terri Hendrix and Bob Livingston pay moving respects of their own. Personally, I feel honored to have had that opportunity back in early 2010 to spend a few hours with both Kennedy (who was already retired) and his protégé/successor, Dalis Allen, talking about his legacy. For the way he took his lifelong love of music and had the vision and determination to turn it into such a beautiful and impactful dream come true, I think Kennedy was as much of a true artist as any of the hundreds (if not thousands) that he ever booked at his festival. And even at 80 years old, he had one of the sharpest memories of anyone I've ever interviewed. Kennedy's moved on now, but you can bet his memory will live on for as long as people continue to make the pilgrimage out to Quiet Valley Ranch year after year to "Heal in the Wisdom" of song.

Fittingly, our cover story in this issue is on another "Rod" who is very much a legend in his own time: Rodney Crowell. I've interviewed Crowell a number of times since the release of his 2001 masterpiece, *The Houston Kid*, and I always come away from the experience with renewed respect for the man and his work. If you haven't picked up his latest album, *Tarpaper Sky*, I can't recommend it highly enough. And the same goes for his 2011 memoir, *Chinaberry Sidewalks*, which is every bit as eloquently written as any one of his songs. I spent the better part of the last two months happily revisiting Crowell's entire catalog, and I probably spent just as much time cranking 20-years-worth of Old 97's albums (especially their most excellent new one, *Most Messed Up*) in prep for our "Mr. Record Man" column and our Q&A with frontman Rhett Miller. Adam Carroll, Ray Bonneville, Radney Foster, and Lydia Loveless also got plenty of play, along with the terrific new albums from John Fullbright and Kelly Willis and Bruce Robison — all of which you'll find profiled or reviewed inside.

Finally, on behalf of all of us here in the LSM family, I'd like to thank everyone who participated in our sixth annual Lone Star Music Awards, held April 27 in San Marcos. Cheers to all of the nominated artists who performed (all of them winners in our book), the many guest presenters (from MC Mattson Rainer of KNBT to the infamous Gill Webb to the one and only Robert Earl Keen), and of course all of our generous sponsors: Rebecca Creek, Red Dirt Hurricane, KNBT, KOKE, 36 D, Red House Records, Southern Thread, Strait Music, the Zone, Texas Music Scene, Barefoot Athletics, Dickson Productions, Live at Billy Bob's Texas, and Cooper's BBQ. And especially, thanks to every fan who made it out to the Marc for the show or who took the time to vote online for the winners. We couldn't have pulled it off without y'all. And next year, let's all get together and do it again. Who's in?



THE PARTY NEVER ENDS: OK, maybe not *everybody* "got hammered" at the Lone Star Music Awards; some of us waited until the official after party at Cheatham Street Warehouse (which ended with the Beaumonts blasting through a rip-roaring cover of Motörhead's "Ace of Spades" so loud, you couldn't even hear the passing train). But hammered or not, a good time was had by all the whole night long. I can't remember what had us laughing so hard when this shot was snapped backstage at the Marc, but odds are it was something REK said. From left: Willy Braun of Reckless Kelly, Robert Earl Keen, Joe Ely, Richard Skanse, and Zach Jennings. (Photo by John Carrico)

musta notta gotta lotta sleep that night!

Hall of Famer Joe Ely teams with Reckless Kelly to rock sixth annual Lone Star Music Awards in San Marcos. | By Richard Skanse



“Hey operator, cancel the phone call/I hear somebody knockin’ at the door ...”

Anytime Joe Ely sings those lines in concert, best cancel your plans for going anywhere for the next seven or 10 or sometimes even 15 minutes. Because that’s “Cool Rockin’ Loretta” knockin’, and once Ely lets *her* in, there ain’t nobody going nowhere until she’s had her way and mopped both the stage and dancefloor with everyone within earshot. On the evening of Sunday, April 27, that meant not only Ely and his backing band for the night, Reckless Kelly, but all of the other Americana roots ‘n’ roll artists — plus a few hundred fans — gathered inside the Marc in downtown San Marcos for the sixth annual Lone Star Music Awards.

The epic “Loretta” closed the three-song “J.E.R.K.” set by Ely and Reckless Kelly that kicked off with “Dallas” immediately after Ely’s induction into the Lone Star Music Hall of Fame. It was arguably *the* highlight in a night celebrating nothing but highs from the last 12 months in Texas, Red Dirt, and Americana music and — in the case of Ely and fellow LSM Hall of Fame inductee Kent Finlay — storied careers spanning four decades. Reckless Kelly would return to the stage (sans Ely) a few minutes later for their extended headlining slot, after the presentation of the evening’s last two awards: **Song of the Year**, to William Clark Green for “She Likes the Beatles,” and **Album of the Year**, to Jason Boland & the Stragglers for *The Dark and Dirty Mile*.

While the Hall of Fame inductees are selected by Lone Star Music, the winners of the LSM Awards are determined by fans who vote online after a nominating committee of industry insiders picks the candidates for each category. Reckless Kelly collected two awards of their own, for **Americana/Roots-Rock Album of the Year** (*Long Night Moon*) and **Musician of the Year** (for Cody Braun.) Other winners in the artist and musician categories included Jason Isbell for **Songwriter of the Year**, Cody Canada and Kacey Musgraves for **Male** and **Female Vocalist of the Year**, the duo of Kelly Willis and Bruce Robison (**Country Album of the Year**, for *Cheater’s Game*), Guy Clark (**Singer-Songwriter/Folk Album of the Year**, for *My Favorite Picture of You*), Oklahoma’s Turnpike Troubadours (**Live Act of the Year**), Thieving Birds (**Emerging Artist of the Year**), and Lloyd Maines (**Producer of the Year**). Also honored were Dickson Production’s annual MusicFest in Steamboat Springs, Colo. (**Festival of the Year**) and San Marcos’ storied Cheatham Street Warehouse (**Venue of the Year**, nicknamed the “Gruene Hall Award” after the historic dancehall was retired from eligibility after winning five years in a row.) And 8-year-old Dierks Canada entered the record books as the youngest LSM Award-winner ever for his **Album Art of the Year**-winning painting used for the cover of his dad Cody Canada’s *Some Old, Some New, Maybe a Cover or Two*. (Dierks actually painted the piece when he was only 6.)

The evening kicked off with master of ceremonies Mattson Rainer of KNBT introducing Zane Williams and Kylie Rae Harris, two of the up-and-coming artists featured on the current season of TV’s *Troubadour, TX*. Their three-song set, which included a duet on Williams’ “Pablo and Maria,” was followed by performances throughout the rest of the evening by fellow nominees Chris King (backed by his full band), Slaid Cleaves (who sang his crowd-



pleasing “Texas Love Song,” another nominee for Song of the Year), Emerging Artist winners Thieving Birds (whose frontman, Ace Crayton, had also been in the running for Male Vocalist), Country Album winners Kelly Willis and Bruce Robison, and, just before the Hall of Fame inductions, William Clark Green, whose full-band set naturally included his winning “She Likes the Beatles.”

First introduced at last year’s awards show, the Lone Star Music Hall of Fame was started to recognize artists whose music and careers have come to exemplify Texas and Americana music at its finest — and who have played an undeniable role in inspiring and even guiding countless others in their wake. Willy Braun of Reckless Kelly had the honor of inducting legendary Lubbock rocker and songwriter Joe Ely with help from a very special guest, 2013 LSM HOF inductee Robert Earl Keen. Keen didn’t perform this year, but his surprise appearance and characteristically funny but reverent intro remarks were as enthusiastically received by the crowd as Ely and Reckless Kelly’s subsequent powerhouse “J.E.R.K.” set — not to mention the emotional acceptance speech by the night’s other HOF inductee, songwriter and Cheatham Street Warehouse don Kent Finlay. Finlay’s fame and name may not be as widely known as Ely’s, but his impact on the Texas music scene as a mentor and/or father figure to artists ranging from George Strait to Todd Snider to Randy Rogers to William Clark Green cannot be overstated. To paraphrase Slaid Cleaves, one of the handful of Cheatham Street alumni on hand who helped induct him, “You just can’t have a Lone Star Music Hall of Fame without having Kent Finlay in it.”

Agreed ... and, done.

2014 Lone Star Music Award Winners

Album of the Year: Jason Boland & the Stragglers, *Dark & Dirty Mile*

Song of the Year: William Clark Green, “She Likes the Beatles”

Songwriter of the Year: Jason Isbell

Live Act of the Year: Turnpike Troubadours

Americana/Roots-Rock Album of the Year: Reckless Kelly, *Long Night Moon*

Singer-Songwriter/Folk Album of the Year: Guy Clark, *My Favorite Picture of You*

Country Album of the Year: Kelly Willis & Bruce Robison, *Cheater’s Game*

Male Vocalist of the Year: Cody Canada

Female Vocalist of the Year: Kacey Musgraves

Emerging Artist of the Year: Thieving Birds

Musician of the Year: Cody Braun of Reckless Kelly

Producer of the Year: Lloyd Maines

Festival of the Year: MusicFest

Album Artwork of the Year: Dierks Canada, for Cody Canada’s *Some Old, Some New, Maybe a Cover or Two*



OUR FAVORITE PICTURES OF Y’ALL: (At left) Cody Canada and his 8-year-old son, Dierks, show off their new LSM Awards (for Male Vocalist and Album Art of the Year, respectively.) (Opposite page, from top) Hall of Fame inductee Joe Ely and double award-winners Reckless Kelly do the cool J.E.R.K.; Ace Crayton of Emerging Artist winners Thieving Birds; Song of the Year winner William Clark Green sings about Beatles. (This page, from top) Zane Williams and Kylie Rae Harris kick off the show; Chris King keeps it country; Slaid Cleaves sings a “Texas Love Song”; 2014 LSM Hall of Fame inductee Kent Finlay (whose Cheatham Street Warehouse also won Venue of the Year) with his proud children, Jenni, HalleyAnna, and Sterling Finlay; Country Album of the Year winners Bruce Robison and Kelly Willis; 2013 HOF inductee Robert Earl Keen and Willy Braun of Reckless Kelly introducing friend and 2014 HOF inductee Ely; backstage with Willy Braun, Keen, Ely, and Musician of the Year Cody Braun. (All photos by John Carrico)





Photo by Scott Newton Courtesy of KLRU-TV

acl's pride and joy

willie and stevie among
first austin city limits hall
of fame inductees

by lynne margolis

As he sliced through a throng of people nibbling hors d'oeuvres and sipping cocktails at KLRU-TV's Studio 6A, made famous as the spot where *Austin City Limits* taped so many of its 40 seasons, Double Trouble drummer Chris Layton said, "I feel like I've just come back home."

For Layton, bassist Tommy Shannon and keyboardist Reese Wynans, who joined their late bandleader, Stevie Ray Vaughan, in the first group of inductees to the new Austin City Limits Hall of Fame on April 26, it was more like coming full circle. With fellow inductees Willie Nelson, founding ACL executive producer Bill Arhos and the late University of Texas Longhorns football coach Darrell Royal, Vaughan and Double Trouble helped make not only the show, but Austin itself, world renowned.

Now celebrating its 40th anniversary, *Austin City Limits* lays claim to being the longest-running music program in television history. Nelson performed on the 1974 pilot, which helped Arhos convince skeptical PBS programmers the show was worth picking up, and Royal, whose early support drew artists such as Merle Haggard and George Jones to the stage, helped it gain a national audience. Vaughan and Double Trouble, of course, drew viewers who'd previously regarded the show as only a country-music showcase.

The ceremony and performances, and a follow-up event on June 26 at ACL Live at the Moody Theater, where the show is now taped, will be turned into a two-hour anniversary special for likely November airing. Talent announced so far for the June show includes Gary Clark Jr., Jimmie Vaughan, Sheryl Crow, Kris Kristofferson

and John Mayer; Jeff Bridges will emcee.

KLRU-TV CEO and general manager Bill Stotesbery said the ACL Hall of Fame itself will open around then at the Moody Theater. A growing timeline of every artist who has performed on the show already covers a hallway wall there, and a gallery contains the work of longtime ACL photographer Scott Newton. As for future inductees, Stotesbery said, "Right now, we're looking at the obvious inductions, the people who were most important to getting the show started. As we go forward, it'll be contributions to the show, significance of the artist and importance of that episode in the history of the show."

Both the show and its original studio, in UT's Communications Building B, have been designated as an official landmark by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, though surprisingly, Vaughan and Double Trouble, who gave electric blues a much-needed jolt of energy in the 1980s, are not yet in that hall of fame.

They were, however, feted in fine style at Studio 6A, along with their fellow inductees. (Vaughan also will be the subject of an exhibit titled "Pride & Joy: The Texas Blues of Stevie Ray Vaughan," opening June 12 at the Grammy Museum at L.A. Live.)

Nelson performed with Lyle Lovett and Emmylou Harris before Matthew McConaughey's induction speech, in which he noted, "There really would be no *Austin City Limits* without Willie Nelson, all right? It's as simple as that."

Accepting the honor, Nelson commented, "I've said it a hundred times or more; Austin is the best thing that happened to music. Austin is where music

comes together."

Executive producer/host Terry Lickona inducted the now-retired Arhos, saying, "If Willie is in many ways the heart of *Austin City Limits*, Bill Arhos was the driving force, the spirit that kept the show going."

Noting he's the only inductee without a statue, Arhos told a story about Nelson's 2006 pot bust, earning a huge laugh. Retired Longhorns Coach Mack Brown inducted Royal, calling him "One of the first and biggest fans of *Austin City Limits*." Lickona said Royal's famed pickin' parties inspired ACL's songwriter-session episodes, and Royal's widow, Edith Royal, added, "He loved his family, he loved football and he loved music, more than anything."

Jimmie Vaughan was on the road touring, but taped a thank-you for his late brother. And Layton added, "Stevie is still here. He's here in this building. ... This place is home. It feels great to be back on this stage."

Then he, Shannon, and Wynans called out one blues star after another: Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Mike Farris, Doyle Bramhall II (who played "Change It," which his father wrote for Vaughan), Robert Randolph Jr. and Buddy Guy. For the finale, "Texas Flood," the stage supported Double Trouble, Nelson and his son Lukas, Lovett, Bramhall, Guy, Shepherd and Nelson's harmonica player, Mickey Raphael.

That kind of star power, a reflection of 40 years of *Austin City Limits* talent, suggests ACL's Hall of Fame will one day stand as tall as the Rock and Roll or Country Music halls of fame. For these inductees at least, it's the perfect home.



acl fest leaves heritage headliners behind

For the first time in its 13-year history, the Austin City Limits Music Festival will not have one top-tier headliner whose career began before the 1990s, much less the '80s or earlier. The closest thing to a "heritage rock" act among the top eight announced for the Oct. 3-5 and 10-12 festival is Pearl Jam. Top names also include **Eminem, Outkast, Skrillex, Beck, Calvin Harris, Lana Del Ray, Foster the People, and Lorde** (for the second weekend only). Until 2013, when it jumped into the '80s with Lionel Richie, Depeche Mode and the Cure, the festival always had at least one Baby Boom-friendly headliner, a la Neil Young, Tom Petty, Stevie Wonder or Bob Dylan.

As for the rest of the lineup, the **Replacements** and **Jimmy Cliff** might be considered the most senior of the major acts. As always, **Asleep at the Wheel** is on the bill, along with a variety of gospel acts such as the **Legendary Soul Stirrers** and **Jones Family Singers**. But roots-music artists seem sparser than in the past, making ACL Fest, which takes place in Zilker Park, seem more like sister festival Lollapalooza than ever. A handful of Americana acts will appear, though, including the **Avett Brothers, Robert Ellis, Turnpike Troubadours, Lake Street Dive, Parker Millsap, Nikki Lane, Ray Benson & Milkdrive, and Elizabeth McQueen**. More details are available at aclfestival.com. — LYNNE MARGOLIS



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Photo courtesy of Cary Cooper



real women, real songs — lots and lots of songs

Cary Cooper gave herself and 21 of her female songwriter peers a challenge: write a song a week for 52 weeks, and share them — warts and all, finished or not — on the Internet.

By Richard Skanse

On the top shelf of a bookcase in Cary Cooper's living room in Dallas sits an ordinary bowl filled with 52 cut-up pieces of paper, each with a seemingly ordinary word written on it. Words like "panic," "vulnerable," "joyful," "envious," "thoughtful," "puzzled," "negative," and "demure," all taken from a therapist's chart of human feelings. But that bowl and those 52 pieces of paper are kind of magic, because by year's end they will have sparked well over a 1,000 brand new songs by a dedicated group of 22 talented women songwriters from around the country. What's more, every single one of those songs will be shared with the world on YouTube.

Cooper, the keeper of the bowl and the ringleader of the group, first started the "RealWomenRealSongs" project a year ago — inspired by a YouTube collaboration that her 12-year-old daughter was participating in with other tweens. "Each week they would have a theme and they would post a video they made based on whatever the theme was," Cooper says. "And one day my daughter said, 'Mom, you should do this with your songwriter friends and write songs!' So I just kind of started with some friends of mine for the first season, and I didn't know if we would manage to pull it off, but we ended up making it through the whole year. After that ended I took a three-month break before starting this season, but I had already started recruiting people."

Including Cooper, nine of the women participating in this year's RWRS project were either born in or live in Texas: Terri Hendrix, BettySoo, Sara Hickman, Connie Mims, Stephanie Macias (aka Little Brave),

Kate Hearne, Lisa Markley, and Ellis (now based in Minneapolis). Lucy Wainwright Roche, Dorit, Honor Finnegan, Natalie York, and Annika (at 16, the youngest member of the group) all live in or around New York City. The rest of the group is made up of Alice Peacock (Nashville), Megan Burt (Denver), Anne Vogelzang (Madison, Wis.), Tracey Grammer (Doylestown, Pa.), Tylan Greenstein and Ingrid Elizabeth (Berkley, Calif.), and sister-in-laws Emily and Hope Dunbar of Nebraska. Cooper assigned each of the 21 other women a set day of the week on which to submit their songs (three women a day, seven days a week for 52 weeks), leaving herself as a "floater" to post her song on whatever day it was needed to fill a hole; invariably, sometimes life and/or touring schedules can get in the way and a participant has to sit a week out — though at 18 weeks into the project most all of them had stayed diligently on track.

"What's funny is, you kind of learn everyone's personalities by how and when they turn their songs in," observes Cooper, who collects the submissions via DropBox and spends at least an hour a day uploading them all herself to YouTube. "There are some who are very regular and turn their songs in like two or three days early, and there are some I know not to expect to hear from until right at midnight the day that their songs are due. And then others are emailing me weekly saying 'Oh my god, I'm so sorry, I'm going to be late again!' And it's typically the same ones in each category." (She credits the Dunbar sisters, both schoolteachers, for being the most reliably punctual, but tactfully declines — with a laugh — to name the most chronic procrastinators.)

Regardless of their variable time management skills and busy schedules, though, it's not really the weekly deadline that proves the most challenging aspect of the project for many of the women involved — just as it's not the task of writing songs on demand based a shared prompt or theme that makes RealWomenRealSongs unique (it's hardly

"sharing the songs on youtube is tough," admits Terri Hendrix

the first songwriter pool built around that concept.) What sets RWRS apart and really tests the writers' commitment is the fact that rather than just sharing their work with each other via email or private get-togethers, they record videos of their songs knowing that each and every one of them will be posted online. And if you think that's not a big deal for even seasoned artists who make their living sharing their art in public, guess again.

"Sharing the songs on YouTube is tough," admits Terri Hendrix. "I'm a perfectionist, and some of my songs are not always 'done' when they're turned in — they are more or less ideas. I end up making the deadline, but sharing those

songs with a huge audience is challenging."

BettySoo seconds that. "It's definitely scary uploading a video each week and knowing that very early version of a song that I might not ever choose to perform again will live on the Internet forever," she says. "Forever." Sara Hickman even addressed that paranoia directly in her playful, beat-poet style submission for

whatever we're writing out there, even if it's not exactly what people are expecting from us."

Among the surprises so far have been Cooper showing off her schoolyard "cup song" skills in her Week 3 ("Demure") submission, and Hendrix — best known for playing guitar, mandolin, and harmonica — sitting down at a piano for her Week 7 "Found" song. BettySoo has incorporated loops and her own multi-tracked backing vocals in some of her RWRS videos, and Hendrix also went full-on techno for Week 10's prompt, "Happy."

"When you're writing on deadline and need to turn in a song a week, it makes you think outside of the box," says Hendrix, who's actually expressed interest in recording an electronica album for years. "I had a blast with 'Happy,' but it was tough because I looped all these various recordings I have of people talking, and I was just about done with it when I hit one wrong button and deleted the entire piece. I was never able to get it exactly like I wanted it, but I finished it. That's one I plan on continuing to work on, though — I still hear it the way it should be and it bothers me that it's not that way ... yet."

BettySoo says she has a "gut feeling" that some of her RWRS songs may make it onto one of her albums down the road, "whether in their current form or edited," and doubtless more than a few of the other women's songs will, too. But stockpiling material really doesn't seem to be the main objective for anyone involved.

"For us the whole purpose is not only to write a lot, but also to be vulnerable and share the creative process with other people," Cooper says. "The hope is that we inspire other people on their own creative journeys, no matter what they are and not necessarily just songwriting. We have a public RealWomenRealSongs page

on Facebook, and I love that we have a photographer who posts photos on there weekly based on the prompt themes, and there's also a visual artist who is making these really awesome collages. And we have a number of people who aren't officially involved in the project but who follow the prompts and post songs to their own YouTube pages and share the links with us on Facebook. It's been really neat to watch it evolve like that."

In addition to their weekly song submissions, each of the 22 women in the group has also been recording monthly video blogs. Those haven't been posted publically yet, but Cooper plans to compile and edit them together into a RWRS documentary at the end of the year. After that, she'll begin the adventure all over again with a new group of writers for RWRS' third season. "I already have people expressing interest, saying 'I want to be a part of it next time,'" Cooper says. "So I think it's definitely caught on."

In the meantime, this year's crop of Real Women continues to write on ... and on and on and on and on. It's a marathon that doesn't necessarily get any easier, but keeps on giving week after week.

"This project brought me out of a long dry spell, and a creative fire feels good," enthuses Hendrix. "I'm also a fan now of every woman in the group. It's a sisterhood of good women, and every artist is unique. Cary is doing a really special thing here. It's taking a whole lot of her time, but I hope the sisterhood she's created makes her feel good."

You can follow Cooper, Hendrix, BettySoo and the rest of the 22 women of RealWomenRealSongs on YouTube at www.youtube.com/user/RealWomenRealSongs and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/realwomenrealsongs.

bettysoo says
rwrS gives them
the freedom to
"put whatever
we are writing
out there, even
if it is not what
people expect."

Week 11's prompt, "Panic."

But despite — or perhaps even *in* spite of — such reservations about sharing some of their songs with the public sooner than they'd like (if at all), many of the women have embraced the challenge by trying out different instruments and even musical styles outside of their usual comfort zones — or at least the ones they're best known for. The rule with RWRS is, anything goes.

"I imagine I am not unlike many artists in that I write in a number of styles at home, but not all of those songs make it onto albums because they don't fit the theme, genre, instrumentation, etc., of an album I'm recording," notes BettySoo. "But I think the nature of this project does give more permission to put



SONGWRTIERS RALLY TO HELP FRIEND AND MENTOR KENT FINLAY FIGHT CANCER



HalleyAnna Finlay singing for her dad, Kent, at Luckenbach. Photo by Brian T. Atkinson

As the longtime proprietor of San Marcos' Cheatham Street Warehouse and mentor to up and coming songwriters and performers, Kent Finlay has played a key role in helping to launch the careers of a veritable who's who of Lone Star notables, including George Strait, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Todd Snider, James McMurry, Terri Hendrix, Randy Rogers, and countless more. So it's no wonder that ever since Finlay was recently diagnosed with a relapse of bone marrow cancer, there's been an outpouring of support from the Texas music community. In late March, 600 friends and former students came together for a Finlay benefit concert in Luckenbach. Performers included Ray Benson, Bruce Robison, Jon Dee Graham, Cody Canada, Owen Temple, and Finlay's youngest daughter, HalleyAnna. Kent's other daughter, Americana radio promoter Jenni Finlay, summed up the event — which raised nearly \$15,000 between door donations, a silent auction, and tip jars — as "a beautiful day filled with amazing songs and love. Our hearts are so full."

Highlights included Temple's haunting take on Finlay's song "Mines of Terlingua" and Benson's energetic event closer, "Luckenbach, Texas." "Songwriter, mentor, curator, teacher, historian," Temple said, describing Finlay's distinct roles in shaping Texas music. "Usually, it's just one. The amazing thing is that he's all of those. Kent has encouraged and participated in and helped create the best of what Texas music has been and is."

Importantly, Finlay has always supported songwriters spanning all genres. Graham noted Finlay's affinity toward outsiders. "Kent's a really open-minded fellow who took an interest in me as far back as the Skunks in 1978," he said. "At that time, there were a limited number of places a punk rock band could play. He never talked down to us. He would even hang out with us. He could sense that we were testing boundaries and there's nothing more outlaw than that. Kent Finlay likes people who fuck with the rules." — BRIAN T. ATKINSON

STEVE SILBAS, THE OTHER HALF OF CASBEERS' "BARB 'N STEVE," PASSES

On April 8, just five months after losing his beloved wife, Barbara Wolfe, to cancer, former San Antonio club owner Steve Silbas died in a hospice two weeks after suffering a heart attack and stroke. He was 51. Silbas, who had diabetes, had been in ailing health for some time even before Wolfe's passing, but remained optimistic through his grief while undergoing dialysis and waiting for a kidney donor.

For the better part of a decade (1999 through 2008), Silbas and Wolfe owned and operated the Alamo City restaurant and concert venue Casbeers on Blanco Road, which specialized in serving up delicious enchiladas and hamburgers and booking local, regional and touring Americana singer-songwriters and roots rock acts. In 2008, they moved the business into an old Methodist church in the King William Historic District. Casbeers at the Church (later renamed San Antone Cafe & Concerts) maintained the menu and intimate feel of the original Casbeers in its dining area but also featured a larger listening-room like concert space in the chapel, complete with church pew seating. It was a beautiful venue with terrific acoustics, but it only lasted four years. The couple closed the business in the spring of 2011, citing the economic downturn and Silbas' health issues (he had had open-heart surgery earlier that year.) The venue's final concert was a Bob Dylan Birthday Bash tribute show on May 24, 2011.

Silbas was buried with his wife's ashes in San Antonio. At the memorial service, Texas songwriter David Rodriguez sang Buck Owens' "Together Again" in honor of the couple who endeared themselves to so many musicians and San Antonio music fans for 13 years. — RICHARD SKANSE

NEW & RECENT RELEASES

on the LoneStarMusic radar

April 29

Old 97's, *Most Messed Up*
Josh Grider, *Luck & Desire*
Ray Lamontagne, *Supernova*

May 6

Nikki Lane, *All or Nothin'*
Graham Weber, *Faded Photos*

May 13

Radney Foster, *Everything I Should Have Said*
Sturgill Simpson, *Metamodern Sounds in Country Music*
Carrie Elkin & Danny Schmidt, *For Keeps*
Dolly Parton, *Blue Smoke*

May 27

Bruce Robison & Kelly Willis, *Our Year*
John Fullbright, *Songs*
Brandon Jenkins, *Stand Alone*
Mark Jones & Twenty Paces, *Breaking Even*
Slim Bawb, *Gristle & Guts*

June 3

Miranda Lambert, *Platinum*
Dave and Phil Alvin, *Common Ground: Dave Alvin + Phil Alvin Play and Sing the Songs of Big Bill Broonzy*

June 10

Mary Gauthier, *Trouble & Love*
Seth Walker, *Sky Still Blue*
Amy McCarley, *Jet Engines*

June 17

Willie Nelson, *Band of Brothers*
The Mastersons, *Good Luck Charm*

June 24

Matt Harlan, *Raven Hotel*
Sarah Borges, *Radio Sweetheart*

July 1

Old Crow Medicine Show, *Remedy*

July 15

John Hiatt, *Terms of My Surrender*
Cowboy Jack Clement, *For Once and For All*

August 5

Sunny Sweeney, *Provoked*

August 25

Shovels & Rope, *Swimmin' Time*

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Adam Carroll

Seasoned (but not broken) by life and the road and happily married to his second wife, the Tyler Kid is finally growing into his own hard-luck songs — and crazy enough to help sing Gary Floater's, too. | By Jim Beal Jr.

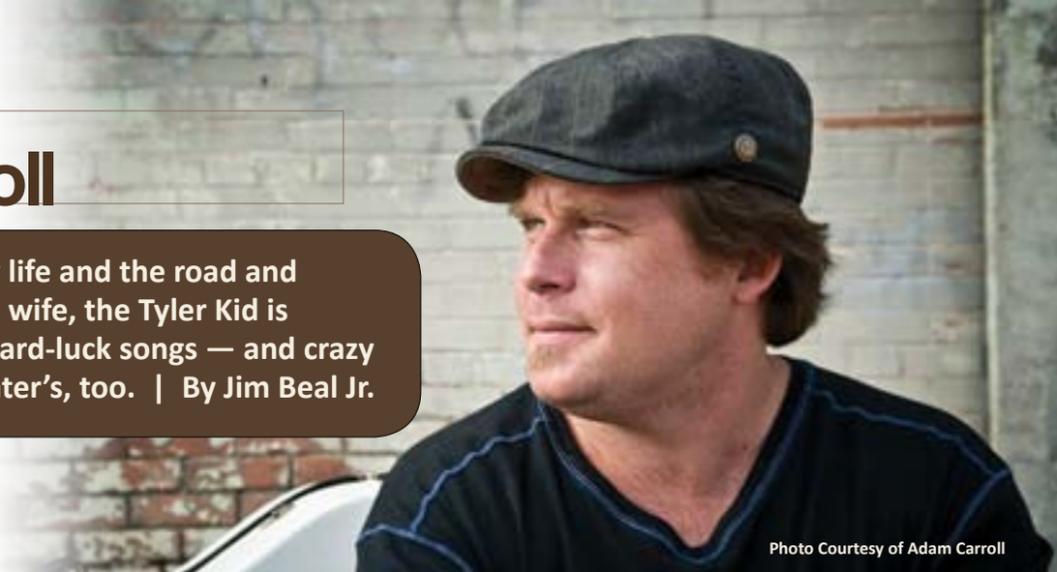


Photo Courtesy of Adam Carroll

He's 39, but from a distance — and not a long distance — Tyler-bred, San Marcos-based Adam Carroll could pass for half that age. Carroll has a full head of perpetually tousled hair, an air of innocence and an “aw shucks” kind of demeanor that's refreshing but deceiving.

Below that hair are twinkling eyes that don't miss much, and a sly smile that intimates he's either up to something or is well aware that you're up to something, and he's not likely to turn his back on you. Those attributes help make Carroll a first-rate Texas troubadour; a storyteller who still looks like a kid while writing and singing stark yet sympathetic songs about gamblers, ramblers, ex-cons, drunks, cab drivers, fishermen, thieves, washed-up musicians, heartbreak and, now and then, love gone right.

Carroll's new album, his eighth, *Let It Choose You*, is packed with all of the above plus a South Louisiana accent here and there to augment his Texas storytelling proclivities.

“I studied classical guitar at Tyler Junior College, but I wasn't very good at competing in the guitar program,” Carroll says. “I discovered a creative writing teacher, Candace Schaefer (now the associate director of the University Writing Center at Texas A&M University), at the college, and it just blew me away. I loved the writing, but I had a hard time with short stories. I had trouble making something that long be interesting.”

Inspired and influenced by the likes of Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, Robert Earl Keen and other wordsmiths in his lawyer dad's record collection — and equally influenced by the players on his musician/choir-director mom's side of the family

— Carroll turned his talents to the three-minute song form. He worked coffee houses and open-mic nights and started rambling around Texas working places such as Poor David's Pub in Dallas, Flipnotics in Austin, and Cibolo Creek Country Club and Casbeers in San Antonio.

Carroll's 2000 debut, *South of Town*, produced by Lloyd Maines, served notice there was a new kid around who had something to say. Maines has since produced several Carroll projects, including *Let It Choose You*.

“The first two albums, *South of Town* and *Looking Out the Screen Door*, most of the songs came out in this huge writing spurt I had in a year, year-and-a-half,” Carroll says. “Some of the songs, if they stumped me, I'd get frustrated. But I read an interview with Neil Young where he said you sometimes have to go away from the song and come back to it. If it doesn't come out right away, it doesn't mean it's a bad one.”

From the start, the fresh-faced Tyler kid was writing about the nitty and the gritty.

“A lot of the songs I wrote were like a pair of jeans, a shirt or a suit that were given to me at a certain age,” Carroll explains. “They were too big for me. When I wrote them, some came from experiences I had. But being lonely, having ex-wives, being in jail — at 21 I didn't have those experiences. But I wrote about them. And I grew into them. The songs on this album, some certainly come from experiences I didn't have at 21. Now I could have been a character in a song I wrote when I was 21.”

Carroll also has fallen under the spell of South Louisiana, captivated by the music, the food and the culture of Acadiana. *Let*

It Choose You songs including “Bernadine,” “Tears in My Gumbo,” and “Good Behavior” are directly attributable to that spell. “I've always loved that music,” he says. “I don't see how you can't. I love the timing of the songs, the beauty of the language, and the sound of accordion and fiddle.”

And that dovetails with the experience Carroll has had singing his songs in places as far from home as Italy and Holland. “The world is different, but whatever appeals to people is the same,” he says.

As is the case with a lot of singing songwriters, Carroll's early songs were straight-up solitary efforts. Over the past few years, though, he's done a considerable amount of co-writing with fellow travelers, including Owen Temple, Brian Rung, Jeff Plankenhorn, Susan Gibson, Mark Jungers, and Michael O'Connor. It was with O'Connor that Carroll recorded the 2010 duo album, *Gulf Coast Blues*, and *Let It Choose You* finds Carroll revisiting some of the songs from that set that co-writer O'Connor sang the first time around.

Carroll's songs have been covered by Slaid Cleaves, Hayes Carll, the Band of Heathens, and Canadian troubadour Roger Marin. Carroll, in turn, has been known to cover a few songs himself, albeit mostly from one somewhat questionable source. For a number of years now, he and Owen Temple have balanced their own work with work that's either a labor of love or borderline insanity. They've been collecting and recording the songs of Gary Floater, an elusive — some would say mythical — genre-hopping singer-songwriter from Miami, Mo. Floater's music admittedly isn't for all tastes; if H. P. Lovecraft had lived long enough to hear him, Floater's songs (not to mention his harrowing tall-

tales from the road) probably could have given him nightmares. Carroll and Temple's recently released third Floater “tribute” album, *Who Cares*, features such obscure gems as “Let's Get This Over With,” “I'm an Alcoholic,” “Two Boring Losers in Love,” and “Hello Diabetes.”

“There's a small circle of Floater fans around Cheatham Street Warehouse in San Marcos, and they come out and support him even though he never shows,” Carroll explains. “As many times as he's been beat up, he ought to have a metal cowboy hat. It's hard to get kicked out of Cheatham Street, but Gary's been banned

for life. He's an asshole, but, just when I've heard about enough out of him, he brings a smile to my face.”

Fortunately, Carroll's got a more reliable and sensible reason to smile these days: his new wife, Canadian singer-songwriter Christian (Chris) Marie Carroll. The couple met in 2012 north of the border at Roger Marin's Cicada Fest, and got married last year. Chris, who is at work on an album of her own with Robert Earl Keen's bassist Bill Whitbeck, sang harmony on her husband's *Let It Choose You*. In the liner notes, Carroll writes: “To my wife Christian, thank you for helping me find

the courage to make this record. I love you.”

“I quit drinking three years ago. I was learning to be sober,” Carroll says. “I also went through a divorce. I had the songs, but I thought, ‘What do I do? How do I make the record? How much work is it gonna take? Why should I make a record at all? How do I square the new stuff with the old stuff?’ And Chris said, ‘Shut your mouth and go to your gig.’ She told me the songs were important and so was I. Then she said, ‘Go up to your music room and get your ass to work.’”

He did.



Photo by Rodney Bursiel

Ray Bonneville

Searching for elusive answers and an “easy” gone hiding down in the groove | By Tiffany Walker



On a recent spring evening, Ray Bonneville peered out from the shadow cast by the brim of his hat into the crowd jammed inside Austin's storied Cactus Cafe and said quietly, “I can't really see you, but I can feel you out there.” He then launched into a groove that was so smooth and dark, it was intoxicating. By the time he

Bonneville makes it look easy, but as he explains, that “easy” sound is the culmination of having played “thousands of nightclubs, juke joints, bars, and smoky get-home-at-4-o'clock-in-the-morning gigs. After awhile, the stuff gets into your blood.”

got to the chorus of “Love is Wicked,” a track from his recently released album *Easy Gone*, the room was mesmerized.

If you were lucky enough to have been there that night, after the effects of the groove wore off, you may have found yourself scratching your head and asking, “Just how exactly did all that music come from just one guy?” Sure, you saw the stomp boards, harmonicas, and guitars, but the rich textures and dark tones

Bonneville conjures up with these tools are almost supernaturally haunting.

Take it from no less an authority on matters of musicianship and groove alchemy than Gurf Morlix, who doesn't beat around the bush when it

comes to hailing Bonneville's presence both onstage and on record. “He's the absolute best in the world at what he does,”

Morlix says. “He does everything so well. He's the king of the groove. And then, he just happens to be a really great electric guitar player. And then, he just happens to play harmonica better than anybody this side of Charlie Musselwhite. And then he writes these amazing songs, and he's such a great singer. And then, he's got the feet going — he's playing the drums, too! It's amazing.”

Like any artist who has mastered their craft, Bonneville makes it look easy, but as he explains, that “easy” sound is the culmination of having played “thousands of nightclubs, juke joints, bars, and smoky get-home-at-4-o'clock-in-the-morning gigs. After awhile, the stuff gets into your blood.”

The truth is, though, music seems to have always been in Bonneville's blood. As a kid growing up in Quebec, Canada, he recalls being drawn to the twangy electric

guitars coming through his grandmother's "big piece of furniture radio." Bonneville would stick his ear up to the rough cloth to listen, just so he could get as close to that sound as he could. His mother soon bought him a used acoustic guitar, and after just one lesson, he was off and running with it. "I didn't want any more lessons," Bonneville says. "I just wanted to do my own thing with it."

And that's exactly what he did. By the time he got to high school, his family had moved to Boston, and Bonneville had gone electric. Influenced by British rockers like the Kinks, Manfred Mann, and the Zombies, he formed a band called the VIPs with some of his school friends, and they toured New England in a 1957 Cadillac ambulance playing rock 'n' roll at fraternity parties.

After a stint in Vietnam, Bonneville surrendered to a sense of wanderlust that would lead him back to Boston, briefly, then on to places as varied as Alaska, Paris, New Orleans, and finally, in 2006, Austin. Along the way, he learned to fly fish, fly airplanes, and trust his instincts. And when he wasn't being distracted by his "mistress, the airplane," he was slowly developing his signature sound, which today

is as rich and varied as the smell of steam coming off a pot of gumbo.

The miles he's lived have seasoned Bonneville's style. He picked up the raw sounds of the blues in Boston, where he encountered such great travelling bluesmen as J.B. Hutto, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, and Hound Dog Taylor while they were all still touring. He also discovered the great blues harmonica player Charlie Musselwhite. At the time, Bonneville was driving a cab, and soon he was practicing the harmonica in between fares.

After heading up the Ray Bonneville Blues Band in Boulder, Colo., he left for Alaska to focus on his solo career and become friends with his harmonica rack and foot percussion. Though proficient on each separately, putting them together with the guitar was like learning an entirely new instrument. He figured in Alaska they would pay him to play even if he wasn't very good yet.

From the rowdy bars of the Pacific Northwest, he escaped to Paris, where for the first time he encountered a listening crowd. There he'd play up to three shows a night, with the last one kicking off at 4:30 in the morning. He later had similar gigs in New Orleans, where he really found his

vibe amongst the restless spirits and lazy rhythms looming over the Big Easy.

It wasn't until the '90s, though, that Bonneville picked up his pen and began sketching out his own original songs and luring listeners in with their provocative images set amidst his atmospheric grooves. On *Easy Gone*, his eighth album and fourth for Red House Records, the potent combo of his words and music work to suggest stories more than to outright tell them, leaving any sense of closure to the listener's imagination. But although the title track finds Bonneville asking, "Where has my easy gone?" like one searching for a less complicated time and place, the song's relaxed, hypnotic tone suggests one at peace with the uncertainty — knowing, perhaps, that the elusive answers he seeks are out there, just waiting to be found. And if not, so be it. He leaves his songs open-ended and ambiguous on purpose because it keeps them that much truer to life.

"There's as many versions of what's happening in a song as there are people who are listening to it," Bonneville explains. "Because everybody has a different sort of history."

⊗

Lydia Loveless

Leave it to a Buckeye girl to put the punk and fire back in alt-country.

| By D.C. Bloom



It only takes about a minute into Lydia Loveless's latest release, *Somewhere Else*, to realize that all those seemingly hyperbolic comparisons to some of music's most legendary female voices she's garnered are more than warranted.

But for the young Ohio woman who grew up on a beef cattle farm halfway between Canton and Columbus, sound-alike suggestions really used to get her goat. When her lead guitar player told a then-teenaged Loveless, "You sound so much like Stevie Nicks," it wasn't exactly heard as a compliment. "I was like, 'Fuck you!'" admits Loveless, 23. "I used to be adamant about not listening to things people told me to listen to or to people they thought I sounded like. But I've lightened up a lot ... I think Stevie Nicks is awesome — now. So it's actually kind of nice to be compared to her."

While Loveless may have lightened up, *Somewhere Else* finds her rocking harder than she ever has — and certainly harder than a couple of other vocal giants she's been compared to, June Carter and Loretta Lynn (even with Jack White's assist), ever managed to do.

Loveless was tagged with the catchall alt-country descriptor when her critically-acclaimed Bloodshot Records debut, *Indestructible Machine*, dropped in late 2011. That album skewed a bit more cow than punk, more Patsy Cline than Patti Smith. But *Somewhere Else* captures the evolution of a young voice finding her true voice, attempts to genre pigeonhole and comparison name-check be damned. In fact, no one has explained the Loveless Sound as well as Loveless herself. In the weeks leading up to the album's release,

Loveless wrote on her website, "... I feel like I truly captured my sound at last. It's rock 'n roll, it's pop, it's chock full of sexual innuendo and it kinda sounds like something bleeding (not in the period kind of way, well, maybe a little)."

Rather cheeky talk from the daughter of a preacher man. But the parental pulpit pounding didn't last that long. "Dad was a pastor for the first nine years of my life," Loveless explains. "Then he had a complete split from the church and bought a bar. That was our lifestyle. I wasn't allowed to paint my fingernails or watch MTV up until then."

Loveless welcomes the opportunity to clarify some of the biographical embellishments about those formative years that have been cited ad nauseum to explain how a sweet lil' bucolic Buckeye gal got steeped in such saloonish ways and a Merle-ish musical meme.

"The whole bar thing has gotten blown out of proportion," she says. "It was never a country and western bar, and dad was the owner, not the band booker. It was called the Underground and there was a Mexican restaurant upstairs. So there were a lot of parties with the Mexican dudes. Just good times. But that really was only for a couple of years."

The Loveless clan would soon gravitate to Columbus, prodded to emigrate by what she vaguely refers to as "some sort of misfortunes befalling us." But it certainly was a fortuitous move for Lydia, who soon discovered a punk club called Bernie's where Carson Drew, the family band that included her sisters and

father, would eventually start playing. While the genetic venture evaporated shortly after the family members recorded their first (and last) album, Loveless found a largely welcoming music community in Columbus and fertile ground to launch her solo career — albeit a bit off the beaten path from where one expects the next big thing to take root.

"For the most part, we're really supportive of each other," Loveless says of the scene in the Ohio capital, where she still lives. Yet she acknowledges that there were those who were baffled by her Bloodshot deal. "I feel free to talk shit about them because when I first

"I used to be adamant about not listening to things people told me to listen to or to people they thought I sounded like. But I've lightened up a lot ... I think Stevie Nicks is awesome — now." — Lydia Loveless

got signed, they accused me of sleeping my way to the top of the indie label scene," she continues. "There's a very uptight country scene in Columbus that is completely confused why nobody cares about their Johnny Cash covers that they play once a week."

Well played, Ms. Loveless. Point, set and match, actually. Because today, it's people like Kevin Russell who are playing Lydia Loveless covers. The Shinyribs/Gourds

Dawn & Hawkes

They may have charmed that Maroon 5 guy (and millions of TV viewers) with their harmonies on *The Voice*, but for this Austin folk duo, the sweetest success remains the writing and sharing of songs. | By D.C. Bloom



The line of more than 30 selfie-with-celebrity seekers snaking through the beer garden at Austin's Whip In on SXSW Sunday was impressive for a duo that only had a four-song EP (2012's *Golden Heart*) to their credit. But Miranda Dawn and Chris Hawkes were much more than just another photogenic singing couple with loving harmonies and catchy tunes: They were network television stars, riding high on their first 15 minutes of national fame that commenced the moment Adam Levine spun his chair around and gushed, "That was my favorite performance I've ever seen anywhere on *The Voice*."

That was the fateful moment that officially landed the Austin-based folk duo in the same club as Nakia, Curtis Grimes, and a growing list of other Texas artists (33 to date) who have reached a broader audience via the popular NBC talent show. Although Dawn and Hawkes would eventually be eliminated just shy of the "playoffs" during a "battle round" episode in April, their run on *The Voice* still carried their voices to millions of listeners across the country who otherwise might never have heard of the couple. It probably didn't hurt sales of that aforementioned EP, either; *Golden Heart* made the Top 25 of *Billboard's* Folk Chart.

The question for all contestants, of course, is how to parlay that network television exposure into a career in music that will last. No one wants to be forgotten by the business as quickly as *Nashville's* fictional Layla Grant — let alone any number of *real* would-be American

Idols and former *Voice* contenders whose names escape us at the moment. Fortunately for Dawn and Hawkes, their commitment to songwriting remains their priority. Levine's praising of their audition cover of the Beatles' "I've Just Seen a Face" may have been music to their ears, but they both firmly believe that in the end, it will be the quality of their original material that will matter most.

"Whether it's to a handful of fans or a national audience, it's all about how people react to a song," Hawkes says. "You may write a song and something about it touches someone in a way and at just the time they needed. They may have needed that song like they needed a chemist to come up with a certain medicine, and if someone had squashed that person from writing that song, they would have missed out on the thing they needed."

Fittingly, Dawn and Hawkes played their first show in front of a large audience not on a TV singing contest, but in a setting where the art of songwriting is revered above all else: the Kerrville Folk Festival, from the stage of the Kennedy Theatre — named for the late Rod Kennedy, who started Kerrville's New Folk Contest to give aspiring songwriters a chance to be heard. Kennedy often said that New Folk was designed to help kids writing songs in their bedroom and too shy to sing them for anyone — a description that once fit Dawn to a T.

"For the longest time I really was writing in my bedroom and no one heard the songs," says Dawn, who went on to

become a 2012 Kerrville New Folk finalist. "It wasn't until other people heard them and told me what they meant to them that I knew I had to do this."

Now that their run on *The Voice* is behind them, the couple can concentrate fully on finishing their first full-length studio album. "The songs for the new one are all written," Dawn says. "We just need to sit down and record them."

Doubtless the end result will help garner Dawn and Hawkes even more fans, as will their concert appearances in Austin and beyond. But if they still end up getting recognized now and then in airports or grocery stores by people who only know them from *The Voice*, well, they probably won't snub any selfie or autograph requests. As music fans themselves, they can certainly relate. Hawkes readily recalls the time their paths crossed with another celebrity singer, long before they had their own moment in the sun.

"We were performing on an outdoor stage and looked up and there was Glen Hansard, who was riding a bike by the place, and he stopped to listen to our set," says Hawkes. No one else seemed to recognize Hansard as the guy from the movie *Once*, let alone as the songwriter and frontman of Ireland's the Frames and the Swell Season. "We wanted to get our picture with him before he left, so I said, 'We're going to take a break and go say hi to our friend Glen ...' — so he wouldn't ride off before we could meet him!"



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Rowed Over

George Strait: The end of the trail (or so they say) | By Holly Gleason

*"Sometimes I feel like Jesse James, still trying to make a name
Knowing nothing's gonna change what I am
I was a young troubadour when I rode in on a song
And I'll be an old troubadour when I'm gone ..."*

And so, they say it's over. Or fixing to be. June 7 in Arlington, Texas: the final show with almost too many guests to name, then — truly — the Cowboy Rides Away. For good.

Or so they say, but it's hard to believe. George Strait has been a fixture at the top of the country music game for well over 30 years, winning awards, creating indelible singles, and defining what it means to be a classic country star for large chunks of two different centuries.

Maybe it says something about the state of our tailgate/moonlight/cold beer/hot night/hotter babe nation. For whatever reason, King George — a man who reveres Lefty Frizzell, Merle Haggard, George Jones, Hank Thompson, and Bob Wills — has decided to pack it up. When he does, he takes with him dignity, elegance, understatement, top-shelf songs, and a focus on the music, not the man or the mayhem.

Just consider the hits: "All My Ex's Live in Texas," "The Fireman," "Does Fort Worth Ever Cross Your Mind," "Ocean Front Property," "Give It Away," "The Chair," "Marina Del Ray," "Unwound," "Chill of An Early Fall," "Carried Away," "She'll Leave You with a Smile," "Write this Down," "Fool Hearted Memory," "I Just Wanna Dance with You," "I Can Still Make Cheyenne," "Run," "Amarillo By Morning" ... and on and on. There are 50 No. 1's on one Strait collection, and 22 more hits on another.

Listen to "Troubadour," a No. 1 from 2008, and understand that honoring the life, the rooms, the music was everything that made Strait who he was. To him, music was about distilling the essence of the

post-cowboy romanticism, iconicism and easy-going virility that defined being a Texan and a stand-up guy.

Heck, when Strait strode onstage in a white hat at the 1999 CMA Awards to the flourish of twin fiddles and was joined by Alan Jackson for the pointed "Murder On Music Row," it was a moment that decried the loss of traditional country in the rock/pop crossover blitz. So topical and in the moment then, but also prescient about the state of country music today.

And yet Strait's music still holds its own and finds its way against the status quo tide, and those hits of his just keep on coming. "I've Got a Car," currently headed to the top of the country charts, demonstrates there's no loss of enthusiasm for the man who won the 2013 Country Music Association Entertainer of the Year Award in the midst of what's being billed as his final tour. If those Entertainer of the Year Awards, won in the '80s, '90s and '10s, are about being an artist who's brought country music to the farthest reaches of our global culture, Strait's earned 'em. More than being a judge on a talent contest, or wearing his jeans just so (though ladies sure like the way Strait fills out his Wranglers), the taciturn Texan has been places no country star had since Willie Nelson.

Like Willie, who held down starring roles in *Electric Horseman* and *Honey-suckle Rose*, Strait even anchored his own box office hit, *Pure Country*. Playing Dusty Chandler, a superstar who eschews arena-sized success, Strait explored what anchors "real" country in the face of the

established himself as a matinee idol while watching the soundtrack spend weeks atop *Billboard's* Country Albums chart en route to selling six million copies and serving up two No. 1 singles.

Strait's success reflected the power of strong music, a clean image, and maintaining one's dignity. Long before he was hailed as "King George," Strait quietly filled arenas, sold in heavy-metal numbers, and early adopted seminal songwriters Dean Dillon, Jim Lauderdale, John Prine, Bruce Robison, and Jamey Johnson, as well as classicists Buddy Cannon, Guy Clark, Frank Dycus, Dallas Frazier, Red Lane, Dicky Lee, Sanger D. "Whitey" Shafer, and Sonny Throckmorton. He also helped bring country music into major stadiums with his Country Festival Tours in the '90s. Uniting some of the genre's biggest names — Alan Jackson, the Dixie Chicks, Tim McGraw and Faith Hill in their prime — with tasty acts like Asleep at the Wheel and Lee Ann Womack, Strait's Texas-sized traveling festival was a survey course in what real country should be.

What country music loses when the man who can ride, rope, rodeo, fish,

hunt, and act like a genuine gentleman leaves the road is a sense of authenticity. Not someone flexing their "lifestyle" as a brand extension, but an artist who draws as much from Frank Sinatra's gift as a stylist as he does from being the high-water mark of Ray Price embodied.

Somewhere along the horizon, of course, Strait will punctuate what it means to retire with his legacy intact. Unlike "Electric Horseman" Robert Redford in his suit of electric lights, drawn in for the money and the last gasp of fame, or Strait's own Dusty Chandler needing desperately to get back home, he will return to a place where the footlights fade and life emerges — and he can let the music, the moments, the memories do the work rather than shamelessly aping for applause or chasing bad trends down dark alleys in the name of irrationally trying to hold on to something that is so far beneath him.

Maybe that's what set Strait apart. Rather than trend, tilt, or tumble, he knows his strengths — and he can walk away at the top of his game. Never staying too long at the party, he leaves his

legacy shining as bright as ever, reminding anyone who's paying attention that the kind of music that endures comes from an artist's core, maintains a standard of excellence, and should never be drowned in cheap tricks, pyro, or costume changes.

Let's hope Nashville remembers. If not *why*, then at least the man who embodied so much of what the genre is made of. Otherwise, it's gonna be a long rest of forever on the country dial.

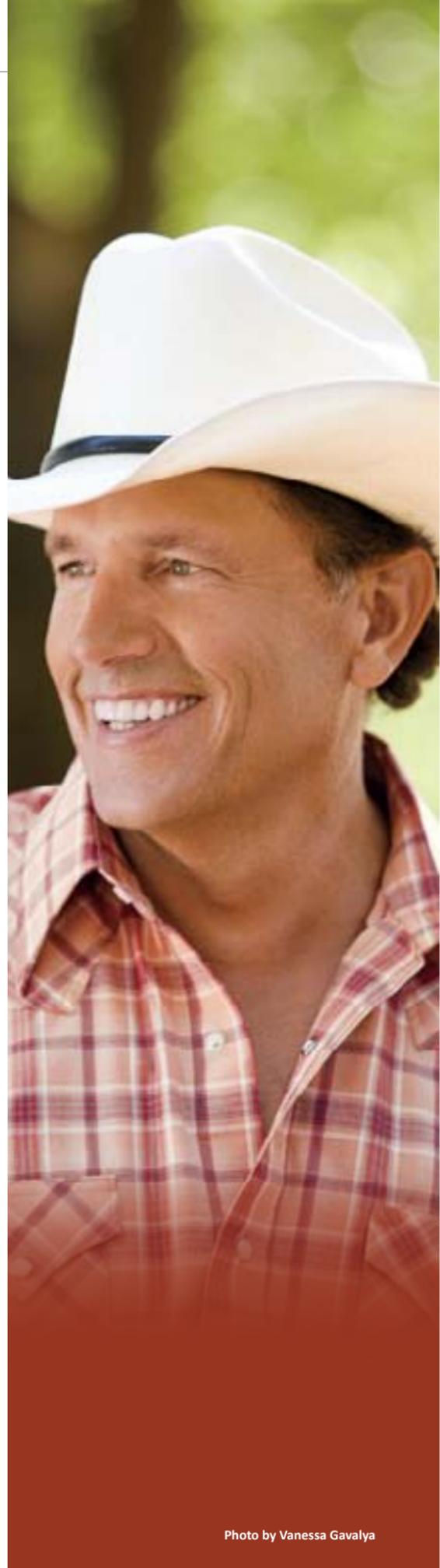


Photo by Vanessa Gavalya

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True Heroes of Texas Music

Rod Kennedy 1930 – 2014

The ex-Marine turned Kerrville Folk Festival founder didn't just credit music for changing his life; he spent most of his life returning the favor. | By Michael Corcoran

Austin became known as a town of free spirits and cheap living in the '70s and '80s, but it took a lot of hard work from people like Rod Kennedy to build the Groover's Paradise that became the Slacker's Playground. Although best known as the founder of the Kerrville Folk Festival in 1972, Kennedy made his mark much earlier, helping to establish what became radio station KUT and popularizing the outdoor music festival in Austin in the '60s with annual July concerts in Zilker Park.

In a town full of talkers, Kennedy was a do-er. When he passed away April 14 at age 84, the talk was about how the Hill Country would've been a much different place had it not been for the conservative ex-Marine who was profoundly touched by sad and beautiful songs.

When Kennedy turned 80, the event was celebrated with a three-hour concert at Austin's Paramount Theatre featuring such Kerrville favorites as Robert Earl Keen, Ruthie Foster, the Flatlanders, Eliza Gilkyson, Bobby Bridger, Terri Hendrix, Randy Rogers and more. Before that milestone I visited Kennedy at his house in Kerrville and talked about a career that began when he was the 16-year-old "boy singer" for the Bill Creighton Orchestra in his native Buffalo, N.Y. Kennedy didn't have to haul an instrument, so he was drafted to handle stagehand chores, and within a matter of months he was booking the band. "I was hooked from that point on," said Kennedy, who loved to sing, but found early on that his place was behind the scenes.

He moved to Texas in the late 1940s with his mother when she got a job as a buyer for Sakowitz, an upscale clothier based in Houston. After serving in the Marines during the Korean War, Kennedy booked jazz, gospel, country, classical, rock, Tejano, Broadway shows — you name it — in addition to the singer-songwriters in Kerrville, where the main stage bears his name. Under Kennedy's stewardship, Kerrville grew from an indoor event that attracted 2,800 people

over three days into the world's longest continually running folk festival, which annually draws more than 30,000 fans over an 18-day run.

Kennedy was already established as a promoter in 1972 when organizers of the Kerrville-based Texas State Arts & Crafts Fair asked him to put on a music festival at night to keep the crowds in town. The Kerrville Folk Festival was the crowning achievement of Kennedy's career, but even if it had never happened, his impact on the Central Texas music scene would've been profound.

As a 24-year-old freshman at the University of Texas in 1954, Kennedy used a school project to spearhead efforts to raise money for a campus radio station that would become a reality four years later when KUT went on the air. Weeks after graduating from UT in 1957, Kennedy and then-wife Nancy Lee bought the KHFI classical music station for \$21,000.

The roots of Kerrville were planted at the Zilker Hillside Theater in 1964, when Kennedy began booking and hosting the KHFI-FM Summer Music Festival over six nights in July. Monday was Folk Night and included such acts as Bob Dylan mentor Carolyn Hester and Texas country bluesmen Lightnin' Hopkins and Mance Lipscomb.

Kennedy worked hard and expected the same of those in his employ. He also demanded respect for musicians. There was that infamous night at emmajoe's on Guadalupe street when Kennedy flattened a drunk Blaze Foley, who was causing a ruckus during a folksinger's set.

Teaming up with Newport Jazz and Folk Festivals founder George Wein, Kennedy co-promoted the Longhorn Jazz Festival at Disch Field in 1966 and inside at Municipal Auditorium (later renamed Palmer Auditorium) the next year when it rained. The jaw-dropping lineups included Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Dave Brubeck, Stan Getz, and Nina Simone, plus homecoming sets from Austin-born Teddy Wilson and Kenny Dorham. "Thelonious Monk trashed his hotel



Kennedy at the 2013 Kerrville Folk Festival. Photo by Susan Roads

room," said Kennedy, whose behind-the-scenes recollections — including some huge monetary losses at Kerrville when it rained — fill his 1999 autobiography, *Music From the Heart* (Eakin Press). Monk admitted swinging from the light fixtures and paid the Downtowner Hotel \$400.

Kennedy, who never had children because, he said, his work schedule wouldn't be fair to them, opened the Chequered Flag folk club, named after his passion for race car driving, at 15th and Lavaca streets in 1967. He put the Speed Museum next door in 1968 to display his collection of vintage Porsches, Ferraris and Maseratis.

A conservative owner of sports cars owning a folk club in the '60s seemed incongruous for the times. But then, Kennedy has always been a model of duality. His best friend of 40 years was the liberal singer Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul & Mary, yet until he backed Barack Obama in 2008, Kennedy was a staunch right-winger.

"Rod is that rare combination of sensitive listener and a former Marine who has the determination to just plow through when things get tough," said Gary Hartman, director of Texas State University's Center for Texas Music History, in 2010. Preserving music history was a cause dear to Kennedy,

who donated 43 boxes of papers and memorabilia from Rod Kennedy Presents to UT's Center for American History when he retired.

"Just having him around and watching a show sort of raises the bar just a bit," said Lloyd Maines, who played in the backing band for the 80th birthday event. "I think his passion and persona is what helps make the Kerrville festival a special-feeling place."

Taking his cue from his military training, Kennedy laid down the rules that kept Kerrville unique: no talking in the audience during a performance, no recorded music between sets, and get that drum circle out of the campgrounds. Kerrville was built on reverence for the songwriter.

"I was pretty intimidated by Rod when I met him in 1981," said Kennedy's neighbor Robert Earl Keen in 2010. "Not just because of his reputation, but because he ran something that I very much wanted to be a part of." Keen said that when he won Kerrville's New Folk competition in 1983, "it validated music as a career choice for me."

Although he continued attending the festival up to last year, Kennedy retired in 2002, leaving the producer's seat to his longtime protégé, Dalis Allen. When I interviewed Kennedy in 2010 he was in love and taking his retirement seriously, with nine time-shares all over the world. He got a check every month from the Kerrville nonprofit ("My title is consultant," he said, "but nobody listens to me anymore.") He also sold Enlyten dietary supplements. Robust at 80, he was the product's greatest endorsement and during his last few years at Kerrville, he had a booth selling the product.

Above all, though, he still listened for great songs until the very end.

"Music changed my life," he said four years ago. "When I was in the Marines, I had a mission that had nothing to do with feelings. You're just not aware of anything else. But I've heard songs that made me cry."



Rod Kennedy and Terri Hendrix at Kennedy's 80th birthday celebration at the Paramount Theatre in 2010. Photo by Susan Roads

my friend rod, the patron saint of folk music

By Terri Hendrix

Rumor had it that Rod Kennedy, founder and patriarch of the Kerrville Folk Festival, was going to be in the audience that night. I fidgeted backstage; pulled at the bib of my overalls and nervously second-guessed my set list. "Too many slow songs? Would funny songs be okay?"

It was 1997 and I'd been invited to come play a short set at Paul Barker's house concert in Austin, Texas. Problem was, I didn't feel prepared to play music for a listening audience, much less have a semi-audition for the promoter of one of the most prestigious festivals in the country. During my weekly gigs on the Riverwalk in downtown San Antonio, I was used to having my music ignored by customers with their backs to me, heads leaned into straws, sucking down drinks in clear plastic cups with salt-lined rims. While margarita machines hummed in the background, I'd sneak in an original or two between covers of Van Morrison or Fleetwood Mac; but as for people actually listening to what I had to say? I wasn't used to that at all.

I looked at my watch; it was time. A full-blown case of stage fright set my knees to knocking as I walked to the chair placed dead center in front of the audience sitting in fold-out chairs in the living room. I was greeted by silence. Absolute silence. With shaking hands and quivering voice, I launched into "Two Dollar Shoes," tapping my right foot on the hard wood floor as I played. Trouble is, when I tap my foot, it's usually in time to a totally different song than the one I'm playing — but it was the only thing I knew to do to keep my leg from quivering. When I finally had the courage to open my eyes, I saw a grey-haired man with a receding hairline in a recliner. His arms were crossed, eyebrows cinched, and his lips were pursed in a pinched-off scowl. Given his posture, it was perfectly clear that he did not like my music. I might have had a touch of the jitters, but I was still Riverwalk-tough enough to shoot him a smile through bared teeth. He glared back at me.

My set drew to its close with polite applause. As the audience murmured about after the show, a woman led me by the elbow to meet Rod Kennedy. My heart sank when I realized he was the grouch in the recliner. Little did either one of us know that within 24 hours of him stiffly shaking my hand, Rod would almost die from a heart attack — one that had actually started while I was playing. Thus the horrible looks he was shooting my way during my show.

The next time I saw Rod, he'd recovered from his health scare and was introducing me at the Kerrville Folk Festival. At the end of my set, he hugged me and reminded me with a laugh, "The first time I heard you, I had a heart attack!" I had to laugh, too, because an unlikely friendship had blossomed ever since our less-than-ideal introduction. And just like it had for so many others before me, the festival Rod founded really did help launch my career as a songwriter. I sold my P.A., quit my Riverwalk gigs, and set out in earnest to find my way travelling the national and international folk circuit.

When my career was knocked off the rails due to medical issues in

2003, Rod started calling to check in on me and never stopped. It felt good to be acknowledged by him. Hugged by him. Seen by him. It was a lifeline of encouragement — for both of us. He was inspired that I didn't quit performing, and I was inspired by his stick-to-itiveness with the singer-songwriter. I admired and appreciated how, even in an era when cell phones became third appendages and audience attention spans sometimes seemed to dwindle to that of lab rats, Rod continued to endorse music that made you stop, listen, think, and feel. He took pride in knowing that he was an integral centrifuge in folk music history. His awareness of his legacy remained even as time quietly took away his health, car keys, home, and eventually his independence. He made sure that those who stepped in to fill his shoes at Quiet Valley Ranch would continue to "welcome home" not only the singer-songwriters he always believed in but the audiences who truly shared with him that same love of music.

The last time I saw Rod was when I stopped by his nursing home to put on a little concert. He wasn't feeling well enough to visit. And now, he's gone. I'm waiting for his phone call. And it's not going to come. I'm at odds about his death. I know his body had given out on him and that he was in great pain. But I can't help but selfishly wish he could have witnessed one more festival, because my fondest memories of Kerrville will always be of getting to watch him bask in his dream. I'd like to sit on the other side of the stage and watch him soak in the show. I'd like to watch this ex-Marine lean on his cane, peer over the rail from his VIP seat, and take in the nuances of each performance with that intelligent sideways grin on his face.

Dear patron saint of the folk singer, ambassador to the songwriter, friend — as the embers from the campfires at this year's festival crackle with songs, you will be missed. Goodbye, Rod.



Bob Livingston, Amilia K. Spicer, Bill Oliver and Betty Soo at Kerrville in 2009. Photo by Susan Roads

rod kennedy: the passion of a legend

By Bob Livingston

Rod Kennedy was a crusty old bird. There are many tales of his irascible nature, his ruling the roost and his penchant for kicking musicians off the Kerrville Folk Festival for one reason or another — including yours truly. On the other hand, Rod was a musical visionary who produced not just folk but jazz festivals and also opened the Chequered Flag, one of the first folk clubs in Austin. He founded the Kerrville Folk Festival in 1972 and helped jumpstart the careers of countless singer-songwriters. He was a pretty conservative guy in a lot of ways, but he partnered up with left-leaning folkies for the love of the song.

I had the high privilege of being on that first Kerrville Folk Festival, playing bass with Michael Murphey. The festival was held in the Municipal Auditorium in Kerrville and LBJ showed up at some point with long hair and sat in the audience with all the other music lovers. There was no way to know then that Kennedy would stick it out through thick and thin, eventually move the Festival out to the Quiet Valley Ranch, and brave scorching heat and flash floods and still keep everything afloat — for another 30 years!

Holding forth from his captain's chair in the wings of stage right, Rod ran a tight ship. There was a big clock right under your nose; you got 40 minutes to play and that was it. As the years rolled by, I played the festival several more times: with the Lost Gonzo Band, Jerry Jeff, Bobby Bridger, and Willis Allan Ramsey. In the '80s I played three straight years as a solo performer. The third year, Rod told me I wouldn't be asked back for being ill prepared to play my 6 p.m. set after a 54-hour plane ride from India. Hell, he was probably right. I was massively jet lagged, my hands were swollen and sore from some wild drum lessons in India, it was 105 degrees with the sun dead center in my eyes, and the stage piano wouldn't stay in tune. It was the perfect storm for disaster. I was disoriented, and halfway into the set my mind went blank. I asked for requests. Somebody yelled out "Merle Haggard!" and I immediately launched into, "Down every road there's always one more city ..." Rod was not amused. And he never gave me another chance.

In 2002, Rod turned the wheel over to a new Festival producer, Dalis Allen, and I think I redeemed myself somewhat and have played some respectable sets on the "main stage" since then. Three years ago, Rod surprised me and made some amends for banning me from the festival. He said he knew that in the past he had "ruffled some feathers," and was seeking some folks out to say he was sorry. I guess I'd finally passed Rod's litmus test of folkdom, but I'm not 100-percent sure.

On April 14, 2014, Rod passed away "surrounded by love and music," according to Dalis. On April 26 there was a memorial service in Kerrville. It was full of musicians and well-wishers and there was a Marine Honor Guard that marched down the isle and presented an American flag to Dalis. I hadn't thought much about Rod being a Marine, but Dalis gave me a clue as to what Rod was all about when she said, "A Marine does not fail."

Even though we had that little thing happen between us, I had great respect for Rod Kennedy. He gave us one of the greatest folk festivals in the country, and his folk ethic, passion, tenacity, and love of songwriters and songs was infectious. Rod was one of a kind and we'll all miss him. Safe travels, amigo.



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Rhett Miller

The Old 97's frontman on the secrets to surviving 20 years together in a rock 'n' roll band, the joy of dropping f-bombs, keeping up with Tommy Stinson, and not meeting Axl Rose.

By Richard Skanse



Photo by John Carrico



Photo by John Carrico



Photo by John Carrico

"We've been doing this longer than you've been alive ..."

So begins the first song on the Old 97's 10th studio album, *Most Messed Up*, and if you're not a fan of songs that shamelessly get self-referential — let alone veteran rock 'n' roll bands that refuse to quietly move aside after 20 good years to respectfully make room for new kids half their age, well ... step off the tracks. True to its name, *Most Messed Up* crashes through the door three sheets to the wind and dead-set on finding not just a hook-up or punch-up but a dozen rounds of each. The four 97's (singer/guitarist Rhett Miller, bassist/singer Murry Hammond, lead guitarist Ken Bethea, and drummer Phillip Peeples) may all be a lot older than they were when they first rolled out of Dallas with their 1994 debut, *Hitchhike to Rhome*, but not even their salad days as Bloodshot Records-certified, major-label-bidding-war-provoking insurgent country upstarts found them ever sounding quite *this* full-

tilt and go-for-broke on record. It's the sound, Miller admits, of a band that still very much has something to prove.

"I've always been grateful in a way that there was no massive success that propelled me when I was 15 years old and doing my first gig has never gone away," says Miller, calling from his home in New York's Hudson Valley a day before reconvening with the rest of the band to kick off a four-month tour. "You're always trying to prove it to somebody, whoever that is — like the cool kids, or when I was young, the girls — and I've always felt that and I've always liked that. I like the drive and the ambition. And yes, I always want to be better and be the best songwriter that I can be, and I want people to recognize that, too. I know that there's something gross about saying it, but there's a reason I get up onstage and try so fucking hard every night, and that's that I want them to *get* it.

"I don't want to spend my life

apologizing for, you know, trying to be a kick-ass rock 'n' roller," he continues. "Because I think there's something noble about spending your life in pursuit of that, and I'm proud of it."

Doubtless the rest of Old 97's would concur, and the performances on *Most Messed Up* certainly back that up. But it's part of Miller's job to talk the talk, and he's acquitted himself so well in his role as frontman, principal songwriter and band spokesperson that the rest of the group has long since come to terms with his occasional need to pop out for a solo album every now and then. He's a trooper, too: At this year's South By Southwest Music Conference and Festival, Miller trekked down to Austin for a week's worth of Old 97's promo work all by his lonesome. When we catch up with him a week later, he's still recovering — but nevertheless ready to hit the road again in 24-hours and get back to the business of walking the walk.

You were just back in Texas for SXSW, but you were the only Old 97 here all week. How many frontman-get-out-of-jail cards did you earn by handling all of the band's SXSW promotional duties yourself this year?

[Laughs] Man ... my manager just called me to thank me again for all the hard work or whatever. But I like to work. So if I have to go down there and leave the family, I'm fine with working my ass off. But boy, it kicked my ass this year. I had like seven gigs in 48 hours, and then the panel I did and two interviews and two photo shoots ... it was really a lot. And when I got back I was sick for 48 hours, just with a cold and from being run down. So I had to sleep for like 15 hours just to recover. But that's fine. Like I said, I love to work.

You were born in Austin and grew up in Dallas, but home for you now is in upstate New York. How did you end up there?

My wife and I were in L.A. when we figured out we were going to have a kid, and we just couldn't really justify staying there because we couldn't afford anything we would have wanted. And we ended up really loving it here. We live outside of a little college town 90 minutes north of Manhattan, and it's unexpectedly a beautiful place to live. Although I do miss Texas.

You're a long way from the rest of the Old 97's, who are kind of scattered over the rest of the country: Ken and Phillip are still in Dallas, but Murry lives out in California, right?

Yeah, Murry lives in Pasadena, and Ken and Phillip are in Lake Highland.

Do you think the fact that you all live so far apart has actually been a factor in why they Old 97's have stayed together for so long? Would the band still be together if you all lived in the same town

all this time?

[Laughs] No, I think you have a good point. I think when we come together, we're really together, and when we're apart ... we don't need to be together. I think there's something nice to that. It takes some of the pressure off. It's like when I do a solo record and I tour behind it a lot and I really get to where I miss the guys and I'm so happy to get to come back and make a record with them. And then by the time we've made an Old 97's record and toured the record and done all the work for that, I'm really ready to go back to the solo stuff for a little bit. So yeah, I think your point is a good one — absence makes the heart grow fonder.

When you're in the middle of making a solo record — obviously you're not all by yourself, but do you ever consciously miss the guys? Like, "Hey Murry, listen to this! Oh, wait ..."

Like the phantom pains kind of a

thing? Yeah. You know, there's a thing that happens that's kind of like that. After finishing the Old 97's record at the beginning of the year I went straight to Portland to start work on a solo record with Chris Funk and his band, Black Prairie, which is most of the Decemberists plus a couple of other players. And there were some contentious moments at the end of the 97's record, like there is in any democracy — there was some back and forth that was really heated. And so I got to this session in Portland with these other guys, and it was just so easy going because we didn't have all the baggage that 20 years of history can sometimes bring — and because I got to be the boss. There were a few moments where I thought to myself, "Oh, I want to do this ... I wonder how I'm going to convince them?" And then I thought, "Oh yeah, I don't have to convince anybody of anything, I just have to ask them nicely and then they do it!" So not to say it's better or worse, but it is different. But the 97's wouldn't have a 20-year catalog that's as loved as it apparently is if it wasn't for that push and pull dynamic that makes us what we are.

Speaking of that push and pull, have there been times over the course of the band's history when the 97's really did

feel up against the ropes or about to implode? Have you ever come that close to calling it a day?

I'm such an optimist that I've never given into the fear or awareness of any proximity to an implosion. But in retrospect, I know that there were times, like in the early days of the band — like there is in any band — where you're wondering if this thing was going to work. And then you look at your friends who have jobs and who are making actual money and have some security. So I would bet that there were a few moments where we could have easily given up. But at the same time, things really kept moving; we did the Dallas record, then we did the Bloodshot record, and we went straight from that to the bidding war with all the labels trying to give us as much money as possible to get us to sign with them. And from that straight to, you know, we had a pretty glorious three-year run on Elektra where they were spending a ton of money to get people to know about our band, which was fantastic — although in retrospect I can see how that business model failed. You don't need \$300,000 to make a record — come on! But all of those years moved pretty quickly, and there wasn't a lot of time for second-

guessing. And there wasn't a lot to be unhappy about. We were quickly moving into the position of being basically as successful as the level of bands that we had all looked up to and emulated, like X and the Pixies. Maybe we never played arenas like the Clash did, but you know, they were opening for the Rolling Stones, so whatever. We kind of pretty quickly got to the point that we had all wanted to be at.

After that, the next time that kind of offered a lot of opportunity for disaster was when Elektra was folding, and I had decided to make a solo record. That had nothing to do with me wanting to become a famous pop star, which of course I got accused of a lot at the time; it was really just that I had all these songs that the band didn't like, and it was making me fucking crazy that I couldn't release them anywhere. I didn't see it as being an either/or; I thought, I can do this *and* that, and the fans will hear the record and realize, "Oh yeah, these aren't Old 97's songs, this makes sense." And honestly, I think that's how it's worked it out. But there was a time when I was making *The Instigator* and all the changes were happening when I think we could have stopped being a band. I think there was some fear and bad feelings going around.



Photo by Eric Ryan Anderson

"We're not ready to be an old-timey band. We're not ready to make easy going, back porch, toe-tapping alt-country. In a way, I don't know if it would be better if we were; maybe oldsters are a better market for us to try and plumb. But, whatever."

But in the end we just came together and said, "If we can get over this, we can be a band for fucking ever. We can be 70 years old and still be doing this and people will still be wanting to hear us, if we do it right." And fortunately I think we did it right.

The Old 97's album *Drag It Up* came out right after *The Instigator*. Was that the band's therapy record?

Yeah, *Drag It Up* was where we really sort of worked through those growing pains. And I can still hear all of that when I listen to it. There are some fun moments on that record — I'm really proud of "Won't Be Home No More," and I think "The New Kid" had some elements of triumph about it — but that's a tough record. It was a tough record to make, and sometimes it's a tough record to listen to. But I'm glad we made it; you know, you've gotta make it to go onto the next one.

I think that "next one," 2008's *Blame It On Gravity*, really did convey a much more positive head space for the band as a whole, and a couple years after that y'all had so much new material to work with that *The Grand Theatre* ended up being two albums (*Volume I* in 2010 and *Volume II* in 2011). But to my ears, *Most Messed Up* sounds like the most assertive and energetic record you've ever made. And it's also probably the most reckless sounding — like the Old 97's on a bender. What sparked that attitude about it?

That's a good question. I'm not positive I have a full answer for it. You know, in terms of the songs, the song "Nashville" is the one that kind of opened the floodgates with these themes. And

that was a fluke. I'd gotten put together with this old songwriter in Nashville, John McElroy, and he said, "I think your audience would like it if you walked out onstage and said 'fuck.'" And we got wasted at 10 a.m. at his house in Nashville and wrote this song in two hours. And it's funny because out of all the songs on the record it's got the most narrative voice; it's the most removed, kind of like a short story. But it really opened me up to the idea that I don't have to be subtle or hide behind anything, that I can just walk out onstage and go, "Fuck it, I'm going to be honest — all the stuff that I only alluded to on all the other records, I'm going to just fucking stand up and sing it; I don't have to be embarrassed. This is real life, we're all grownups here." And that was really liberating, knowing that I can be as fucked-up as I want and that I don't have to pretend to be great, and if the songs are raw and I let myself go there, then it's probably going to be better than if I try to do something fancy and hide behind something else.

That said, though, it doesn't mean that all the songs are straight-up autobiography. I'm probably a little bit better off than the guy on that album. But it's definitely me.

So it's not necessarily a personal mid-life crisis being worked out there.

Well, a little bit. I mean, everybody I know is going through the shit; it's part of being in your early 40s and realizing that the sweet bird of youth has not only taken off, but flown away to somebody else.

I think my favorite line on the record is

"I'm not crazy about songs that get self-referential," from "Longer Than You've Been Alive" — a song that is unabashedly as self-referential as any you've ever written. But I also always loved "The One" from *Blame It On Gravity*. I just think it's fun when you kind of name-check the other guys in the band.

[Laughs] Yeah, or when my friend Robert will end up in songs. The reason I think I wrote that line is because I heard an echo of my friend Jon Brion's voice, who produced *The Instigator* for me, and who's somebody I really admire as a songwriter and as a producer and as a person. When we were making *The Instigator*, I had a song called "This Is What I Do," and it was pretty self referential, too. I actually named girlfriends from my past by name. And Jon said, "I like this song, but in general, I really don't like songs that are self referential. I think it sort of kills some of the potential for universality of a song if you make it specific about yourself." And I've always worried about that a little, and it's kind of nagged me as I've written songs in the 12 years since then. But part of this record, and that song in particular, was, fuck it — there's no rules. And if I want to sing about being in a rock band for the last 20 years, I'm going to sing about it, and I'm going to tell the truth. So when we play that song live now, I'll sing that line, "I'm not crazy about songs that get self-referential," and then I'll say, "Too late!"

One of my other favorite songs on the album is "Intervention," which features a guest appearance by Tommy



Stinson of the Replacements (and more recently, Guns n' Roses). How did that come about?

Tommy was there for the basic tracking of the final two songs on the record, which were "Intervention" and "Most Messed Up." And then he plays additional guitar on three other songs, too. But one of the most fun things he did was ... Tommy's not the world's greatest singer, per se, but there's a lot of fun background vocals and yelling that he does, especially on "Intervention." We were trying to do some banter at the end of the song where the guy who's going through the intervention would say, like, "Give me back my beer!" or, "I'm not that bad, I can stop any time," that kind of thing. And at the very end of the song, Tommy says something that I don't even know what the fuck he's even talking about, I think maybe it's a drug dealer reference or something, but he says, "You got ... you got Huggy Bear's wallet phone number?" [Laughs]

It's so perfect. And his voice is so distinctive. I like Tommy a lot. He actually had a lot to do, I think, with this record being all sloppy and raw and as unapologetically rock 'n' roll as it is.

How long have you known him?

Tommy and I did a charity event in Philadelphia about five or six years ago, and we stayed in touch. We just hit it off. We stayed up all night long that night, and I actually bragged about it for a couple of years that I had to carry him and his wife at the time to their hotel room and pour them into their bed — that I'd matched him shot for shot and whatever. And then sure enough, when he came to Dallas when we were doing pre-production for this record, I stayed up thinking that I could match him again, and wound up falling down and breaking my elbow in the hotel room afterwards. So, thanks a lot Tommy! But I guess the moral of the story is, no matter what you think, you can never out-drink Tommy Stinson. So don't even try.

I think it's a trip that he's been in Guns n' Roses now for almost as long as Slash ever was.

Well he's been in Guns n' Roses longer than he was in the 'Mats! Which is crazy.

You did another interview recently where you talked about Tommy inviting you out to catch a GNR show in Dallas and hang out with the band afterwards. Did you actually meet Axl Rose?

I saw Axl through an open dressing room door, and he was wearing a mumu

and getting a foot rub from a small Asian woman. But I was not invited to meet him.

I'm actually an Axl defender and a still a big GNR fan, but that image of him sounds about right.

[Laughs] Yeah. It was a pretty good show, though. If you've seen them play recently, you've probably noticed that he has other people sing a bunch of songs, which gets a little old. But it was a pretty good show anyway.

I've noticed that on past records, the one or two songs that Murry sings and writes kind of stand out from yours, style wise — almost like interludes. But his song "The Ex of All You See" on *Most Messed Up* seems very much in the same vein as your songs on the record. Did he write it to match the mood or did it just happen to fit?

Murry brought a handful of really beautiful songs to the table, and if we had made a different record, I could imagine at least two or three Murry songs on the record. But when this record was sort of taking shape, he came to us and said, "Look, this record is so tight, and so conceptual in a way, that I don't really see a bunch of my songs fitting on it. I just see this one song that would really make it rock." Because he hasn't had just one song on a record

I don't think since maybe our very first record. But that was his choice; he just really wanted this record to be what it is, a really tight, sort of high-concept thing, and he didn't want to take it away so we would have to bring it back ... I think he just wanted to maximize the punch of the message of the other songs on the record. Which is a testament again to how long we've been together and how the egos have kind of all mellowed a little. We're like a little army, man, roaming around the country.

Were the sessions for *Most Messed Up* radically different from the ones for *The Grand Theatre*?

They were not radically different, because we were in the same studio with the same producer (Salim Nourallah), and we did kind of the same thing, where

we did some pre-production to work out the songs so that we could go in and cut them basically live off the floor. But we did it moreso than we did on *The Grand Theatre*. On *The Grand Theatre*, we really left a lot of room for tons of overdubs, and I ended up having to re-sing a bunch of stuff. On this record, most of what you hear was cut live as we recorded to tape. Almost every single line of mine, and a lot of Ken's guitar, too, and the whole rhythm section. And the imperfections are one of my favorite things about the record. I'm so sickened by the way music's become this really clean, perfect sounding thing. Where's the humanity in that? I'm sort of afraid for the future of music, because kids are going to listen to it and go, "ugh, why would I want to be part of something that a machine can do? Why would I devote my life to it?"

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Looking back at *The Grand Theatre* — not to nitpick, but I was always disappointed that you didn't just release all the songs from those sessions as a big "screw-it" double album, all at once, instead of in two installments. Was that ever the plan?

Yeah. Well, I wanted it to be a double album. I wanted it to be the whole big, commercial disaster, but New West Records apparently was trying to make money. Which is fine — I can't begrudge them that. And in the end, it was good that we spread it out, because with *The Grand Theatre Volume Two*, some new songs came in and the songs that we had got a lot better. So it wouldn't have been as fully realized if we had done it all at once. But yeah, I for sure wanted to do the double album.

You mentioned New West. You're now with ATO, which I believe is the Old 97's fifth label. Is there always a period of playing catch-up when you sign with a new label, just to bring everyone there up to speed? Does it feel like starting over?

I would say that so far it's been easy and good. I don't know if it's more work for our manager ... it probably is, but that's good — they should earn their money! But I never had to do it so much. The Elektra to New West switch was really easy and painless, and we had some good years with them, and I still have some good friends at that label and there were no hard feelings at all. They were great. But it did make sense to switch for us, and I don't think we could have picked a better label than ATO, with the way it skews toward youthful and rocking. We're not ready to be an old-timey band. We're not ready to make easy going, back porch, toe-tapping alt-country. In a way, I don't know if it would be better for our career if we were; maybe oldsters are a better market for us to try and plumb. But, whatever. I love the roster ATO's got, I love the people at the label, and it feels like such a perfect fit for us.

So I know you're not looking to call it quits anytime soon, but this being the band's 20th anniversary, is there any one moment in the Old 97's history that stands out as a personal favorite?

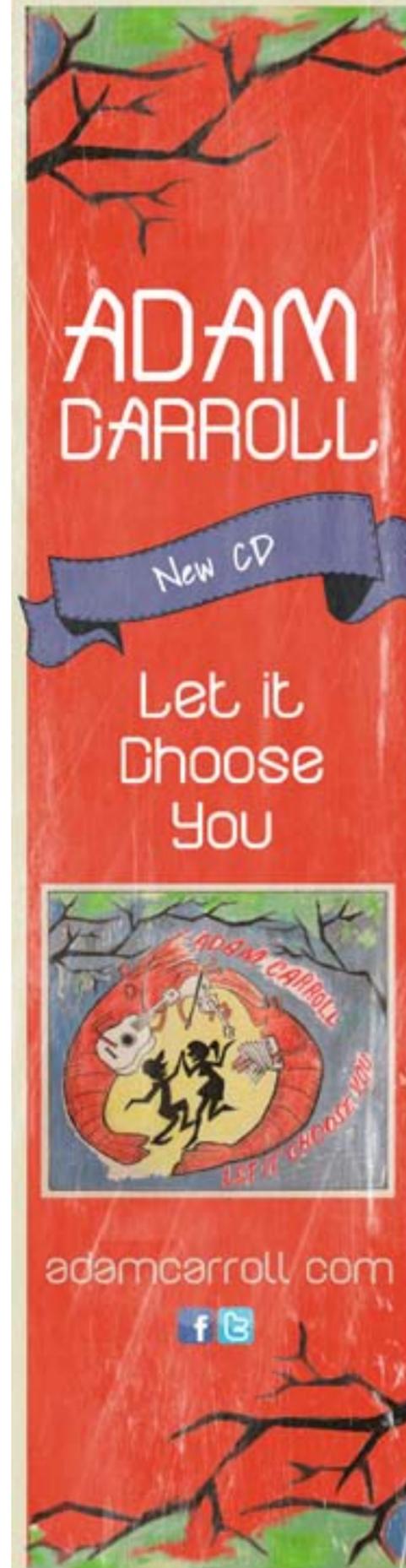
Gosh. It's funny, but I think my lack of nostalgia has probably helped in my career. I mean, it's such a lame answer to say that it's always the new record that's the thing that I'm most excited about. But in the case of this record, I'm more excited even than usual. When we got back the masters for this record and I realized how successful we had been in translating these songs into this sort of statement of purpose, and how unlikely it is, for a band without massive success, to be able to do it for this long ... that's a huge feeling of accomplishment. And I take a great deal of pride in what we do. And then lately there's been some moments of validation, critically and from my peers, and I feel good about right now, and I feel good about the future. For the last, I'd say five or 10 years, I've been really aware of the long game in a way that I hadn't been before. I know that I would like to be the kind of songwriter that, you know, like right now, I want the 20 year olds

to look up to and go, "I want to do that, I want to be able to do this for 20 years and still make good records." And I look at Willie Nelson or Kris Kristofferson, and I think, I want to be that: I want to be that guy that people look up to when I'm an elder statesman and say, "He did it right."

That kind of sounds an awful lot like Matthew McConaughey's Oscar speech.

[Laughs] Yeah — I'm chasing myself! But I do feel pretty good about things right now. Knock wood ... I'm about to be on tour for four straight months, so we'll see how I feel after that.

Rhett Miller



Above **and** Beyond

From Houston's Chinaberry sidewalks to Nashville, L.A., and the top of the country music charts, **Rodney Crowell** has lived long and prospered by the art of the song. But he's still hell-bent on chasing his own elusive carrot as far as he can run.

By Richard Skanse



Rodney Crowell

It's Tuesday, March 11, the night before the starting gun for the official opening of the 2014 South By Southwest Music Festival and Conference, and Rodney Crowell is already off and running on his 11-shows-in-four-days promotional blitz. "I've got a record coming out, so I'm going beggin'," he says at the outset of one of his first of interviews of the week. "Rattling the 'love-me' cup across the prison bars of life."

The quip gets a simpatico chuckle from fellow songwriter Ray Wylie Hubbard, who has lured Crowell an hour south of the SXSW hubbub in Austin to talk and play on *Roots and Branches*, Hubbard's weekly KNBT-FM radio program taped live in front of a small audience at Tavern on the Gruene in New Braunfels. "The last time I saw you it was in Augusta, Ga. — it was an ice storm, and there was also an earthquake," Hubbard says by way of intro. "We're a hard-hat area when we get together," nods Crowell.

Mother Nature sits this one out, though Crowell isn't Hubbard's only guest: he's slotted between an up-and-coming Civil Wars-type Americana duo from Nashville called the Carolina Story and regional favorites Midnight River Choir. But Crowell's the only cat in the room with a pair of Grammy Awards to his name — the latest, for his Best Americana Album-winning duo record with Emmylou Harris, *Old Yellow Moon*, not even two months old yet. When *Roots and Branches* producer/KNBT program director Mattson Rainer congratulates him on the record (which also won Album of the Year at the 2013 Americana Music

Honors & Awards), Crowell feigns hubris ("We just took all the awards that we could haul home!") and recounts an anecdote about asking a bewildered NARAS rep if they could please mail his Grammy *check* directly to his home address, because, he told them, "this is really important to me, and I want to show it to my wife."

"They gave me a look like, 'Is he serious?'" Crowell says with a mischievous laugh. "Well, Mr. Crowell ... you know, there's actually no ... it's voted on by your peers ..." And I said, "Man, I'm joshing you! They thought they had a rube right out of East Houston ..."

Crowell later plays one song from *Old Yellow Moon*, the reflective "Open Season on My Heart," and closes with the exquisite title track from 1995's *Jewel of the South* — one of the handful of good but largely forgotten albums he recorded in the decade between his 1988 country smash, *Diamonds & Dirt*, and his critically acclaimed, 2001 Americana "comeback" statement, *The Houston Kid*. But the fact that he first plays three songs in a row from his aforementioned new record, *Tarpaper Sky* — and not one pick from the fistfuls of time- and chart-proven classics he's penned over the last 40 years — comes across not so much as "love-me" begging as it does the conscious act of an artist who's really not big on victory laps. Crowell says as much when Rainer, playing the straight man to the freewheelin' Hubbard by trying to cover some missed bases in the interview, dutifully brings up Crowell's best-selling record.

"You've had No. 1 songs, and top 10 songs, and you had five No. 1 songs from one album, *Diamonds & Dirt*," Rainer

marvels, earning a cheerful whoop from the audience at the mention of the album. "You and Michael Jackson ... I don't know how many albums produce five No. 1 songs ..."

"Well, what about it, Mattson?" Crowell asks wryly. "What are you driving at?"

"I just thought it should be mentioned before you get out of here, some of the successes that you've had," Rainer presses. "What would you say would be your career-defining song ... the song that got people to return your phone calls?"

Crowell mulls it over for a moment before conceding that his '70s composition "Till I Gain Control Again," memorably covered by both Emmylou Harris and Willie Nelson, was the most probable "door opener." This wins more cheers of recognition from the audience, but the way he sort of squirms around the question belies a clear discomfort with the notion of defining his career by any fixed moment in time.

"Not to avoid your question, but it's kind of hard to talk about success, because the carrot needs to stay out there, you know?" Crowell explains. "I don't want to own the carrot too close."

"Success is a funny thing," he continues, "in that, by the time you get to success, it's gone."

He says this with the conviction of a man who knows from truth, as learned from decades of first-hand experience. But the funny thing about Rodney Crowell is how many times he's also proved it wrong.

Counting the duo record with Emmylou Harris, one-off side-projects like 1997's *The Cicadas* and 2004's *The Notorious Cherry Bombs*, and 2011's somewhat hard-to-categorize *KIN: Songs by Mary Karr and Rodney Crowell*, *Tarpaper Sky* is Crowell's 18th album in a recording career now spanning nearly four decades. Factoring in records (outside of his own) that he's helmed as producer doubles that catalog, while a full round-up of albums featuring Crowell's name in the credits as a songwriter, guitarist and/or singer increases the tally exponentially.

Not a bad run for a guy who titled his 1978 debut *Ain't Living Long Like This*.

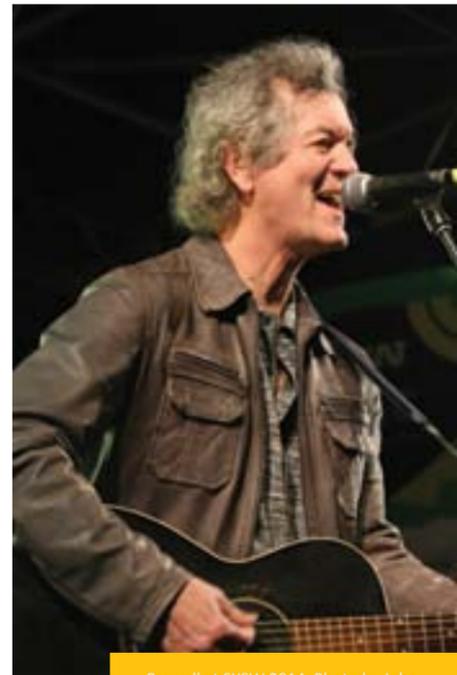
But as should be the case with any artist worth the title, it's not the quantity of Crowell's work that matters most so much as the quality. And the longevity of his career wouldn't account for much either if not for the fact that he's not only maintained his standard of quality, but consistently strived to push it higher — ideally just out of even his own reach. Mailbox money and touring on nostalgia alone may pay the bills and even keep a fortunate few flush for life, but Crowell hasn't gone the distance as a performer and songwriter by coasting on the fumes of past glories. Songs like "Till I Gain Control Again," "Ain't Living Long Like This," and "After All This Time" (one of those five chart toppers from *Diamonds & Dirt* and his first Grammy winner) still hold up decades on, but there would be no *Houston Kid* or *Tarpaper Sky* if Crowell wasn't still writing songs fit to stand beside if not even above them — as attested by such highlights from his latest as "Famous Last Words of a Fool in Love," "The Flyboy & the Kid," and especially "Oh What a Beautiful World."

Whether or not the songs he writes today or will write tomorrow ever register as "hits" or garner more Grammys doesn't really matter, either; that's not the carrot Crowell's chasing. But that's not to say he hasn't caught up close enough to *that* kind success for it to bump him on the head more than a few times over the years. There may be a handful of bigger household names in Americana and Texas (and certainly country) music today than Crowell, but few of his peers have had careers marked by as many spikes in good fortune — both commercial and artistic — as he has.

He took his hardest knock/reality check on the chin immediately upon landing in Nashville in August of 1972. Crowell, who had just turned 22, high-tailed it to Music City from Houston with pal Donivan Cowart, flush with high hopes stoked by a album they'd made together in Louisiana for a hustler who'd told them he'd landed them a 10-record deal with Columbia Records. But once they got to town, they found out they'd been had: there was no record deal (let alone the accompanying tour they'd been promised as a support act for Kenny Rogers and the First Edition), and both the tapes and publishing rights to their *Rodney & Donivan* album had been sold off for a whopping hundred bucks to the Wilburn Brothers' Sure-Fire Music company. Crowell and Cowart never saw a penny of it, as their dubious champion had already skipped town. The album never saw the light of day, though, as Crowell's kept it under lock and key ever since he and Cowart charmed their way past a receptionist and pinched the masters from the Sure-Fire offices. ("Good for you," Doyle Wilburn told Crowell with a laugh years later, after Crowell confessed/bragged about the heist.)

After that inauspicious start, though, Crowell's all but run the tables throughout his entire career. He might rightfully argue that notion, and it'd be wrong to chalk any or all of it solely up to luck, but suffice it to say that a fast-forward survey of his last 40 years really backs up the line in his 2003 song "Earthbound" about him making out "like a bandit." Not long after snatching his first record back from the Wilburns, Crowell fell in with the misfit crowd of Music City mavericks (many of them fellow Texas ex-pats) orbiting around Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt, and finding the stones to share songs with *that* circle raised his writing chops and confidence in double time. Both served him well when a right-place/right-time circumstance landed him a publishing deal under guitarist/songwriter Jerry Reed (of "Amos Moses" fame), and soon afterwards a demo tape of his songs found its way into the hands of producer Brian Ahern, who was helping a young grievous angel named Emmylou Harris shape her Reprise Records debut in the wake of Gram Parson's death. Crowell's "Bluebird Wine" ended up being the opening track on that album, 1975's *Pieces of the Sky*, and "Till I Gain Control Again" took flight on Harris' second album later that same year, *Elite Hotel*. By the time Harris was making 1976's *Luxury Liner*, Crowell wasn't just contributing songs: he was living in Los Angeles and recording and touring as a member of her Hot Band alongside such seasoned vets as James Burton, Emory Gordy, and Glen D. Hardin. Harris and a handful of Hot Band members in turn sang and played on Crowell's Warner Bros. debut two years later (along with Ry Cooder, Dr. John, Willie Nelson, and Mickey Raphael.)

Ain't Living Long Like This still holds up as one of the best records Crowell has ever made, though it didn't make Crowell a star in his own right. But his songs on the record weren't long for obscurity. Harris recorded both the title track and "Leaving Louisiana in the Broad Daylight"



Crowell at SXSW 2014. Photo by John Carrico

There may be a handful of bigger household names in Americana and Texas (and certainly country) music today than Crowell, but few of his peers have had careers marked by as many spikes in good fortune — both commercial and artistic — as he has.



Photo by John Carrico

on her 1978 album *Quarter Moon in a Ten Cent Town*, and the Oakridge Boys later polished “Leaving Louisiana” (co-written by Crowell and his old partner in crime Cowart) into a No. 1 smash. Waylon Jennings also rumbled his way through “I Ain’t Living Long Like This,” taking it to No. 1 in 1979 and securing its place in the Outlaw country hall of fame.

Johnny Cash’s cover of the album’s “Song For the Life” (on his own 1978 record, *Gone Girl*) was not a hit, but Crowell did hit it off with the Man in Black’s daughter Rosanne round about the same time. They married in ’79, raising Crowell’s daughter Hannah from a previous, short-lived marriage in the mid-70s and producing another three daughters of their own (Caitlin, Chelsea, and Carrie.) Crowell also produced Rosanne’s first six albums, culminating in 1987’s *King’s Record Shop*. His burgeoning production skills were put to additional use on a pair of early ’80s Guy Clark albums and even a 1982 live album called *The Survivors* by Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis — 23 years after a 9-year-old Crowell was taken by his father, an aspiring country singer himself, to see the same three legends perform at Houston’s Magnolia Gardens on the banks of the San Jacinto.

Crowell’s first three albums of the ’80s — 1980’s *But What Will the Neighbors Think*, ’81’s *Rodney Crowell*, and ’86’s *Street Language* — didn’t fare near as well as the records he produced for his wife, but he caught up with a vengeance with 1988’s *Diamonds & Dirt*. In contrast to the slick but spiky L.A. songwriter vibe of the three albums that preceded it and even his progressive-country leaning debut, *Diamonds* was unabashedly country, with every song seemingly fine-tuned for maximum radio impact. Goosed with rockabilly rave-ups and Bakersfield-style hot licks and buoyed by Everly Brothers-worthy classic pop hooks and harmonies, it’d probably be deemed too edgy and Americana by current Clear Channel standards; but released at the tail-end of what Steve Earle later called country music’s “great credibility scare” — a 15-minute window of golden opportunity for Crowell and fellow iconoclasts like Earle, Dwight Yoakam, and Lyle Lovett — *Diamonds* hit the mainstream at exactly the right time.

Although Crowell’s next record, 1989’s *Keys to the Highway*, kicked another two singles into the Top 5, the big hits dried up quickly soon after. The ensuing decade also took a heavy emotional toll, bookended by the deaths of his father and mother and also marked by the end of his marriage to Cash. Still, Crowell’s ’90s were far from the classic *Behind the Music* third-act crash. His “selfishly amicable and thoroughly modern divorce” from Rosanne (as Crowell would describe their 1992 split years later in his memoir) didn’t offer much in the way of exciting tabloid fodder, and there were no addiction-addled midlife-crisis meltdowns or riches-to-rags stories for the gossips, either. He took care of his daughters (sharing custody with Rosanne), met and fell in love with the woman who became his third wife (country singer and actress Claudia Church, who he’s still happily married to today), and kept on working and writing. And though the four albums he recorded between 1992 and 1997 didn’t sell a lot of copies, they were all released on major labels, and no matter what he tries to tell you to the contrary, they’re all pretty damn good (especially 1992’s *Life Is Messy*).

And then he wrote his masterpiece. Or at the very least, the record that launched the most acclaimed and creatively bountiful stage of his career, 13 years after his apparent commercial peak: 2001’s *The Houston Kid*. The cathartic (though not always comforting) process of writing and recording the songs on that album — almost all of them rooted in autobiography or drawn from composite memories of his parents and dirt-poor Houston childhood — rebooted Crowell’s muse and spun it 360. First he looked all the way back to his parents’ courtship to shape the framework for his memoir, *Chinaberry Sidewalks* (published by Knopf in 2011). Then he turned inward, back around to the present, and finally straight ahead and *up* for the songs that would form his next several albums: 2003’s soul-searching (and stirring) *Fate’s Right Hand*; 2005’s seething and beautifully despairing *The Outsider*; and 2008’s brutally honest and moodily ruminative *Sex & Gasoline*. The sum total of that stunning four-album run (plus the book) is a vivid self-portrait of a man in full at the top of his artistic game. That he also still works and plays well with others is affirmed by not only his recent Grammy-winning duo album with Harris, but his 2004 reunion album with his old road band, the Notorious Cherry Bombs, and 2011’s *KIN*, the collection of songs he co-wrote with his favorite fellow Houston-reared memoirist, Mary Karr, and then recruited a host of his most distinguished Americana peers to color in with their own voices.

Tarpaper Sky (released in April on New West Records, marking Crowell’s debut on the label) is Crowell’s first album issued solely under his own name in six years. Blame the gap on irresistible women: He actually started the album back in 2010, but pushed it aside when the Karr and Harris projects came up.

“The songs that Mary and I did just sort of caught fire, and the next thing you know,

we had a record,” he says. “And then right about when that was getting done, Emmy called me and said, ‘Let’s do this,’ so then that naturally jumped ahead, too.”

Crowell recalls a recent conversation in which he was asked, “What are you up to?” and was surprised by his own reply. “I told them, ‘I have a solo record coming,’” he says, then laughs. “A solo record! It just sounded odd to me, like I was taking time off from being in a band or something. There was that four-year period in there I guess where I was collaborating with women, but it still sounded weird: ‘I have a solo record coming out!’”

It’s now Friday of SXSW week, and Crowell has talked to so many people about his new “solo” record over the last

few days that he’s probably experiencing serious *deja-vu*. To wit: just a few minutes ago, he wrapped his second appearance on a Ray Wylie Hubbard-hosted radio show of the week, this time for a SXSW special on Sirius/XM Radio’s “Outlaw Country” channel. The taping was done in a woodshed in the East Austin backyard of Texas Music Office director Casey Monahan, and it’s Monahan who secures us a quiet place to talk on the back porch of his across-the-street neighbor. Crowell is gracious and forthcoming, but most of our interview will end up being continued via phone a week later when he’s back at his home in Nashville, as he’s in clear need of a few hours of crash time before being due onstage at tonight’s official Americana

see what we can cook up.” And so Stuart and I just started conversations where he asked, “What do you want to do?” And I went, “Well, I want to do some landscape painting.” So we sort of started working from there, and the conversation went, “What would that be like?”

What exactly did you mean by “landscape painting”? Can you elaborate?

Yeah. “Long Journey Home,” “Fever on the Bayou,” “Frankie Please” ... although they’re not like pastoral, wistful visions of what it looks like out there, the narrative in those songs is not so singular as, you know, *Fate’s Right Hand* and *The Houston Kid* and *Sex & Gasoline*.

Or *The Outsider*.

Well, I tend to think of *The Outsider* as less singular and more just pissed off about invading Iraq — but everybody was pissed off about invading Iraq. But *Tarpaper Sky* was really less a singular narrative from my perspective and more ... it’s not really broad-stroke love songs, like commercial broad strokes, but it does pull the camera back a little bit to look at the subject matter.

Anyway, once we had that idea in mind, the first thing we did was try to find out how to record differently, so we unplugged the headphones in the studio and got everybody to play just to the natural sound of the room, so that it would all be live. Instead of a production, the record is a performance. The last three years, that’s what I’ve been most interested in. I kind of wore myself out on production, so I think I’ll be committed a lot more to performance from now on — which means playing and singing it live, and that’s your record. And that’s what *Tarpaper Sky* is: Landscapes and live performance.

I want to come back to that in a bit. But let’s start with *Tarpaper Sky*. What was the original catalyst for this album when you started it back in 2010?

I really wanted to experiment with Steuart Smith, who, you know ... we had worked on *The Houston Kid* intentionally together, and we had worked on *Diamonds & Dirt* intentionally together, but then the Eagles got him. And we had worked sporadically on the records that I made between *Houston Kid* and now. But we had some time where he was off from the Eagles, and I said, “Let’s go into the studio, let’s get some of those guys from the *Diamonds & Dirt* sessions, and let’s

That’s a fine way to start a relationship.

I thought, “This is really auspicious, man! They gave me the hook!” And it pissed me off, you know? Then I thought, you know, it *should* be that way. Anyway, they said we did 30 minutes, but I’m sure we only did 26. We could have got one more song in. I should have been a man and done another song.

They say when you go to prison, the first thing you’re supposed to do is find the biggest guy in the yard and punch him in the face. To assert yourself.

Yeah. You know, I wimped out. I’m pissed off at myself for wimping out.

At the taping you did the other day for Ray Wylie’s show in New Braunfels, you were asked about success, and I loved what you said about always wanting to keep the carrot in front of you. Would you be going stir crazy right now if you didn’t have a new project ready to work on right after winning your Grammy?

I don’t know. Good question. When I wrote *Chinaberry Sidewalks*, during the last three years of writing that, I worked every day. *Every day*. You know, I’d take a

Sunday off every now and again, maybe two in a month. But man, I just like to work. And as long as I’m working like that, I don’t really goof off anymore. I don’t really take vacations. So I get these songs, and they start to move the energy, so I’ve got to record them. I’ve got enough songs in the can for another record already, and I’ve got some more new songs coming, and Emmy and I are writing some songs and thinking about making another record, too. So it’ll be interesting to see what it feels like someday to *not* have anything to show. I’m not saying that I want to do that, but I haven’t ever really considered it — if I’d be restless or not. If things keep going, if I don’t fall over dead, I’ll probably work like this until I do. I mean, I’ve raised four girls and they all have their lives now, and Claudia and I just have a dog to take care of, so I can pretty much just do what I want to do. And outside of working, I might take a walk around the neighborhood, but that’s about it. Other than that, I just want to get better at playing the guitar and trying to figure out how to play the blues.

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Photo by John Carrico

You mentioned working with Steuart Smith a number of times since you made *Diamonds & Dirt* together. But what was it about some of the other players from that record that made you want to work with them again? Who else did you bring back from those sessions?

Well, Barry Beckett (piano/organ) passed away, and he was a big part of that record back then. Barry was the ballast, you know, this great musician from Muscle Shoals who we were all wanting to impress. So Barry's gone, but Eddie Bayers (drums) and Michael Rhodes (bass) have played on practically every hit record to come out of Nashville. And because they're working musicians, they get called to play on a lot of records that they're not necessarily proud of; you know, honestly, they'd tell you that. But they're really good musicians, so I was like, "C'mon man, come on over here and let's do this." They're fun to work with and really spontaneous. One of the reasons for unplugging the headphones was so that they would not be in the same mindset that they are in when they make the pop country records.

Did any of the songwriting come out that spontaneously, live-in-the-studio set up?

Well, you know, I'd had "Fever of the Bayou" for 25 years but it had no last verse. Will Jennings and I started the first two verses way back there, and we said, "This is kind of cliché Cajun stuff here, what do we do? We've gone as cliché with these first two verses as we could possibly go." So by the last verse we were just at a loss. But when it finally dawned on me that I could write a bunch of clichéd, Cajun English-French patois and get ourselves out of the jam, new life came into that song.

And "God I'm Missing You" actually came from *KIN*. Lucinda sang it on that record, because we let everybody that we invited choose the songs they wanted to do. I actually had my fingers crossed that I'd get to sing that one myself, but Lucinda jumped on it, and you know, "Yes baby, that's yours!" And she killed it. But I still had my own version in mind, and figured, "This is OK to do this again, this is a long way from what she did with it."

"Jesus Talk to Mama" was a thing that I wrote just thinking about my mother. She was a Pentecostal gal, you know, and she always wanted me to write gospel music. She thought that's what I should do. Anyway, I wrote that one when I was in Australia. And "Grandma Loved that Old Man" had been around since *The Houston Kid* — I wrote it right after that record, but

it just didn't really fit the next couple of things I did. "The Long Journey Home" was probably five or six years old before I got around to it, and "The Flyboy & the Kid" had been around for a while, too — I wrote that 10 years ago with Guy in mind.

So you know, I would say the thing about *Tarpaper Sky* is, there's 25-year-old songs, 10-year-old songs, 9-year-old songs on there. The newest songs are "Famous Last Words," "What a Beautiful World," and "I Wouldn't Be Me Without You." I actually didn't realize Billy Joe Shaver had a song of his own called "I Couldn't Be Me Without You," which is funny because you'd think I would know everything of Billy's. So I called him and was like, "Billy, I've written this song here, and I didn't know your song ..." But he just said, "Hey man, you can't copyright a title!"

Knowing that you wrote "The Flyboy and the Kid" with Guy Clark in mind, right or wrong, I immediately peg you as "the Kid." Have you always been "the Kid" in one way or another? I mean, you were "the kid" when you played drums in your dad's honky-tonk band growing up, and there's no telling how many times you've been referred to as "the Houston Kid" in print since that album came out.

Well, with "The Flyboy & the Kid," it just rhymed, that's all. And the "Houston Kid" thing wasn't anything I was really thinking about at the time when we made that record, but it just kept showing up in those songs, and so that's how that became that. But Steuart Smith and I did used to joke about this thing where, anytime we were in a car together when it was snowing and there was ice on the ground, if I was the one driving I would speed up, hit the brakes and see if I could make it slide. And Steuart would always say, "That's the Kid coming out!"

Like all the other songs from *KIN*, you co-wrote "God I'm Missing You" with Mary Karr. I know you've long been a fan of her prose and books, but she had never written songs before you talked her into it. Did she bring anything new to the process that you can put your finger on that's stuck with you?

Oh sure, that's easy. That's real easy. Mary's a poet of the page, you know? I don't know if you've read any of her poetry, but she's got five or six books of poetry. So when I kind of cajoled her into doing it, I said, "Come on, you should really trust me with this ..." And I wanted to find every way we could to let the poet's voice speak. And here's the

simplest example of that: "Anything But Tame," which is one of my favorite things that we wrote together, the opening line for the melody that I had was, "When our feet were tough as nails and our eyes were sharp as flint." I liked "nails" because you can really sing that "a" vowel. But Mary was shaking her head, and she said, "No ... our feet weren't tough as nails. When you're running around barefoot, your feet were tough as horn. Like hooves." I said, "Yeah, you're right, but it doesn't sing, like 'nails' does." But I started singing it with "horn," and now, I wouldn't sing it with "nails" in a million years, because "horn" is so much better. And that was the poet's voice, not the songwriter's, because if the song had been all mine, I probably would have shot it out there as nails. Now, there were still a few times where there were words that Mary had where I said, "Mary, I can't sing these, *nobody* can sing these words — I know it's what you would put on the page, but it just can't be sung. Too many vowels." And in those cases, it would be the songwriting technique that would overrule the poet choice. But every chance we got, we followed the poet instinct. And now I do it a lot, a lot more consciously than I used to.

What about writing your memoir — did that experience inform the way you write songs now? What did you take away from that?

Revision. Revision, revision, revision ... revision! More revision. What's that quote by Truman Capote? "Great books aren't written; they're re-written." So I spend a lot of time revising now. I still get those good couplets, you know, but if I get maybe half of a song or verse that just falls out of the air, you can bet that the second half of it is going to involve a process of revision, trying to cobble together the rest of the song with verses that sound just as fresh and just as good. I used to let second halves of songs stand on the merit of the first half of the song. But I don't do that so much anymore.

Does all that painstaking revision ever get in the way of pure inspiration, though? Do you ever lose the plot?

I do go too far sometimes. But I don't throw anything away; I just keep looking, keep digging, keep listening. And sometimes I go back and go, "Oh, I had this right two weeks ago."

Speaking of revision, on *Old Yellow Moon*, you finally got around to singing and recording your song "Bluebird Wine"

— 38 years after Emmylou sang it on *Pieces of the Sky*. But you changed some of the words in it.

Right. That was Emmy saying, "This is us coming full circle, you've never recorded this, let's do this." I said "OK, but I gotta revise this ... Those first two verses, I don't like those soft rhymes." There was something about the not-quite-saying-what-I-meant aspect of a 21-year-old's version of a song that just didn't sit with me. Back in 1974, when I first heard her version before the record came out, I thought it was like, perfect, because I was seduced by the beauty of that arrangement and the recording and her voice and just the idea of my song going out there. But you get a little distance from it and you go, "Hmm, those first couple of verses are weak." I took a swing at it for my very first record that I made, and we just didn't get it. Maybe because subconsciously — I don't think I knew this consciously at the time — I couldn't stand behind it.

That song first got to Emmylou via a publishing demo of yours, right? Were you still living in Nashville at the time?

No, I had moved to Austin by then. But before that, this bass player that had worked with Anne Murray came through Nashville, I met him through a guitar player, and he said, "You got any songs?" I said, "Here, take this tape." And he took it up to Canada, and it just so happened he took it to the guy who ended up producing Emmy. Well in the interim, I bailed on Nashville and I moved down here, over on Endfield Road, in late '74. But Emmy recorded that record, did "Bluebird Wine" and "Till I Gain Control Again" (the later on her *Elite Hotel* album, also from 1975) and then came through here, played the Armadillo, and called me and said "Come sit in with me." That was January of '75. And the next day, she said, "I'm going to L.A. tomorrow, and I've got an extra ticket — you want to go?" That was back when you could travel on somebody else's ticket and you didn't have to deal with security. So the next day I went to L.A. with her and stayed for seven years. I joined the Hot Band and gave up my place here (in Austin). Before that I had actually planned to live here.

She had already recorded your songs, but had you actually met Emmylou before she came through Austin and invited you to sit in at the Armadillo?

Yeah, I had met her in D.C. a little before that — I went and taught her "Till I Gain Control Again." And we hit it off, ended up staying up all night playing, singing country songs.

What was your first impression of Emmylou when you met her?

My first impression? [*Laughs*]



Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell at SXSW in 2013. Photo by John Carrico

Well, I can only imagine Emmylou Harris in 1974 ... did she spin your head around?

Hah! My first impression was, I walked into the Child Herald in D.C., there's this willowy girl onstage singing, and of course it was love at first sight. I didn't know she had a boyfriend. So first things first, I was like, "I've got to make a play for this girl!" And she very kindly dodged my advances. And so we got into a discussion about music and we started playing and singing, and thankfully didn't mess up a good friendship because of my boneheaded ...

Boner?

Yeah. So, actually, it became really productive as opposed to what might have been really destructive. As Emmy says, we still get on and play together because we never got married. And there's something about that, you know? That we can be collaborating like we do now, whereas had we blown it way back when ...

So you go out to L.A. and end up playing in Emmylou's Hot Band. You've talked a lot in the past about what an impact Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt had on you when you first got to Nashville — how being around them could be really intimidating for a young writer, but also a great learning experience. But what was more intimidating: figuring out how to write songs around those guys, or going to L.A. to join a band where you had to play guitar next to ...

James Burton? [*Laughs*] Same thing! Same thing. My education in Nashville in the early '70s with those guys you just mentioned was all about learning how to write songs and figuring out how to know about the craft of the language. I had a sense of melody, but to be around those guys, I was watching guys who really knew language: Guy and Townes and Mickey Newbury; I was around Mickey less than Guy and Townes, but they were all producing language, like, *serious* language. And so, I got it, I got that that's what it was. I was young and impressionable, but it was the perfect thing for me to stumble into to really be a dedicated songwriter. And really, my dedication to "the carrot" that we were talking about, it goes back to there. Because I was watching those guys going, "Fuck!" I remember Townes playing "Pancho & Lefty" not long after he wrote it, and it was like, "Fuck me!"

And then I go to L.A., and I fall into a band with Glen Hardin and James Burton ... and you know, Emory Gordy. So that became a lesson in arranging, in how these great musicians played together. They don't really think a lot about the language of songs, but man, they were really inside arranging a band of six musicians, how to arrange everything. They would talk about how to make a guitar part and a piano part and a fiddle part and all of this stuff work to make music, which was another aspect my education. And that information is what I used later on when I was producing records, like some of those Rosanne Cash records ... it was from what I learned being around those guys. I mean, the first day I got to L.A., I walk in and John Hartford and Richard Greene are sitting at the kitchen table there on Lania Lane, talking about arranging songs.

Unless I'm mistaken, Emmylou's cover of "Pancho & Lefty" on 1977's *Luxury Liner* was Townes' first big cut as a songwriter. But by that point, she had already recorded a handful of your songs. Were you ever aware of any degree of jealousy from Townes or any of those other guys who you

really looked up to and studied under, but who hadn't yet "broken through" quite like you did so quickly?

Well, you know, Townes couldn't be pissed off about that, because I got Emmy to record "Pancho & Lefty," and he knew it. But my conversations with Emmy were never really about my songs. They'd be more like, "'Blue Kentucky Girl' is a great song ... how would it sound if you sang it?" And Guy knew that conversation was going on, because I was having the same conversations with him and he was having them with other people. Guy was talking to Mickey Raphael and telling him, "You should get Willie to record 'Till I Gain Control Again.'" So Mickey takes that song to Willie and he starts singing it, and that was the way that all worked. A lot of people were pushing each other's songs. So I don't think it was competitive. Although, I could claim a lot of naivety, because I was just in a scene having fun, and you know, you step in the water, get on the boat, and you're already down the river. But still, the discussion about songs was never about mine; it was about the song.

I know you didn't start to really hone your songwriting craft until you started hanging with Townes and Guy, but you already had some degree of music experience before you got to Nashville — having played in bands in college and high school and all the way back to when you were playing drums in your dad's honky-tonk band as a kid. And you came to Nashville thinking you already had a record deal for the album you'd made with Donivan

Cowart. Was it with Donivan that you first started writing songs of your own?

Yeah. He and I have been running together since about 1970. I met Donivan my first day of college at Stephen F. Austin, or at least on what seems like my first day there. Somebody knew I played the guitar, and they said, "Oh, I know this other guy that plays guitar, too," and it was Donivan. So we started playing guitar and hanging around and trying to impress girls, and eventually we accrued a few dollars from playing together and got ourselves a house off campus for \$50 a month, if you can believe that. But really my first introduction to songwriting was his brother, Walter Martin Cowart, who was 10 years older than us and would occasionally pass through town. He was a truck driver, but he'd been a history major in college and listened to Dylan, and he kept a notebook that he wrote poetry and songs in. And they were pretty good songs, too. So Donivan and I started emulating him and writing our own songs. But they were really shitty songs. I didn't write any good songs until I got to Nashville, and that took a couple of years.

The record you and Donivan made together never came out, but did any of those early songs from it ever resurface anywhere, even in revised form?

No! They're all on an 8-track tape at my house, but if they got out they wouldn't stand. It would be an embarrassment to anybody involved.

But you still keep in touch with Donivan?

Oh yeah. He's my front-of-house sound guy. He was our front-of-house sound guy with Emmylou for a whole year, and also a recording engineer on *Old Yellow Moon*. And he's recorded a lot with me over the years. He's a solid guy, and he was a really good songwriter, too. I think in the beginning he was a better songwriter than me. But he drifted away from it.

After the false start with that record you made you Donivan, you eventually got your first publishing deal through Jerry Reed. How did that come about?

Well the best part of that is, before that happened, I was ready to pack it in and move back to Texas. At the time I'd been playing this happy-hour gig at a place called the Jolly Ox, and my boss there had said, "If you ever play an original song, I'm going to fire you." I needed that job badly, but I finally broke after about the fifth day. I was just pissed off, you know, because Townes had been screwing my girlfriend behind my back. Susanna Clark (Guy's

wife) clued me in on that. So I was like, "Fuck all this, I'm going back to Texas," and at my gig that night I played this brand new song I'd written called "You Can't Keep Me Here in Tennessee." And right down the aisle comes my boss saying, "I told you no originals! After your set, you're fired!" And the guy right behind him says, "Oh, good, because we want to record that song tomorrow." It was Jerry Reed's manager. So the next day I went down to RCA Studio, where Chet Atkins was producing, and taught Jerry my song. After that I had a gig writing songs for \$100 a week.

So I guess that kept you in Nashville for a little while longer. But you still ended up back in Texas.

Eventually I did, like at the end of '74.

What led you to Austin?

Hippie girls! And there was KOKE radio, and just ... Austin was paradise, you know? And I mean, I was actually happy in Nashville; this time I wasn't running away like I almost had before, it was an actual choice. Emmylou had already recorded a couple of my songs for a record that hadn't come out yet, and I knew that I had a job writing songs, and I thought, "I could do this from Texas, and it'll be alright."

Were you already married at the time? To your first wife and the mother of your oldest daughter?

No. I was living here with Hannah's mother, but that was already over, really. Hannah wasn't born yet. What happened was I left for L.A. with Emmy in early '75 and we started the Hot Band a few months later and then went on the road for a while. And when we took a break, instead of going back to L.A. I stopped off in Austin and kind of rekindled things with Hannah's mother. But we knew it wasn't going to work out so I went back to L.A., and then a few months later she called me and said, "I'm pregnant and I'm going to have this baby." And I said, "Well, come out here and I'll be its father and help you through it." So we got married, but it didn't last too long, and in the end she went off and I got custody of Hannah and that was that. I was a single parent in L.A.

That must have been right around the time you started recording your first "solo" record, 1978's *Ain't Living Long Like This*. Do you have good memories of those sessions?

Oh, I've got great memories of making my first record. I have memories of me and Dr. John and Ry Cooder and Emmylou and Emory Gordy and Mickey

Raphael and Jim Keltner doing a second take of "Elvira," and the rough mix of that far-exceeded the final, carefully mixed version. There was some real, raw music there, and I was delighted with that experience. But I just didn't know enough about recording yet at the time to understand what happened between the night we recorded that song and the final mix. Had I known then what I know about the process now ...

I'll take your word for it as far as all that goes, but I still think it's a great album. It's one of my favorite records of yours and from that whole progressive country era. But it sounds like you were already going in a completely different direction by the time your second record came out. When you were making *But What Will the Neighbors Think*, did you even think of yourself as a country artist?

No, I wasn't. Not at all. I was just a songwriter trying to find a voice. You know, I think with *What Will the Neighbors Think*, I was certainly under this influence of ... I had been to London and I had heard "Pump It Up" by Elvis Costello at Dingwalls, just blasting, and Hank DeVito (songwriter and pedal-steel player) and I just looked at each other in stunned silence going, "What the fuck was *that*?" I mean, it was just an unbelievable sounding attack. So of course we wanted to figure out how to do that. And so that was my New Wave period. So I'd say ... that's a young man searching, you know.

Did you do a lot of touring behind that record and your other two from the first half of the '80s, *Rodney Crowell* and *Street Language*? Was the label supportive?

Oh yeah. That was back in the days when Warner Bros would write a check for me to go out on the road with (fellow Hot Band alumni) Larry Londin and Emory Gordy and Richard Bennett and Hank DeVito and Tony Brown; they'd spend bookoos of money to put me out on the road, saying, "You've got a good record, let's put you out there ... We're not worried about singles; let's just go figure out who your audience is, and then maybe we'll figure out which song we want on the radio." They had a department at the record company back then called "artist development," and man ... anytime I'm meeting my colleagues coming up now who are trying to find their way, I just go, "Thank God for artist development when I came along." Because I *was* an artist developing, and it got me out there and put me in place to learn some stuff.

***Diamonds & Dirt* would probably qualify as “Americana” if released today, but it’s still the most “country” album you’ve ever made. Did your label finally point you in that direction?**

Well, not really. I’ll tell you, I remember clearly ... Steve (Earle) had made his first album, *Guitar Town*, and that spoke to me; I was like, “Steve is being himself.” And also, there was one other thing that happened at that time, where the notion struck me that, “Ah, I’m going to do that stuff that I grew up on; that’s a part of myself that I’m going to get in touch with.” You know, *Diamonds & Dirt* is ... I covered “Above and Beyond” on there, which was the first song I ever sang in public, back in my dad’s band; it was one of those things where the little 11-year-old gets out from behind the drums and sings a song, that kind of cute, cornball country stuff. But that was the first song I sang in public. So the core tone of that album was country music, which is really where I came from. And I didn’t see it as commercial. But after I finished it, the promotion guy from Columbia came over and we listened to the record together, just he and I, and seeing his (very positive) response to it, I said, “Shit ...” Then I started thinking, “Hmm, maybe I have something here.” And that’s when I told Rosanne, “I’m going to step on the gas here and follow this. I’m going to be on the road and I’m not going to be around as much.” Because up until then I’d been a pretty responsible parent, you know? And Rosanne said, “Hmm. I don’t know what this is going to do to our marriage,” which was pretty prophetic, because I got out on the road and I ran after that thing for about three years.

But as it turns out, I didn’t like that country scene. At that particular time, I wasn’t ready for it. But I still found myself falling into that pose, where I had my silver-tipped boots and all that stuff. It’s like, you know when you walk into a room and people look at you and they project something on you, like “That’s *that* guy,” and then you start carrying yourself like that guy, rather than who you are. I call it the Elvis Syndrome. And some kind of intuitive knowledge or something made me realize, “If I continue to do this and I try to create from this place, I’m going to lose it. And what I’m going to be able to create years from now is going to be diminished because the choice I’m making here is personality and stardom over artistry.” That may not have been true, but that’s certainly how I felt about it at the time.

The other day on Ray Wylie’s show, you played the title track from 1995’s *Jewel*

***of the South*, introducing it as a song you were really happy with, even though it was never a hit. I thought it was nice to hear a song from that period, because the five albums you released between *Diamonds & Dirt* and *The Houston Kid* tend to get brushed aside in overviews of your career. The narrative arc of your bio implies that you sort of lost your artistic compass during the ’90s.**

Yeah. I did. But I also had some responsibilities that I eventually accepted. Tony Brown signed me to MCA and they gave me a lot of money up front, and the idea was that they were going to take it back to that *Diamonds & Dirt* thing. But my heart wasn’t in it, even though I certainly went for the money, and so for three or four years, that really was a low point in my career for me. And then I just shut it down and drove the kids to school, single parenting again. But then I met Claudia, and my mother moved to Tennessee and she and I got close, and once I got quiet and still, that’s when the songs that eventually became *The Houston Kid* started to come. And all that memory that was coming up was also what prompted me to start working on *Chinaberry Sidewalks*. And I remember a real conscious moment where I sort of realized that, “OK, this sort quiet period that I’ve been in has come full circle.”

Right before *The Houston Kid*, I went and made a different record, and for some reason I took it over to Richard Dodd, the producer and engineer, and played it for him. And he said, “You know, that’s really good, Rodney — now put it on the shelf and go and make something that’s really you.” And I’d spent a lot of money on making that record, so I was pissed off, like, “Who the fuck does he think he is?” But by the time I got home, I *got* it, and said, “From here on out, I’m only going to do work that, if my kids want to claim their father’s legacy as a recording artist, this is going to be it.” And that’s when I started making *The Houston Kid*, and from there I feel like I’ve been a lot more consistent than I was from ’78 to ’98.

Right. But just like “Jewel of the South,” a lot of the songs recorded on those ’90s albums still hold their own. Let the *Picture Paint Itself*, which isn’t even in print anymore, had “Stuff That Works,” a great song you co-wrote with Guy Clark. On *The Outsider* you revisited “Say You Love Me,” another *Jewel of the South* song, and “Still Learning How to Fly,” the opening track on *Fate’s Right Hand*, was actually first recorded on 1997’s *The Cicadas*, the side-project record you did with your road band

at the time. So with hindsight, don’t you think maybe you’ve been a little rougher on those records than they deserve?

Well, I’ve been very open about my feelings about how I didn’t really discover my voice and figure out how to use it in a way that made me appreciate it until about when I was turning 50, with *The Houston Kid*. So anytime people would maybe argue about how they really liked something I did before that, I’d always go, “No, it wasn’t my performance that you liked — it was the songs that I’d written.” And maybe I was able to deliver those songs the best that I could at the time, but I’d be like, “I knew Ray Charles, I know what *he* did, and I need to get as close to that in my own way as I can.” So my argument was always, “I may have been a fully formed songwriter a long time ago, but the fully formed recording artist didn’t get here for me until about the year 2000.”

Although you started them around the same time and they both explore memories from your childhood, you didn’t finish your book until 10 years after *The Houston Kid*. So it was interesting going back to the record while reading *Chinaberry Sidewalks* and hearing those songs as almost like a soundtrack. But unlike the memoir, *The Houston Kid* isn’t really completely autobiographical. Like up to a certain point, every line in “The Rock of My Soul” rings true to your own story and your memories of your father, but then you get to the part where you sing “I got out of prison ’bout a year ago,” and it veers away from you. Why that detour out of yourself? Was there a reticence to get too personal at the time, or was it just for the sake of the song?

That was for the sake of the song. Because it went out of my first-person narrative really into the culture of where I grew up. A lot of guys from where I grew up went to Huntsville. So the narrator’s, you know ... the lens pulled back, and that narration becomes the narration of East Houston, really. That was one of the songs that my mother actually heard before she died. I played it for her, and she said to me, “You know son, I don’t care about people knowing about me and your dad and what happened between us, but I don’t want people thinking that you went to prison!” And I said, “Well, Mom, if that’s where the song needs to go, that’s how ... the stakes have to keep rising into something to get to the resolve.” And her eyes just kind of glazed over and she goes, “Well why don’t you just stop back there without that verse? You already told the story!” And I

went, “Well, I can’t argue with that, Mom.”

Going back to *Chinaberry Sidewalks*, my favorite passage in the whole book is near the very end, where you’re in the hospital beside your dad on his deathbed, and you flash back on all these beautiful memories that weren’t mentioned at all before. It’s just one paragraph, almost like a coda, but for me it was like a light illuminating the whole rest of the book.

And you know, when I was sitting in the hospital with my dad during those last five days, that flashback really happened. A lot of that stuff was coming up, like how Jacinto City had a semi-pro football team for a couple of years — God knows where that came from — and Dad was 29 years old and played defensive back. He wasn’t in shape to play football, he was a construction worker, but he was out there and he was so proud of himself. And part of why I put that in there with all that other stuff came from me wanting to frame that question of how you could really idolize somebody like that and at the same time just be so mad at them.

As a reader, you do wonder that a lot of times, because the portrait you paint of your father isn’t always very flattering. And you only really get little glimpses of an answer until the very end.

Yeah. And I thought really hard about all of that less flattering stuff, because I knew the ending, and I said, “God, am I really going to go into this?” But I had already gone into it in the song “The Rock of My Soul,” so I said, “Yeah, I’m going to go into all these really despicable things my dad did, and my mother, too.” But I did it because I knew they both redeem themselves. Of course you have to get to the end of the book to get to what I was driving at. But I’m glad you mentioned that. You’re the only person who’s ever mentioned that passage with those warm memories of my dad. But I was proud of that.

You also write about how you later got to introduce your mom to Roy Acuff at the Grand Ole Opry and how meaningful that was to you both, since she and your dad first met at an Acuff dance. I take it your dad got to witness some of your success, too, didn’t he? What did he make of it?

Oh, he enjoyed it. He didn’t get to meet Roy Acuff, but the doors were swinging open more and more and more. And I know he was really proud of me. But you know, he didn’t come from ... with his upbringing, it wasn’t anything that you could say; it couldn’t be like “Son, I’m

proud of you.” It’d be more like ... well, he’d talk about songs.

Your daughter Chelsea has now taken after both you and her mother by pursuing her own career as a performing songwriter. She’s already put out a couple of really good Americana records of her own. Did you or Rosanne ever try to talk her out of getting involved with the music business?

Oh no, I’m very supportive. When Chelsea first started doing it and she brought me her first batch of songs, I made the mistake of trying to say, “OK, that’s a really good start. Now let me tell you what you ought to do to really make a record out of this ...” And she kind of flatly said, “Stay out of my business!” So she went off on her own. But now that she’s found herself, now she’ll come to me and we’ve been collaborating together. I would say Chelsea reminds me of me a lot; she actually reminds me more of myself than she reminds me of her mother. She’s certainly as smart as her mother, but ... Chelsea’s development is going to play out in its own time. And I feel good for her about that, because knowing how it was for me, I think her best work is really out in front of her.

You said at the start that you’ve got enough songs ready for another album, and that you’ll probably do another record with Emmylou soon, too. But you also said something about wanting to figure out how to really play the blues. Did you really mean that?

Oh yeah! That’s been my musical study over the last couple of years. I’m not much into what you’d call sports-bar blues, but I’m really drawn to the acoustic kind of country blues. I always loved Lightnin’ Hopkins, but also, you know, Son House, Blind Blake, Mance Lipscomb, R.L. Burnside’s acoustic stuff ... and Howlin’ Wolf really comes down that way, too . I’ve really thrown myself into observing all those guys. But the thing is, I’ve been inspired by a lot of different artists over the years: Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, Hank Williams, the Beatles, certainly Elvis Costello in 1977. And whenever someone inspires like that, the job of that inspiration is not to try and do what they do, but try to find in yourself the thing that inspired you and create your own version of it. So I’ve been learning how to focus in on the blues as I understand them, coming from inside of me, and I’ve got to say, I’ve really been enjoying it. And my intention is, I’m going to try my best to create something that will stand as my version of what we might call country blues. You’ve always

got to be careful about talking about what you’re going to do in the future, but I’m committed to this.

Did you ever get to see Lightnin’ Hopkins in Houston, back in the day?

Oh yeah, yeah. I saw Lightnin’ Hopkins four or five times back in Houston. He came to Lee College one time when I was going there, he and Alan Lomax. Alan stood up and clapped his hands and sang old songs that he’d collected, and Lightnin’ would sit in a chair and play the blues. And I remember thinking, “I don’t know about that other guy, but I like the guy sitting in the chair playing that shit!”

Last thing here: Do you have another book in you?

Yeah. I started out thinking that I had to know the end, which is the luxury I had with *Chinaberry* — I knew the end, so I knew how to make the arc. But this time around, it sure seems like what I have in mind about writing, I don’t have the end to it yet. So I may learn something, or I *will* learn something, about how to create the arc of the narrative without knowing what that end is ahead of time.

***Chinaberry Sidewalks* was as much about your parents as it was about you, and really only covered your childhood years in detail. Would this one delve more into your life in music?**

It would be from memory again, so it would be memoir. But although I’ve had all these years in the music business, I really don’t want to write about my career. What I can write about, though, are some really interesting people and my inter-relationship with them. I think I can make that the story, rather than, you know, “And then I wrote ...” I’ll never do *that*.



Photo by John Carrico





Radney Foster speaks about *Everything*

A songwriter's
songwriter tangos
with his muse

By Lynne Margolis

Radney Foster's new album, *Everything I Should Have Said*, opens with a sinister tune about a fickle lover, an alluring tease who possesses him, like a demon, only when she pleases. Of course, he's powerless to resist her siren-like call.

He named the song "Whose Heart You Wreck" — followed, in parentheses, by "Ode to the Muse."

Turns out this wicked-temptress tale is really a confession about struggling to maintain the most important — and frustrating — relationship in every songwriter's life. Even guys like Foster, who's written or co-authored several top-10 country hits, find themselves in sometimes torturous battles with their creative spirit.

"To me, she's a recalcitrant, drunk mistress who shows up at your house at 2 in the morning," he says. But in the three or so decades since he and his muse began trysting in earnest, Foster has won many, many rounds, writing dozens of songs with knockout combinations of hit-worthy melodies and heartfelt words.

Long respected as a John Hiatt-level tunesmith, a songwriter's songwriter, he notched his first top 10 in the mid-80s with Sweethearts of the Rodeo's "Since I Found You." That song, co-written with Bill Lloyd, earned the pair their own record deal; their self-titled debut produced several more hits. Foster's first solo album, 1992's *Del Rio, TX 1959*, sent "Nobody Wins" to No. 2 and "Just Call Me Lonesome" to No. 10 on *Billboard*'s country singles chart. His name shows up on at least 22 top-10 country albums — seven of them No. 1's (by Keith Urban, Darius Rucker, Luke Bryan, Kenny Chesney, Brooks & Dunn, and the Dixie Chicks — twice). He even topped the jazz chart with a track on a George Benson album. As he sings in "The Man You Want," Foster has even been "a rock star once or twice."

Sunny Sweeney, Pat Green and Jack Ingram are acolytes. The Randy Rogers Band includes a Foster song on every album, two of which he produced. "He's respected by probably every singer-songwriter up there [in Nashville] as being one of the best," says Rogers. "Whatever Radney's writing is pretty much regarded as something special."

Rucker, a fan since the Foster & Lloyd days, named an album *Charleston, SC 1966* in homage to Foster, whose last album was 2012's *Del Rio, Texas Revisited: Unplugged & Lonesome*, his 20th-anniversary reinvention of the original.

"[When] Radney came up with *Del Rio, TX*, that was where everything changed for me," says Rucker. "That record was a

benchmark for me. And I still love him. Now I get to call him friend and work with him. But he's still my idol."

And yet, while several of those artists have multiple Grammy Awards, Foster, like Hiatt, remains in bridesmaid mode. Not that it seems to bother him. He's thrilled by the success of artists such as Kacey Musgraves, who took home this year's Best Country Album Grammy and the Academy of Country Music's Album of the Year award for *Same Trailer, Different Park*. Musgraves, who contributes vocals to "California" on *Everything*, used to be in Foster's band. He's the one who encouraged her to leave Texas for Music City.

"I helped her move to Nashville," he says. "I mean, I literally helped load stuff for her to get here. I'm so proud of her. She's somebody who I feel like — well, more like an uncle than an older brother. I'm her parents' age. I love her dearly, I really do; I think the world of her. It was a joy to have her in my band; it was a joy to help her move to Nashville; it's always been a joy to write songs with her."

Still youthful-looking at 54, with a full head of wavy silver hair, a quick smile, and laughing eyes behind rimless glasses, Foster landed in Nashville himself at 20 after abandoning his studies at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn. That's when he got the advice that would set him solidly on track as a songwriter, though it would take a few more years — and a dejected, parent-appeasing return to college after his bid for overnight-sensation status failed.

That advice came from none other than Willie Nelson, by then a bona-fide superstar. Foster had gotten hired by a film production company as a driver, shuttling cast and crew between the set and the hotel. Nelson had a cameo in the film.

"They told me they would fire me if I talked to the talent," Foster recalls. "[But] when Willie got into the van, I was like, screw it, what are they gonna do? So I said, 'You know, Willie, we have a couple of mutual friends.' And I talked to him just a little bit. He said, 'Well, what are you doin' up here? Are you at Vanderbilt or something?' And I said, 'No sir, I'm trying to be a songwriter.' And he said, 'Oh, god. Another one of those.'"

"I said, 'Well, do you have any advice for a young songwriter who's tryin' to figure out how to make it work?' And he goes, 'Yeah, I do. The first hundred don't count.' By that time, I don't think I'd written but 30 or 40 songs altogether. And I thought, 'Oh, OK, you've gotta get really serious about it.' It turned a corner for me

in a lot of ways."

For the next five years, Foster went to the school of hard knocks. After finishing college, he returned to Nashville and struggled, grabbing odd jobs and waiting tables while getting as cozy as he could with the muse.

"And then I got signed to a publishing deal and I met Bill Lloyd," he relates. "And we wrote a song for a brand new band called Sweethearts of the Rodeo. It ended up being their first big hit."

Evolutionary theory

According to Randy Rogers, "If there's a definition of an artist, it is Radney and his career, and what he's been able to accomplish."

More specifically, Rogers says, Foster has managed to survive, and ultimately thrive, by switching directions like a chameleon changes colors.

"He was in a band and got wildly popular and famous. And then he had a solo career and he was known for a while as not being able to get played on the radio, and then all of the sudden, he's one of the hottest songwriters in Nashville; everybody from the Dixie Chicks to Keith Urban are cuttin' his songs. And then he starts producing records for me and other artists, so he turned that thing on, and now he gets to do what he loves, which is play as many shows as he wants and make records, and produce people and write."

As for how Foster got to this point, Rogers observes, "He has a knack for being commercial but at the same time, still being able to have songs that are deep enough to resonate with people on a level that isn't dumb, but doesn't fly over the head of the listener. He has a very human approach, with great melodies."

"I try my best to have melody at the forefront of all the songs that I write," Rogers says, "and I learned that from Radney. His melodies are just gorgeous, and it's very seldom you find somebody that has that ability, as well as the ability to hit a home run with the lyrics."

Jack Ingram concurs, adding, "He obviously has such a great handle on melody. I write some good melodies in my own songs when I write by myself, but they're not real ... *tight*. He's much more of a disciplined pop songwriter. A lot of people use pop as a bad term. I do not. A great pop song is as moving as it can be."

And Foster's new album is filled with examples to back that up: "Hard Light of Day," "Lie About Loving Me," "Talk Myself

Out of Falling," "The Man You Want" ... whether they twang or rock or sway, they all carry that ability to adhere like Super Glue inside the brain.

"It's gotta be singable for the average human being, and they have to be able to want to sing along to it," Foster explains. "Sometimes you'll hear a song on the radio and go, that's just the dumbest thing in the world. And then you'll find yourself hummin' it an hour later. Well, that's because it's a really catchy melody. That's a big part of what makes somebody want to listen."

But there's a trait that goes beyond melody and lyrics — the trait that earns Foster so much respect even among those who bear no love for some of the artists who record his songs.

"It's pretty simple," says Rogers. "You never sell out. You never put your name on some piece of shit just to make a paycheck. He's had some high spots and some really low ones, where things looked like they might not turn around. But when those low spots come, those are the times where it usually drags out the best in you. And instead of conforming and writing directly toward whatever was popular, or changing anything about the way he approaches the craft of a song, he stuck to his guns, and that's stood the test of time."

Ingram agrees, noting some artists try so hard for popularity, they wind up writing words they wouldn't want to sing for the rest of their lives. But for Foster, "If it's not truthful, it's not going into a song."

The drunk mistress

"All songs, or good ones, almost always have to have a point of conflict," says Foster. He points to "Mine Until the Morning" as an example. "It's a very sexy song, but it's sad. It's about two people who have been broken, and it's very obvious to them both, and they're both just looking for that moment of human comfort."

He's joined on the song by another Grammy-winning female — Patty Griffin. They've had a mutual admiration society going for quite a while, he says. "She'll show up at my gigs every now and then when I'm in Texas, just to dance, just to have fun. And we have at times shared a guy who's still her day-to-day guy; when she's not working, he works for me. So I just called her and said, 'Hey, I've got this duet and I think it would be really awesome if you would sing on it.'"

She heard the mid-tempo ballad, which turns a pragmatic proposition into

a moment of hope amid heartache, and agreed. Their contrasting voices lend more poignancy to the song, a companion piece of sorts to "California."

"'Mine Until the Morning' is what he says in that moment when those two broken people meet on the road," Foster explains. "And 'California' is what he sings a year later."

Though "California" is fictionalized, the inspiration came from a conversation he and his wife, Cyndi Hoelzle, had about her parents, both Pennsylvania natives who met in the Bay Area. While Foster and Hoelzle were vacationing where she was raised, she told him her parents' story. "She said, 'Everybody moves to California to start over in some way,' because that's kind of how it was with her folks. It just struck me, and I said, 'Baby, I need about 10 minutes. I'll be right back.' And I wrote down this sketch of an idea for that song. I just thought, 'What if you have two people who need to start over? And they fall in love on their way to California?'"

Foster says several of the album's songs are companion pieces, though he didn't realize it until the sequencing phase. "Whose Heart You Wreck" and the closing title tune make appropriate bookends, he says, because the latter

addresses one of the most devastating experiences of his life: his split from his first wife, who subsequently moved with their son to France after he waged, and lost, a fierce custody battle.

"There was a point at which we loved each other very dearly and we created a mess, and that's what 'Everything I Should Have Said' is about: my responsibility in that deal. But in one sense, I think she had trouble with the muse."

It's easy to believe a wife could be jealous of such a demanding mistress. Which lends a hint of irony to the fact that Hoelzle plays the femme fatale in the video they created for "Whose Heart You Wreck." It was filmed at Dockside Studios outside of Lafayette, La., the remote, "very vibey" hideaway — and former bordello — where he recorded the album with producer Justin Tocket. (Their 14-year-old son served as director Steve Boyle's gaffer.)

It could be said that Cyndi embodies Foster's muse in real life as well.

"Talk Myself Out of Falling," the kind of song Urban could likely turn into another hit, is about the night the couple fell in love. "Noise," Foster says, is about their relationship 20 years later. "Lie About Loving Me" and "Holding Back" also share a connection. As for "Unh,

Unh, Unh" ... well, that's just a more direct reference to a subject broached repeatedly in these songs. "Sometimes love should be monosyllabic," Foster sings, his voice a mix of humor and suggestiveness. "With that ooh, ooh, ooh and that oh, oh, oh/That yes, yes, yes, not that no, no, no."

Miranda and Blake could likely send that sexy thing right to the top of the charts. It pairs nicely with "The Man You Want," another of those catchy-melody love songs Foster does so well. That one also comes with a dose of irony; Foster had given up writing odes to his wife after several attempts failed to earn positive reactions.

"Then I wrote this song, and I walked in the house and said 'Hey baby, you wanna hear this new song?' And she said, 'Sure.' And it just knocked the breath out of her," Foster relates. "She said, 'Oh, baby, I love that.' And I went, 'What is the difference between that and all those other ones I wrote for you?' And she kind of cocked her head and thought about it for a minute and said, 'Well, on that one, you told the truth.'"

Score another one for Foster and his muse. Or muses.

But Foster says the album's emotional resonance also has much to do with Tocket,

who challenged him to dig deep.

"He really came from the point of view that if it wasn't something that was intensely personal to me, that we weren't gonna deal with it," Foster explains.

For better or worse, one song that

days before their writing session, Foster's 11-year-old daughter came home from school and asked, "Daddy, what does the word 'slut' mean?"

"I had quite a pause," Foster recalls, "and I said, 'That is a word that, no matter

*"Tonight I own this stage
And me and this six string machine
are gonna kill some hate
'Cause you don't talk to my friends that way
You don't talk to my brother that way
And you damn sure don't talk to my*



"I wrote this song, and I walked in the house and said, 'Hey baby, you wanna hear this new song?' And she said, 'Sure.' And it just knocked the breath out of her," says Foster, recalling the first time he played "The Man You Want" for his wife. "She said 'Oh, baby, I love that.' And I went, 'What is the difference between that and all those other ones I wrote for you?' And she kind of cocked her head and thought about it for a minute and said, 'Well, on that one, you told the truth.'"

fits that category also could become an anti-hate anthem. Like "Angel Flight," the moving tribute Foster and Darden Smith wrote for the soldiers charged with bringing home their fallen brethren, "Not in My House," co-written with Allen Shamblin, addresses a bigger-picture issue with a first-person approach.

But it's not just personal, it's also based on personal experience. A couple of

how it's used, it's never ever used in any way other than to make someone feel small. And to hurt."

When Shamblin heard the story, he said, "We've gotta write that."

The song builds in intensity, with Foster and Joe Stark slicing off ever-sharper guitar licks, until it reaches a dramatic peak with a powerful, Guthrie- and Seeger-invoking stanza:

daughter that way."

"It's sad that it wasn't that hard to write," Foster says, adding, "I don't start out to be somebody's mouthpiece for anything. I just set out to write what I'm passionate about."

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Waiting on the wagontrain

Trailblazing Austin country band the Wagoneers just might be sitting on the best comeback album you've never heard ... yet.

By Rob Patterson

It was a classic music business tale: The Wagoneers blazed out of Austin in 1987 to quickly win a major-label record deal and head to Nashville to record their debut album. Boldly titled and branded true Texan as *Stout & High* — a coinage taken from a letter by an Alamo defender describing its walls — the smoking disc won rave reviews from the mainstream media and country music critics for the way the foursome delivered authentic twang, shuffles, and old-school C&W rocked up to date with four-man band brio. They took their hard-charging live show on the road, playing anywhere and everywhere and opening shows for country stars and legends as well as rock bands like the Ramones.

A second album, *Good Fortune*, was a pale follow-up. Radio never embraced the band, and after two years of near-constant roadwork, guitarist Brent Wilson and bassist Craig Pettigrew quit the group. Singer and primary songwriter Monte Warden and drummer Tom Lewis carried on into 1990 with hired guns, but their run was over, kaput, done ... or so it seemed. In 2011, the Wagoneers staged a long-overdue return to action with two well-received reunion shows during South By Southwest.

After two decades apart, it was as much of a surprise to the band itself as it was to fans, but the Wagoneers reunion went over so well that they continued playing shows together, whet-

ting appetites for a new recording with a fresh crop of brand new songs. And they did indeed cut a new album — and a really good one, too. It was all playing out like a perfect *Behind the Music* comeback story. Except for the fact that that long-awaited third Wagoneers record is now even *longer* awaited.

"It's in limbo," says Lewis of the still unreleased album, which for now they're calling *The Wagoneers*. "It's been one frustration after another for one reason or another."

Warden, on the other hand, maintains a more optimistic outlook. "I'm not frustrated," says the singer, "because here's what I know: We're just trying to find the right home for it. We waited 23 years to make our third album. I'm not going to rush putting it out."

Their contrasting viewpoints "are both true for where we are," says Warden. But don't misconstrue it as a sign of discord, as the solidarity amongst the Wagoneers has never been greater — especially regarding what they achieved on the album. "I couldn't be more proud of the record," Warden enthuses. "And there are records that I made in the past where I could not have said that."

The Wagoneers has quite a legacy to live up to — despite Lewis' humble attempt to downplay the band's importance and impact. "Though it's an interesting story, we were just a blip on

the map before," he says of their initial run. He has a point, but truth be told, the Wags (as they are known by fans in shorthand) wowed anyone who ever saw them play, and were pivotal in Texas and roots music history in their timing and influence. In the late '80s, Nashville music was mired in country-pop dreck, the Austin Cosmic Cowboy movement had played out its hand, and country had hit a low point in popularity with new generations of music fans not just in Austin and Texas but nationwide. The music needed a new burst of energy and vitality, and the Wagoneers had that in spades. Delivering country with an energy and hipness that both grabbed younger ears and satisfied older ones with their reverence for the style's verities, the Wagoneers were the nuclear trigger for a young Austin country scene that soon came to include Kelly Willis and Chaparral (out of which came Bruce and Charlie Robison) and many others to follow in a 1990s local flowering if not explosion of roots country talent. They not only presaged the rise of Americana/alt-country, but gave it a hearty shove, paving the way in Music City for rock-style bands playing country like the Mavericks. They must also be credited as one of the acts that helped plant the seeds of the Texas country/Red Dirt movement that's flourished now for well over a decade.

In the years following the band's break up, Warden launched a solo career and later struck pay dirt as a writer of songs for top Nashville acts, most notably the 2004 No. 6 George Strait hit "Desperately" (co-written with Bruce Robison). Lewis and Wilson both did time as hired guns in Austin and Nashville before returning home, where the former also drums with the band

Haybale! Bassist Craig Pettigrew played with Dale Watson in his early Austin years before largely setting music aside to work as a bus driver for Austin's Capital Metro to support his family, which in time came to include five kids.

The only time the Wagoneers got together again was to cut a rather hot track in 1995 for a now-out-of-print Austin country compilation. Then in 2011, they were asked by the Austin Music Awards to play the show as part of their induction into the Austin Music Hall of Fame. When they reunited to rehearse in Warden's South Austin living room, they discovered from the first notes that the mutual magic was still there. After playing the awards show and then a SXSW showcase at the Continental Club later that night to a warm and robust reception, the Wagoneers were back in full gear for phase two of their career.

The new album, recorded two years ago, is the work of a genuine *band* locking together to not just serve but honor and exalt 12 stunningly good songs Warden wrote with the help of co-writers like his wife Brandi, Pettigrew, Bruce Robison, Colin Boyd, and Darden Smith. They cut it in Nashville with producer Mark Bright — a Wagoneers fan from their first run whose chart-topping credits include Carrie Underwood and Rascal Flatts — but tracked it old-school and Austin style. "The recordings are basically us live in this big room at Starstruck Studios," Lewis says. "Mark did sort of a George Martin approach: just set up some mics and let us go. Two or three of the songs are first takes."

In less than two weeks they had a definitive contemporary Wagoneers album. "I think it shows our maturity," Lewis continues. "It's a little bit of everything like we did before but more of



James Pardo
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it. But it's a very current sounding album; it doesn't seem like the follow-up to *Stout & High* or *Good Fortune* — it stands on its own. We're all proud of it."

And rightly so, as it's one of those all-too-rare albums that strikes a perfect balance between commercial appeal and artistic credibility. But although they've shopped the new album to record labels, so far, no dice. "Everyone says, 'We love the record,' and that's it," says Lewis. A band that was once courted by the biz and then backed to the hilt by A&M has run up against the sad realities of today's far smaller and much more parsimonious industry. "No one is willing to sign anything unless they know they're going to break even."

The Wagoneers are more than ready to help any label willing to meet them halfway; they're practically chomping at the bit to hit the road and win over the world. But the catch 22 is that touring just isn't an option presently without certain adult realities being met. "We've got a guy who has a full-time gig that he cannot leave until we can make the jump to a full-time band," explains Warden. "A label hears that and thinks, that's tour support — and tour support doesn't exist any more. What it means now is selling CDs at your gig."

An alternate route, of course, would be for the Wagoneers to self-release the album, perhaps with help from a crowd-funding campaign. But Warden is standing his ground.

"I know that a record this good is something to be proud of, that it's not something to just throw out there or put it out

ourselves just for the sake of having something to sell at our gigs," Warden says. "This record deserves better than that. And these songs I've written deserve better than that. It can only come out once. And we'll get there. I do not share one percent of Tommy's frustration, but I do share 100 percent of the desire to get this record out at its right home. Anyone who knows me knows that patience is not something I snuggle up against. But I've been able to have such patience with this project because I know that it deserves that."

"All we can do is make the music," he continues. "I just have faith that anything this good will find its way home. I know when this thing finally comes out it'll be a big ol' breath of fresh air for everybody."

Until then, the only place to hear those new songs and to see the band live is to catch the Wagoneers' weekly Sunday residency at Austin's Continental Club. But take it from Warden himself or from anyone else who has already caught them in the act: The Wagoneers at their best, which is very much where they're at right now, is not a show you want to miss.

"I'll put the Wagoneers live show up against any four 20-year-olds," asserts Warden. "It's a shovel to the face."



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reviews

JOHN FULLBRIGHT
 BRUCE ROBISON AND KELLY WILLIS
 RODNEY CROWELL
 LEON RUSSELL
 RANDY ROGERS BAND
 DAVE ALVIN AND PHIL ALVIN
 RADNEY FOSTER
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 NIKKI LANE
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JOHN FULLBRIGHT
Songs
 Blue Dirt Records

The go-to cliché when it comes to praising a truly exceptional vocalist is to say he or she could “sing the phone book and it would sound great.” John Fullbright doesn’t really merit that level of blind praise for his singing (though he’s no slouch), but give the 26-year-old Oklahoma wunderkind this much: He can pretty much write a song about seemingly nothing and really make it *mean* something. For proof, check out the song on his new album, *Songs*, called, well, “Write a Song”: “Write a song, write a song about the very song you sing/Pen a line about a line within a line/Write a song about a song.” The words sound like scratch lyrics, placeholders he might have sung to himself while feeling his way around a melody, a la Paul McCartney singing “scrambled eggs” to the tune of his nascent “Yesterday.” But rather than scrap them, he turns them over and over again (“Think a thought about the very thought you think”) until catching a hint of something possibly bigger (“Live a life that is the life you want to live”), only to let it go and return to where he started: “When your rhymes do not apply to anything/Write a song about a song.” Be it by happy accident or clever sleight of hand, his simple lines about having nothing to say say pretty much *everything* about the art of surrendering to the muse for the sake of the song — literally.

“Write a Song” is both the centerpiece and the anomaly on *Songs*, surrounded by 11 other songs on which Fullbright most definitely is *not* at a loss for words. The album’s matter-of-fact title belies the confidence of a seasoned troubadour who’s been flooring writers on the level of Butch Hancock since before he was old enough to legally drink. Unlike his Grammy-nominated 2012 national debut, *From the Ground Up*, which opened with the jaw-dropping thunderclap of “Gawd Above,” *Songs* makes clear from the start that it’s in no hurry to demand your attention by force; apart from the infectious whistling that gooses the opening “Happy,” Fullbright takes his sweet time before finally getting around to a tune (the catchy “Never Cry Again”) that shifts higher than third gear. As for the rest, you either sit your butt down and listen to the lyrics while waiting patiently for the understated melodies cloaked in spare, somber arrangements to eventually reveal themselves in full (as they usually do, most spectacularly in “The One That Lives Too Far”), or you move along. But if you choose the later, don’t be too surprised if one of those lines of Fullbright’s that so eloquently expresses the thoughts he’s thought trips you up on your way out the door. It could be the one in “Happy” about not wanting to have to wonder how you’ve been, or maybe the one in “High Road” about choosing between the “high road to freedom” and the “low road to you.” But rest assured one of those lines *will* get you, and after that it won’t be any sort of wrathful “Gawd” on high pulling you back inside for a closer listen: just an unassuming young man quietly spinning words into song like a poet savant speaking in tongues.

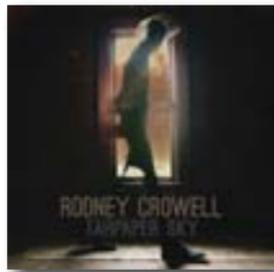
— RICHARD SKANSE



BRUCE ROBISON & KELLY WILLIS
Our Year
 Thirty Tigers

After taking forever and a day before *finally* getting around to making a full album together, Bruce Robison and Kelly Willis now seem committed to not only embracing that particular elephant in the room, but making up for lost time in building their legacy as Americana music’s answer to George and Tammy. Hot on the heels of winning “Best Country Act” at the Austin Music Awards in March and a “Best Country Album” at the Lone Star Music Awards in April for 2013’s *Cheater’s Game*, the husband and wife duo return with a second helping of modern classic country at its finest that goes down smooth as a Don Williams and Emmylou Harris cocktail with a spunky Fireball chaser. There are fewer originals this time around (and fewer songs, too, with a mere 10 tracks clocking in at a minute over half an hour), but they do the covers proud. Bookended by Robison singing his sister Robyn Ludwick’s “Departing Louisiana” and Willis singing the Zombies-penned title track, the set finds them alternating lead vocals song by song and supporting each other via harmonies rather than swapping verses, but their voices blend so well together that it’s never less than a fully collaborative effort. Still, they each have their moments stealing the spotlight. Robison, best known for his songwriting chops, proves himself to also be one of the most underrated male vocalists in country music with his aching reading of the vintage Vern Gosdin hit “(Just Enough to Keep Me) Hangin’ On.” And you probably don’t even have to hear Willis’ take on Tom T. Hall’s “Harper Valley P.T.A.” to know she nails it. Jeannie C. Riley’s smash 1968 version will always be definitive, but mother-of-four Willis brings her own salty sass and verve to the lyric and the rootsy, front-porch-pickin’-party arrangement gives the whole song a fresh, playful spin. Doubtless Willis and Robison will eventually go back to producing their own solo albums (both are long overdue), but as long as their honeymoon period as a duo keeps yielding offspring as charming as *Our Year* and *Cheater’s Game*, what’s the rush in breaking up a good thing?

— RICHARD SKANSE



RODNEY CROWELL
Tarpaper Sky
NewWest

Rodney Crowell arrived on the mid-80s country scene a veteran of Emmylou Harris' Hot Band, a producer of Rosanne Cash, and a writer of hits for Waylon Jennings, the Oak Ridge Boys and Bob Seger; if he was not a veritable Bob Dylan, he was at least a Kris Kristofferson. A raw-voiced poet who turned metaphor in original ways that scraped the marrow from life and offered them up via deadly accurate images — a la “The moments of pleasure/Never do last/Gone like a suitcase/Full of your past/Long gone, and in a hurry,” from “Ashes By Now” — he was the new breed of what country music was.

Writing with that much brio and exactitude, it's easy to turn your records into temples of precision. While the Grammy-winning Crowell has crafted a handful of wondrous albums, ranging from acclaimed Americana releases like *The Houston Kid* and *Sex & Gasoline* to his 1988 mainstream smash, *Diamonds & Dirt*, which shot five songs to the top of the country chart, they've often felt perfected more than surrendered to the moment. And in their glorious flawlessness, a piece of the players' jubilant combustion gets lost. Until now.

His new *Tarpaper Sky* opens with loose-wristed acoustic strumming, the brightness rising from the first bars of “The Long Journey Home,” a meditation on family, moments, and mortality that's as savory and sweet as anything ever written. No lament, just the incredible euphoria of being — and knowing what is limited is more precious for every measured second. From there, Crowell slips seamlessly into the Creole saunter of “Fever on the Bayou,” a temple to desire and merging that embodies the swampy humidity of life on the Louisiana/Texas coast. Just as reckless and randy is the freewheeling thrust 'n' stomp rockabilly of “Frankie Please,” a piano-slaming, bass-bumping juke-joint meltdown at the apex of build and release. Ditto the bawdy torture of want “Somebody's Shadow,” all hip-cocked sex-on-display as the sax honks, the drums burlesque roll and the electric guitar alley-cat yowls. Even the Leonard Cohen/Randy Newman-esque “Famous Last Words of a Fool,” with its compassionary bridge from Shannon McNally, suggests that in lust there is hope — and in hope, love; all there is, really, so tumbling is inevitable in the rush of days.

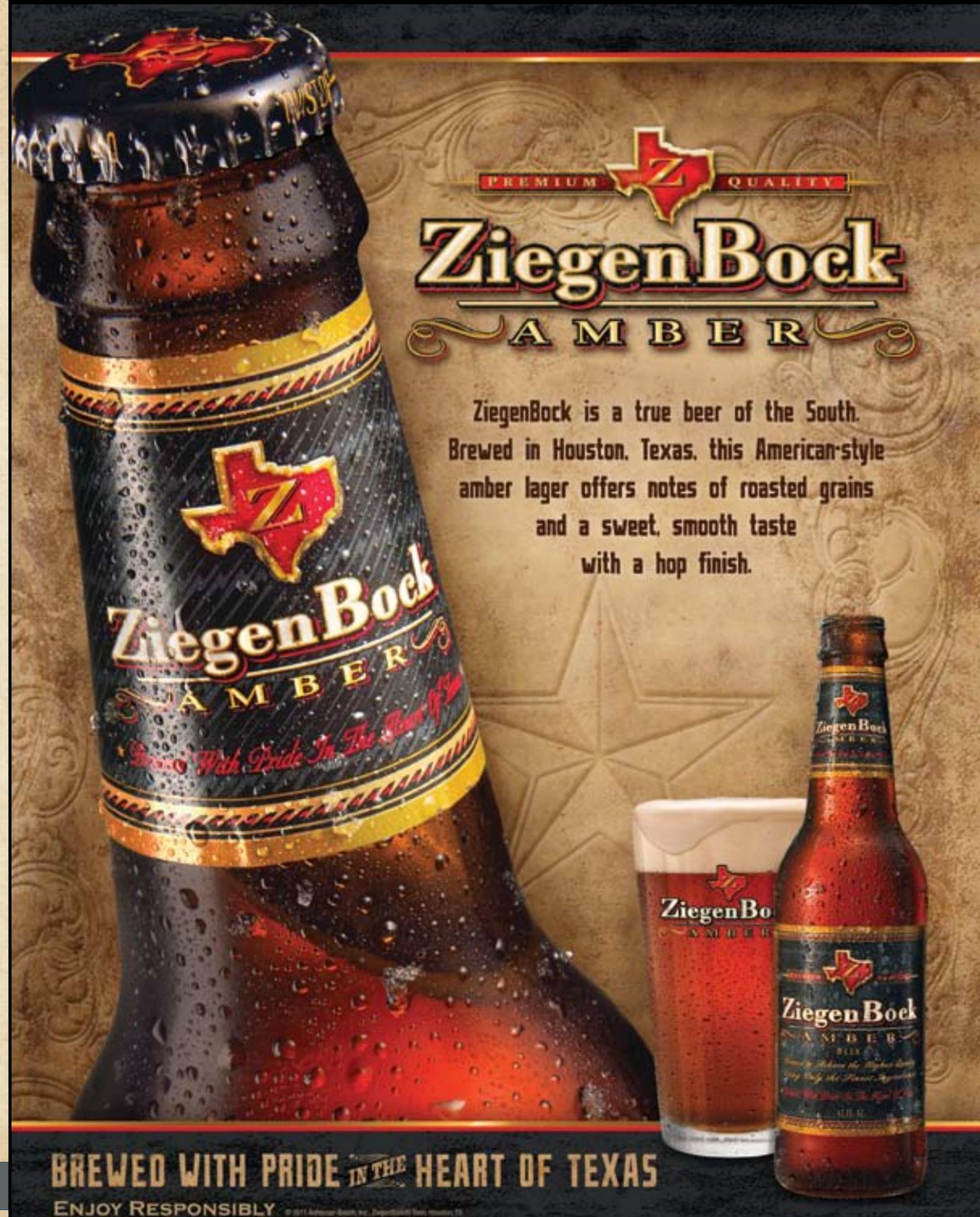
But *Tarpaper's* not all musk 'n' romp. Palpable tenderness marks the hushed “God I'm Missing You,” faltering to grapple with the end of a relationship. Exhaled in places, this is how embracing the ghosts of not knowing and once-upon-a-time drifting through midnight can be. “Grandma Loved that Old Man” celebrates love in the cracks and broken places over a slow shuffle, holding the old man's failings and flaws close as a watery Hawaiian guitar pools underneath. Then there's the vintage country fidelity pledge “I Wouldn't Be Me Without You,” as well as the sweeping send-off “The Flyboy & the Kid,” which evokes Guy Clark's coziest.

A wheezing harmonica and loping campfire benediction settles *Tarpaper Sky*. “Oh, What a Beautiful World” catalogues the simple facts of life to create an arc of what can be, and what it is if we'll see it. Having tasted great loves, defining music with collaborators from Emmylou and Waylon to Mary Karr and T Bone Burnett, Crowell's been there and done that; now he just wants to enjoy the ride. It sounds glorious, indeed. — **HOLLY GLEASON**



LEON RUSSELL
Life Journey
Universal

It almost goes without saying that at 72 years old Leon Russell has grown into his once preternaturally weathered and raspy voice. In the wake of *The Union* in 2014 with Elton John, he's now back on a major label with a big studio and top player budget and veteran middle-of-the-road pop/jazz producer Tommy LiPuma at the helm. But as tasty as this set made up of pop standards like “Georgia On My Mind” and “That Lucky Old Sun” alongside blues roots (Robert Johnson's “Come On in My Kitchen”) and somewhat contemporary gems (“New York State of Mind,” likely the best song Billy Joel ever wrote) may be, in the end it's just a pleasant yawn from a once visionary and progressive artist some four and what feels here like distant decades ago. To underscore the pleasant irrelevance, his two originals, “Big Lips” and “Down in Dixieland,” are fun trifles that follow form, but he already cut them on his own label eight years ago. Admittedly, his refashioning of “Fever” here is somewhat nifty, and there's no denying that in the big picture, Russell's life journey has indeed been interesting. But for anyone other than devoted fans, his *Life Journey* album at best warrants a response of “yeah, nice, but so what?” — **ROB PATTERSON**



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RANDY ROGERS BAND
Homemade Tamales —
Live at Floore's
Room 8 Records

This double-CD and DVD set from the Randy Rogers Band is a fantastic document of what might well be the best live act from the Texas country scene currently hitting the highways of the entire nation. *Homemade Tamales* was recorded over two nights at the legendary Floore's Country Store in Helotes, Texas, with only the best cuts selected for inclusion. A purist could argue that it might have been cool to have a "warts and all," less-than-perfect recording of a single RRB show, but the fact is that Rogers and crew really don't offer up that many imperfections in concert on a night to night basis, anyway. Having played thousands of shows now as a core, cohesive outfit without replacements or lengthy hiatuses for 15 years, the band is the proverbial well-oiled machine. But that doesn't mean they're just going through the motions here: the newer material on *Homemade Tamales*, specifically "Fuzzy" and "Trouble Knows My Name" from last year's resurgent *Trouble*, has the verve expected of a group showing off its new sounds, but aged numbers such as "Like It Used to Be" are performed with just as much enthusiasm. In addition to the comprehensive live set, the second disc closes with a pair of previously unreleased studio tracks, "Satellite" and "She's Gonna Run." Both are classic-feeling Rogers nuggets that could've fit snugly onto *Trouble* or any other RRB album. The DVD offers a crystal clear presentation, but the intimate behind-the-scenes extras — like the clip of Rogers taking the viewer into a tattoo studio with him to get fresh ink — are the real gems. — **KELLY DEARMORE**



DAVE ALVIN & PHIL ALVIN
Common Ground: Dave Alvin & Phil Alvin Play and Sing the Songs of Big Bill Broonzy
Yep Roc

Say Dave and Phil Alvin together again and the knee-jerk thought is rockabilly, à la their landmark early '80s outfit the Blasters. But this album announces, *think again* — and get to know the deepest blues roots that made the Blasters so powerful in the first place and that have long informed Dave's broad and estimable catalog as a solo artist. Cut live in an old-school studio, *Common Ground: Dave Alvin & Phil Alvin Play and Sing the Songs of Big Bill Broonzy* is like a joyously mesmeric night in God's own down 'n' dirty blues bar on the deliciously bad side of the tracks, redolent with authentic smoky and boozy atmosphere, yet at the same time it sounds bracingly fresh for today. Witness "Key to the Highway," which by now has become such a tired old nag of a blues standard that one never ever wants to hear it again. But the Alvins give it a brisk brush-up that pays homage to Broonzy's early '40s recording that inspired the brothers as Southern California teens in the '60s while also investing it with a fresh spirit all their own. The breadth of Broonzy's musical range and splendid songs give them a rich palette to work from: double-finger-snapping swing on "I Feel So Good" and "Tomorrow"; country blues that kicks like a mule on "How You Want It Done"; and crackling acoustic/electric blues that summons up Beale Street in the early jazz era ("Big Bill Blues"), a delta squall ("Southern Flood Blues"), and Chicago's South Side in its prime ("Just A Dream"). The Alvins also bring their propulsive Blasters best to "Trucking Little Woman," and it sounds like they're having, well, a total blast. Dave delivers six-string lightning that shows he's as masterful as any guitar-slinger on the planet, and both sing not just better but cooler than ever, trading lead on some songs and verses on others. And when they do so together on the greasy strutter "Stuff They Call Money," *whoa!*

I'm the sort of critic who eschews playing the year-end best game, much more so predicting such picks this early in the year. But this totally badass long-player is already one of 2014's magnificent musical moments. *Common Ground* finds the Alvins matching the masters they were weaned on in grit, groove, soul, and razor-wielding ingenuity to ascend to the land of giants. I'm already salivating for what's next. — **ROB PATTERSON**



Photo by Beth Herzhaft



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RADNEY FOSTER
Everything I Should Have Said
Devil's River Records

With last year's *Del Rio, Texas Revisited: Unplugged & Lonesome*, Radney Foster returned to his solo roots, celebrating the album that — like his hits with Foster and Lloyd before it — cemented his reputation as arguably one of the most influential (and certainly respected) artists on the Texas country scene of the last 25 years. But on his first album of new songs in five years, he eschews country and folk sounds for soul and rock — to a mostly stellar effect. *Everything I Should Have Said* was recorded in a former brothel in a secluded section of Louisiana, and indeed, there's a swampy heart apparent in some of the album's best songs. A soulful organ hovers around raw, metallic percussion in "Whose Heart You Wreck," while R&B textures lend life to "Hard Light of Day," which seems to be pulled from a Muscle Shoals studio session. And although not everything here delivers quite the same thrill ("Unh Unh Unh" means well but comes off as a tad too cute for its own good), he still hits his mark far more than he misses it. Heck, the title track is intriguing enough for its title alone: Foster, after all, is a songwriter who says things better than most in his field — both his peers and the many younger artists who have taken cues and musical lessons from him (from Pat Green to Randy Rogers and beyond). And as shown in that specific, elegantly conveyed song of regret and throughout the rest of *Everything*, he's still got plenty left to say. — **KELLY DEARMORE**



JOSH GRIDER
Luck & Desire
AMP

Josh Grider's latest full-length effort, the Trent Wilmon-produced *Luck & Desire*, can be heard as a tale of two styles. It's imminently listenable, and there isn't a note out of place. And in some cases, primarily with the album's slower songs, that lack of looseness fits beautifully; yet in others, it comes across as somewhat generic calculation that pulses with a toothless limp. The album's first two songs offer a compelling study of the contrasting sides. The title track is a total stunner with pedal-steel-kissed simplicity; a better instrumental vehicle for Grider's rich baritone is tough to imagine, and the lyrics, draped with thoughtful imagery, are gripping and demand strict attention. But the track that follows, the pseudo-rocking "Anything Can Happen," is at best cringe-inducing, with lines like "country girls dance to a hip-hop song" suggesting that Grider's been chugging his own share of that Bro-Country Kool-Aid that's so popular in mainstream country music these days. Similarly, with their bland nods to neon signs and alleged country-life, it's tough to tell if songs such as "Haymaker" and the laughable laundry list that is "Can't Stop" are parodies or in fact sincere stabs at radio stardom. Of course one wants to give Grider the benefit of the doubt and assume the former, and to his credit, the title track isn't the only keeper on here. "Skin and Bone," with its raw-boned electric strums and stirring vocal assistance by Grider's wife Kristi, is as powerful a duet heard around the Texas music scene since, well, the last time Walt and Tina Wilkins sang together. In the end, the good stuff here ultimately outweighs the lame, but those aforementioned questionable moments make *Luck & Desire* more of a mixed bag than a complete success. — **KELLY DEARMORE**



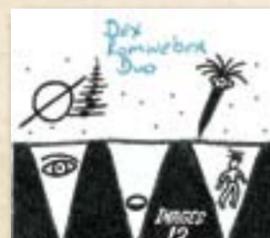
GARY FLOATER
Who Cares: The Songs of Gary Floater
www.garyfloater.com

Who Cares is the third compilation of Gary Floater songs as interpreted through the voices of B.W. Akins and Puffy Dan Walters, the two-man Floater Preservation Society that may or may not actually be an elaborate excuse for Texas troubadours Owen Temple and Adam Carroll to get away from themselves. For the uninitiated (or as yet unencumbered), Floater is the semi-mythical Miami, Mo., singer-songwriter best known for somehow always being a no-show at his own gigs (leaving the dirty work to B.W. and Puffy Dan) and for his lyrical life story of punching Jeff Gordon, as recounted in his song "The Dirty South." For this collection, B.W. and Puffy Dan tap a lot deeper into the bowels of Floater, exploring a more personal side of their hero's songwriting than hinted at on either of the previous two *Songs of Gary Floater* tributes, *A Hero Never Learns* and *Floater Rising*. Through songs like "I'm an Alcoholic," "Hello Diabetes," and "Selfish Lover," listeners get a real sense of what it's like to be Mr. Floater on a day-to-holiday basis, while "Nature Song" takes Jerry Jeff Walker's "Hill Country Rain" to the next level (reminding us all that if you're naked in nature, don't just dance.) But it's the album-opening title track that just might be the new definitive anthem of Mr. Floater's World: It's damn near impossible not to sing (and drink) along with B.W. and Puffy when they hit that epic chorus of "Who cares? Me cares!" Viva La Floater! — **CODY OXLEY**



SUSAN GIBSON
The Second Hand: Live at the Bugle Boy
www.susangibson.com

Susan Gibson may not be the most prolific recording artist on the Texas singer-songwriter scene, having released just four albums in the last 12 years (and one of those, 2008's *New Dog, Old Tricks*, made up of new recordings of her songs from her years co-fronting the Groobees.) But counting those Groobees years, she's amassed a none-too-shabby catalog of durable and crowd-pleasing songs — not the least of which being a little number called "Wide Open Spaces" that helped the Dixie Chicks become one of the biggest country acts of the last 20 years (if not longer). Cull that catalog down to a tidy 16-song setlist made up of equal parts longtime fan favorites and what Gibson calls "remember these?" album tracks, and you've got the makings of a solid live album — her first — that also serves as an equally effective career retrospective. *The Second Hand* isn't without its lulls (the rather aptly titled crawler "Stop the Bleeding" begs for a bar or bathroom break); but gems like "Cactus," "Baby Teeth," "Trophy Girl," "Evergreen," and the stubbornly optimistic "Best of You" offer proof that the "best of" Gibson does not begin and end with that one song *everybody* knows. Well, actually this set *does* begin with "Wide Open Spaces," but that's just a testament to her own confidence that smartly allows the terrific, previously unrecorded "The Second Hand" a chance to shine in the spotlight as the set's main closing number (not counting the new studio version of her 2002 song "Chin Up" tacked on at the end and the unlisted bonus track of another new live song, "Just One More Thing, Mom.") Gibson's four-man backing band provides tasteful, unflashy support throughout, but her chosen venue — the Bugle Boy — deserves its star billing on the album cover for its impeccable acoustics. Every one of Gibson's peers should seriously consider booking the La Grange, Texas, listening room for their own live albums, STAT. — **RICHARD SKANSE**



DEX ROMWEBER DUO
Images 13
Bloodshot

Dexter Romweber's image as an outsider/eccentric is less significant than his stature as an incomparable iconoclast and singular stylist who draws from a deep well of early rock 'n' roll, blues, jazz, country, surf, and vintage TV and movie soundtracks to create hauntingly personal music — initially as half of the Flat Duo Jets, and more recently with the Dex Romweber Duo alongside sister and ex-Let's Active drummer Sara Romweber. Dex's obsessive romanticism, and the siblings' spare rhythmic simpatico playing, are as strong as ever on *Images 13*. Dex's booming baritone growl drives home the brooding Southern-gothic vibe of "Long Battle Coming" and "Baby I Know What It's Like to Be Alone," the spooky/sweet regret of "We'll Be Together Again" (written by vintage Sharon Sheeley in the wake of boyfriend Eddie Cochran's death), and an uncharacteristically poppy reading of the Who's "So Sad About Us." And his twangy, rumbling guitar and Sara's propulsive pulse merge gloriously on the instrumental bruisers "Prelude in G Minor," "Blackout!" and "Blue Surf." With an effective instrumental album-closer in the form of "Weird (Aurora Borealis)" by *Outer Limits* soundtrack composer Harry Lubin, *Images 13* compellingly evokes a tantalizing alternative reality where popular music is still dangerous, unpredictable, and crazy. — **SCOTT SCHINDER**

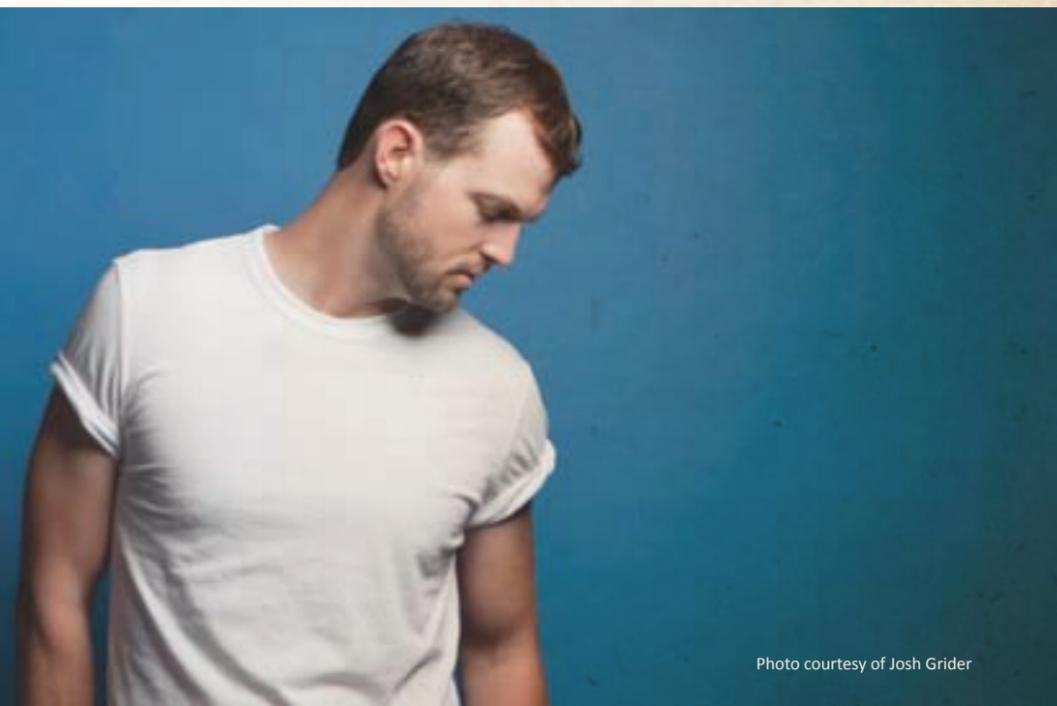


Photo courtesy of Josh Grider

Robert Earl Keen - Ray Wylie Hubbard - Jerry Jeff Walker - Gaelic Storm
 Roger Creager - Cory Morrow - Ryan Beaver - Sons of Fathers - Joe Ely
 K Phillips & the Concho Pearls - Javi Garcia - Josh Grider - Brandon Rhyder
 The Flatlanders - Terri Hendrix - Larry Joe Taylor - Los Lonely Boys
 Walt Wilkins - Jason Boland & The Stragglers - Two Tons of Steel
 Texas Renegade - Eugene Hideaway Bridges - Dixie Chicks - KTU
 Steve Nimmo - Nimmo Brothers - Jeff Strahan - Flounders Without Eyes
 Blue Water Highway Band - The Band of Heathens - Little Brave - MPTU
 Wayne "The Train" Hancock - Strawberry Jam - Sam Sliva - Emory Quinn
 Two High String Band - The Lost Pines - Susan Gibson - Bobby Duncan
 Green Mountain Grass - Sol Patch - Guthrie Kennard - Patti Gayle
 Scott Wiggins Band - John Patrick & the Keepers - Kevin Deal - Quiver
 Bobby Rambo - Eddie "Steel" Foster - The Hugh Fadal Band - Guitar Shorty
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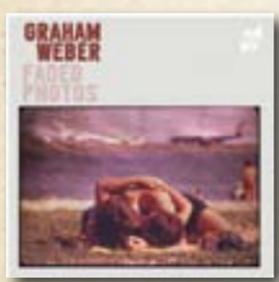
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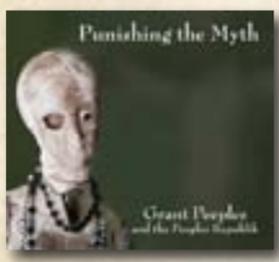
NIKKI LANE
All or Nothin'
 New West

Nikki Lane is touted as both a modern-day Wanda Jackson and a (rather fetching) country outlaw, and not without a number of but hardly all-fitting reasons. This assertive and emotive North Carolina-reared singer and songwriter who landed in Nashville by way of New York City is grounded bare feet and ankles in the trad sounds and spirit of smart, strong Southern women who know heartache but don't take no crap that came before her. But on her third release, produced by Dan Auerbach of the Black Keys, she maps a route for fellow old-schoolers to also be progressive and shake off the stasis that infects far too much under the Americana rubric. Yeah, the high-stepping "Man Up" (think Loretta's "Fist City") and swirling "I Want My Heart Back" have tear-drenched steel and crackling six-string twang echoing within a vintage '50s/'60s Bradley's Barn big room sound. But at the same time, there's a jolt of rock 'n' soul voltage in "Sleep with a Stranger," splashes of New Wave garage pop and psychobilly guitar in "I Don's Care," and a dip into Muscle Shoals waters on the title tune to show how Lane refigures the tried-and-true forms into fresh and tasty treats for today. The only quibble here is that Auerbach buries her Dixie-drawling, burnished-bell of a voice in the mix. But that shouldn't prevent Lane from evoking swoons from listeners of both genders and intimations of a lasting future run of Lucinda Williams-level stature. *All or Nothin'* is an ideal Saturday-night-into-Sunday-morning date of a disc with one way-cool country chick. — **ROB PATTERSON**



GRAHAM WEBER
Faded Photos
www.grahamweber.com

If you want evidence that Graham Weber can rock, proceed directly to *Ashes in the Rearview*, the new album by So Long, Problems, the Stones/Replacements-happy side project band he co-fronts with Mike Schoenfeld. But although Weber certainly does that hair-of-the-dog stuff well, fans of the Ohio-reared, Austin-based singer-songwriter's handful of excellent solo albums since his 2005 debut, *Naïve Melodies*, know that what he really excels at are the kind of gorgeously melancholy musings that are best imbibed after last call. The short but sweet *Faded Photos* is par for that course, offering eight hauntingly melodic ruminations on memory, love, loss, and regret — or more often than not, all of the above ("Ballad of the 04 Lounge"). Unlike his last album, 2011's female guest-laden *Women*, Weber sings every song here all by his lonesome, but his voice is still a beauty in its own right: as expressive and plaintive as Jeff Tweedy's at its most vulnerable ("Boston," "No One"), but distinguished by a keening shimmer that flickers around the edges here and there and comes to the fore with chilling effectiveness on "Talia." That voice and Weber's songs — as strong lyrically as they are melodically — would have been more than enough to make *Faded Photos* a prized keepsake; the unfailingly elegant arrangements, rife with evocative cello and additional strings, are just the icing on the cake. — **RICHARD SKANSE**



GRANT PEEPLES
Punishing the Myth
 GatorBone Records 105

Woody Guthrie reminded us that it takes a worried man to sing a worried song. On *Punishing the Myth*, Grant Peeples' fifth release and third album produced by Gurf Morlix, the restless sage of Sopchoppy, Fla., shows he's been worrying about a lot of things lately. On the piercing spoken word piece "High Octane Generation," which throws bones of homage to Dylan and the poet John Ashberry, Peeples worries about a nation that has "learned to live without beauty," opting instead to sit on sandy banks and "watch the river flow black and backwards." Peeples casts lobbyists and real estate developers to type as money grubbin' villains in "The New American Dream," but also indicts the too-easily-distracted 99-percenters. There's kvetching over the good times a-changing with the plaintive "It's Too Late to Live in Austin." But it's the crippling fear of coming up short in the truth-seeking quest that is at the heart of the album's standout track, "Training in the Chartel Ground." Like the song's protagonist, Peeples clearly understands that the poet's job is to continue to "wrap his fist around that pencil" and simply keep at it. As long as Peeples keeps his pencils as sharp as his insights, we'll keep listening. — **D.C. BLOOM**



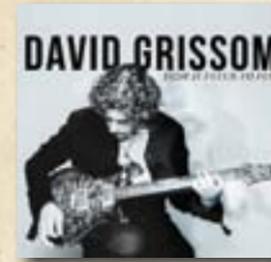
LESLIE KRAFLKA
Onward
Smallz Records

Houston's Leslie Kraflka is proof that it's never too late to find your true calling. A few short years ago, she attended a songwriting workshop taught by Terri Hendrix and Lloyd Maines — not to further hone her craft or learn new tricks, but rather, by her own admission, because she thought it would be fun (she'd long been a fan of the duo.) But she came away from that workshop with her very first song and, apparently, an addiction to both writing and performing that by 2010 found her nabbing both Songwriter of the Year and Song of the Year honors from the Houston Songwriter's Association. Not bad at all for a start (especially for such a late one); but *Onward*, her second album, is where Kraflka really arrives. Produced by Maines and Hendrix at the Zone in Dripping Springs, the whole record sounds fantastic, crisp and full (but never cluttered) and impeccably played by such A-list pros as Richard Bowden, Riley Osbourne, Bukka Allen, David Spencer, Rick Richards, and Pat Manske (not to mention Maines on his generous pedal steel and Hendrix on harmonica and harmony vocals). But Kraflka, despite being a rookie separated by that formidable bunch by decades of collective experience, holds her own all the way through with conviction to spare. Her voice alone is a real find: sweet but assertive and ribboned with color, it glistens through "Beauty," swaggers sassily through "Whiskey High," and settles like a golden-red sunset over the river of pedal steel on "South Texas Fall." Her songs are real winners, too, full of buoyant melodies that never sag or drag and lyrics that convey both maturity and a young-at-heart spirit that's playful but never fluffy. Best of all, though, is the way she handles herself on the album's one cover, "Drunken Poet's Dream." Memo to Ray Wylie Hubbard and Hayes Carll: hate to tell you this, boys, but while you were sleeping, that woman done stole your song. — **RICHARD SKANSE**



MERLE HAGGARD
Okie from Muskogee: Anniversary Edition
Capitol/UME

Despite the title, this is a double-disc twofer of Haggard's late-60s live albums *Okie from Muskogee* and *The Fightin' Side of Me*, neither including the hit studio version of the title track. Cut in the eponymous Oklahoma town while its namesake single was still riding the charts, *Okie from Muskogee* is a fine representation of the young Haggard's authoritative performing chops and the soulful expertise of his longstanding combo the Strangers. It's also a nice showcase for his rapport with his working-class fan base, which peaked with "Okie from Muskogee." The anthemic hit's embrace of silent-majority values struck a chord in the culturally-polarized late '60s, but seems less a statement of its author's preferences than a manifestation of his instinctive affinity for the underdog. The classics-packed set list — "Silver Wings," "Swinging Doors," "Sing Me Back Home," "Branded Man" — demonstrates the remarkable depth that his songbook had already attained, yet pauses long enough for the artist to be presented with the key to the city. *The Fightin' Side of Me* follows the same model, building a sterling live set around another rabble-raising hit. In contrast to "Okie"'s relatively gentle, resigned tone, though, "Fightin'" flirts with kneejerk jingoism. But the material that surrounds it — including several classic covers, plus a goofy vocal-impersonations medley and a reprise of "Okie" — shows where Haggard's heart really lies. — **SCOTT SCHINDER**



DAVID GRISSOM
How It Feels To Fly
Wide Load

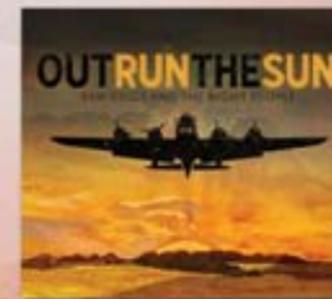
Frustrating indeed is this latest solo album from Austin guitar star David Grissom, best known for his tenures with (among others) Joe Ely, John Mellencamp, and Storyville. The music on the eight studio tracks here glistens with appealing creative splashes, his signature bristling guitar sound and incisive phrasing as well as rich, smart arrangements — really first-rate stuff — plus some authoritative singing. But the lyrics are another matter, full of largely undercooked sophomore poetry and flaccid strings of tattered, overdone and sometimes even painful rock-song clichés like "feelin' righteous ain't no sin," "I've never felt this high," and "come on, why don't ya give me a little kiss?" that seriously hamper the listening experience. Fortunately, the album's fourth track, "Way Jose," is a simmering, jazz-inflected winner of an instrumental. The four live numbers that round out *How It Feels to Fly* include a good but needless note-by-note rereading of the Allman Brothers' "Jessica" and too much of the kind of all-too-common bloozy Austin bar music best left way in the past. Of course there's still the splendor of Grissom's playing, and lyrical simplicity does largely work on his bittersweet duet and co-write with Kacy Crowley, "Overnight." But that's not near enough to warrant much of a recommendation. As gifted a guitarist as he may be, until he ups his word game or finds an equally gifted Bernie Taupin wordsmith to help him fly, Grissom's solo career will never truly get off the ground. — **ROB PATTERSON**



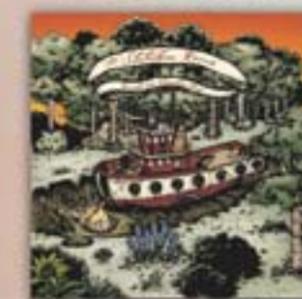
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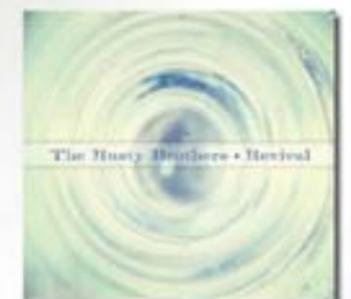
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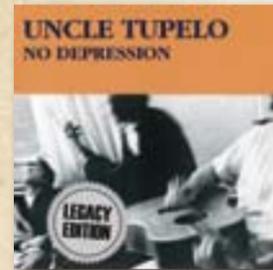
Sam Riggs and The Night People



The Statesboro Revue



The Rusty Brothers

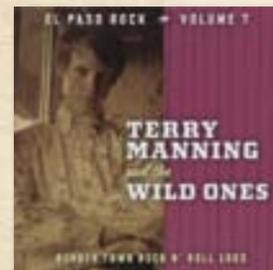


UNCLE TUPELO
No Depression: Legacy Edition
 Sony Legacy

Uncle Tupelo’s 1990 debut *No Depression* inadvertently kick-started contemporary alt-country, and was so influential in shaping the new subgenre’s style and sensibility that its title was borrowed by the long-running magazine that documented the scene. The album also marked the jumping-off point for the band’s dual singer-writers, Jay Farrar and Jeff Tweedy, who would subsequently develop different aspects of Uncle Tupelo’s personality with Son Volt and Wilco, respectively.

With a quarter-century’s worth of hindsight, it’s not hard to understand why *No Depression* has exercised such a powerful influence. The album’s astringent jangle-thrash filters centuries of rural country, folk, and gospel influences through a scruffy garage-punk spirit, with such seething, grimly resolute originals as “Graveyard Shift,” “That Year,” “Whiskey Bottle,” “Train” and “Life Worth Livin’” embodying the same timeless melancholy as the band’s readings of the trad standard “John Hardy” and the Carter Family’s title song. Although Uncle Tupelo would successfully explore a more expansive approach on their next three albums, *No Depression’s* one-off collision of past and present has never been bested.

Legacy’s two-CD, 35-track expanded edition (not to be confused with the label’s 2003 19-track single disc reissue) augments the original album with a selection of stray tracks from the same period, including the great stand-alone single “I Got Drunk.” The 1987-1989 demos that comprise Disc Two offer a compelling assortment of works-in-progress, near-misses, and eureka moments that makes it an illuminating addition. — **SCOTT SCHINDER**



VARIOUS ARTISTS
El Paso Rock, Volume 4: Thunder
El Paso Rock, Volume 5: The Troubled Streets
El Paso Rock, Volume 6: Black Out
El Paso Rock, Volume 7: Terry Manning and the Wild Ones
El Paso Rock, Volume 8: El Vampiro
El Paso Rock, Volume 9: Sand Surfin’
 Norton

Brooklyn’s intrepid Norton label maps the lesser-traveled backroads of rock ‘n’ roll history, unearthing a wide array of raw, primitive, and obscure sounds. An excellent example of Norton’s diligent documenting of forgotten regional scenes is the *El Paso Rock* series, which anthologizes the wild musical melting pot of that border town’s music scene in the late ‘50s and ‘60s. While earlier volumes focused on charismatic rocker Bobby Fuller and blues guitar dynamo Long John Hunter, recent installments spotlight a colorful assortment of lesser-known hometown heroes.

Volumes 4 and 5 (Thunder and The Troubled Streets) emphasize ‘50s-vintage greaser rock ‘n’ roll from the likes of Bob Taylor and the Counts, Johnny Garmon and the Shadows, and instrumental combo Night People, which checks in with two of history’s most blatant (and therefore greatest) Link Wray ripoffs. *Volume 6: Black Out* moves into the ‘60s with a solid set of teen tunes that demonstrate the lingering influence of Buddy Holly and the pervasive appeal of surf-and-drag instrumentals. The surf motif gets more intense on *Volume 8: El Vampiro*, which collects infectious instro nuggets from the Monarcs, the Torquetts and Los Vampiranos; and on *Volume 9: Sand Surfin’*, which augments surf sounds from the Scavengers and the Beach Nuts with garage attitude from the Things and the Outer Limits.

The series’ nicest surprise, however, is *Volume 7: Terry Manning and the Wild Ones*, a casually inspired session by the teen combo cut as Manning’s family was preparing to move to Memphis (where he would carve out a celebrated production career). As with the entire series, the music’s unpretentious exuberance trumps technical concerns. — **SCOTT SCHINDER**



Photo by Eric Ryan Anderson

mr. record man

OLD 97'S | Richard Skanse

The year 2014 marks the 20th anniversary of the Old 97's, and here's the first thing you need to know about that little bit of trivia: Left at face value, it doesn't mean shit. Because in a world where Rolling Stones still tour the earth, Gene Simmons still dons the clown makeup to hawk KISS crap and Pearl Jam gets played on classic rock radio, a rock 'n' roll band turning 20 years old really doesn't merit much fanfare. A pat on the back, perhaps, if said band has somehow managed to stick it out that long with its original lineup (drummer included) intact the whole time, but congeniality and perfect attendance aren't the kind of things one normally goes around bragging about in the school of rock.

That said, though, here's the

thing about the Old 97's turning 20 that is noteworthy: In lieu of a self-congratulatory anniversary tour built around a deluxe reissue of their debut album and/or some silly fans-vote-on-the-setlist publicity stunt, they marked the occasion by slamming down the most unrepentantly reckless and delightfully unhinged album of their career. It begins with singer Rhett Miller sauntering straight up to the proverbial third wall, directly addressing the listener with an opening line that might warrant a broken nose for its cocksure, talking-to-a-child dismissive air — if only he weren't so disarmingly casual about it: "We've been doing this longer than you've been alive." By the time the rest of the band sidles up beside him and kicks the nearly six-

minute "Longer Than You've Been Alive" into high gear, Miller's already in full swagger, spinning off a warts-and-all tale of "20 good years of about 25" that reels from boast to confession and back again with every verse. From there, the rest of the ridiculously aptly titled *Most Messed Up* never lets up, making today's Old 97's sound not so much 20 years older and wiser than they did on their debut 10 albums back, but 20 times more fit, feisty and full of fight.

That's not to say that the young 97's ever lacked for energy. But it's not swagger and rakish charm that carried their 1994 debut, *Hitchhike to Rhome* (Big Iron Records), so much as it was pure pluck and heart — and some pretty great songs. In spite of their youth, the

four group members weren't quite as fresh-scrubbed and wet behind the ears as they looked on the back cover; Miller and bassist Murry Hammond (six years his senior) had already played together for a number of years on the Dallas club scene, having first collaborated on a solo album called *Mythologies* that Miller recorded while still in high school, while guitarist/accordion player Ken Bethea and drummer Phillip Peeples had both played in a noisy Butthole Surfers-style Denton band called the Smeg Wentfields. Prior to forming the Old 97's, Miller and Hammond had consciously retreated from playing grunge-era rock in favor of more coffeehouse-friendly, acoustic singer-songwriter fare, and with Betha and Peeples they pooled influences ranging from Johnny Cash to Joe Ely to rockabilly-inflected Los Angeles punk band X. Still, the alt-country sound they hit upon as Old 97's was rather new territory for all of them, which probably accounts for some of the winsome naiveté that pervades *Hitchhike*. Hammond's West Texas drawl does right by Merle Haggard's "Mama Tried," and the cover of Cindy Walker's "Miss Molly" proved they'd done their homework, but overall the Old 97's' debut outing didn't quite convey the insurgent energy of genre forebears like Jason & the Scorchers, let alone the real-deal honky-tonk conviction of Texas contemporaries the Derailers. What set the Old 97's apart from the crowd, though, was the precocious wit of Miller's songwriting, with "St. Ignatius" and "504" establishing from the get-go his trademark knack for folding twitchy hormonal angst and bookish wordplay into spry, clever, and catchy little short stories and character snapshots. The brooding "Wish the Worst" proved he could deliver a convincingly bitter barstool lament, too.

While the Old 97's nascent country stylings came off a tad stiff and studied on their first record, they loosed up immeasurably onstage, where their rock and punk tendencies came to the fore to put more bang in their twang and hustle to their shuffles. That was the country show they took on the road, and within a year they were signed to Bloodshot Records — the Chicago-based indie label launched in 1993 that would grow up to be the Sub Pop of y'allternative roots punk and the scruffier, scrappier hemisphere of the Americana music world. Most of Bloodshot's fame would come after the Old 97's short stint on the label, but bragging rights for releasing the band's second album and the one that sparked an honest-to-goodness

major-label bidding war went a long ways toward putting the upstart label on the map. To wit: Bloodshot's website still calls the 97's *Wreck Your Life* (1996) "our first hit record (sort of)." Plenty of hardline, old-school alt-country fanatics (the kind who likely keep a library of every issue of *No Depression* ever printed, or who stubbornly maintain that Son Volt will always be the better band than Wilco) might even insist that it's the *best* Old 97's album, if only because it was their last before "selling out" and moving up to the majors. They're wrong, of course, but it is the better of the band's first two efforts. Although Miller's lyrics are still the band's strongest asset here ("This is the story of Victoria Lee/She started off on Percodan and ended up with me/She lived in Berkeley 'till the earthquake shook her loose/She lives in Texas now where nothin' ever moves"), the performances throughout find the 97's walking the jagged line between country and rock far more assertively than they did on *Hitchhike*. Witness their second crack at "Doreen," an enduring fan favorite first cut as a spry little bluegrass number on their debut; on *Wreck Your Life*, they ditch the banjos and mandolin but not the frantic tempo, barreling through the paranoid love song like a runaway train — or like a now-seasoned road band done with playing dress up. (As if to drive that point further home, they also forgo banjos on the Hammond-sung cover of bluegrass legend Bill Monroe's "My Sweet Blue-Eyed Darlin'.")

As good as *Wreck Your Life* was, though (along with most of the material that didn't make the album, later released by Bloodshot on the terrific eight-song EP *Early Tracks* in 2000), it was on their next three records — all on Elektra — that the Old 97's really hit their stride. By any sensible measure, 1997's *Too Far to Care* was the high-water mark of the band's early years; it was also their last album on which they embraced the alt-country genre from start to finish, and they closed off that chapter of their career with a wholly satisfying bang. In between the opening blitz of "Timebomb" and the closing "Four Leaf Clover" (another *Hitchhike* do-over, this time with band hero Exene Cervenka of X added to the

combustible mix), *Too Far* plays like a best-of in all but name, with at least half of the songs (including "Big Brown Eyes" and Hammond's "W. TX Teardrops") remaining staples in the band's live sets to the present day. But even on an album stuffed full of time-tested fan favorites, "Barrier Reef" stands out as the Old 97's own "Satisfaction." From its cocky but drunkenly just-off-kilter swinging verses to its soaring, shout-along-worthy chorus, it's a perfect storm of everything the band does best honed to perfection. It also serves as pretty boy Miller's textbook guide to scoring: It doesn't matter if your opening pick-up line's a groaner ("My name's Stewart Ransom Miller, I'm a serial lady killer"), so long as you also come packing a hook to die for.

All of the above made *Too Far to Care* a very tough act to follow, but 1999's *Fight Songs* coulda been a contender if only it had a little more eye of the tiger

While the Old 97's nascent country stylings came off a tad stiff and studied on their first record, they loosened up immeasurably onstage, where their rock and punk tendencies came to the fore to put more bang in their twang and hustle to their shuffles.

in its tank. It's got top-notch songs to spare, most notably "Jagged," "Busted Afternoon," "Valentine" (Hammond's finest contribution to date at the time), and especially "Murder (Or a Heart Attack)," in which a panicked Miller loses his shit (but not his melodic cool) over losing his girlfriend's cat. But as catchy and clever as the songs are, there's a lack of characteristic Old 97's spunk and energy to the record as a whole that pulls *Fight Songs'* punch. It's a transitional record, too, marked by more jangle than twang as some of the 97's (perhaps most tellingly Miller) were beginning to grow wary of being pigeonholed by the sound of their first three albums. Expanding their sonic playing field would serve them well in the long run, but the somewhat hesitant baby steps on *Fight Songs* belied a certain lack of focus and all-in commitment to changing direction. Correcting that would make all the difference in the world on

their next album.

Satellite Rides (2001) was the game changer. Maybe not quite on the same level as Dylan going electric, the Beatles finding their *Rubber Soul* or U2 chopping down their Joshua tree and shouting “achtung, baby,” but still a decisive turning point for the Old 97’s. For fans along for the ride (or not), this is where you either get off the train for good to seek solace in your copy of *Wreck Your Life* and wonder where it all went wrong, or strap in, let go of the past, crank it up and sing along with “King of All the World” like it’s one of the greatest pop songs ever — because it pretty much is. Well, at least until its 2 minutes and 52 seconds is up and “Rollerskate Skinny” grabs hold, only to be knocked away itself by “Buick City Complex,” “Bird in a Cage,” and, well, on and on it goes, just blast after blast of mercilessly catchy and breathless exuberance. Halfway through the band does ease off the pedal long enough for the short-but-sweet sigh of “Question,” then gives a little nod and a wink to country with “Am I Too Late” as if to say, “Yeah, we can still do that, if we wanna ...” But overall *Satellite Rides* is pure, unadulterated power pop, and the Old 97’s pull it off so well that no matter how far removed it may be from *Too Far to Care*, it’s every bit as essential.

Of course, you wouldn’t know any of that based on the album’s commercial success; *Satellite Rides* peaked at No. 121 on the *Billboard* Top 200 and ended up being the Old 97’s last album on Elektra. It wasn’t Miller’s, though; in 2002 the label released the singer’s first solo album *The Instigator* (his “first” as in the first that he still claims, having long-since written off the out-of-print *Mythologies*, with its

in on *Satellite Rides*. At the very least, it’s a lot closer to the spirit of *Rides* than the next Old 97’s album, 2004’s *Drag It Up* (their first for New West Records, which would be their home through the rest of the decade.) As fresh starts go, it sounds like a band waking up on the wrong side of the bed and burying its head back under the covers. For better or worse, Mark Neill’s murky production certainly fits the mood, drowning songs like “Borrowed Bride” (“life comes apart at the seams, it seems”) in echo and cloaking “Valium Waltz” in a Velvet Underground-y haze. Sometimes the narcotic pace yields real beauty, as in the languid but pretty “Satellite Rides a Star,” but the album’s most redeeming moments come when the band snaps awake and lashes out like a poked bear. The opening “Won’t Be Home No More” and the Hammond-sung “Smokers” throw off some much-welcome kinetic sparks, and the excellent “The New Kid” — note for note one of the most thrilling songs in the entire Old 97’s arsenal — bristles with snarling, frayed-edge dramatic intensity. More often than not, though, *Drag It Up* is a bit of a drag.

Fortunately, the double-disc *Alive & Wired* (2005, New West) lives up to its name in spades. The Old 97’s first live album is a 30-track tour de force that not only captures every ounce of sweat and energy of the band (and a suitably hyper-enthused crowd) going for broke over two nights at Texas’ legendary Gruene Hall, but also fits the bill as a highly effective greatest hits survey. A better one for certain than the single-disc 2006 Rhino/Elektra compilation *Hit By a Train: The Best of Old 97’s*, though the latter does feature the band’s spirited cover of Marty Robbins’ classic “El Paso.” Completeists

Waylon Jennings EP (Omnivore), which finally brings to light a pair of previously unreleased songs the band cut backing the legendary outlaw — an avowed 97’s fan — in 1997, along with four more 97’s demos from 1996.

Career-spanning live albums, retrospectives, and vault releases aside, though, the Old 97’s weren’t done producing new music by a long shot. In fact, the last decade has yielded a bountiful haul of new material from the band, both solo and together. Since *The Instigator*, Miller has knocked out a handful of other quality solo albums: 2006’s *The Believer* (Vanguard), 2009’s *Rhett Miller* (Shout! Factory), 2011’s all-covers *The Interpreter: Live at Largo* (Maximum Sunshine), 2012’s *The Dreamer* (Maximum Sunshine), and 2013’s *The Dreamer: Acoustic Version* (Maximum Sunshine). Hammond also released a quietly beautiful solo set of his own, *I Don’t Know Where I’m Going But I’m On My Way* (2008, Humminbird). All of those are worth seeking out, but none so much as the Old 97’s 2008 album *Blame It On Gravity* (New West). As satisfying as *Drag It Up* was mostly frustrating, *Gravity* reclaimed the buoyant rush of *Satellite Rides* but with a pinch more rootsy character reminiscent of *Too Far to Care*, finding the perfect balance between the two styles that *Fight Songs* swung at but never quite hit. Every song’s a keeper, especially Hammond’s two sterling contributions (“This Beautiful Thing” and “Color of a Lonely Heart is Blue”) and the closing “The One,” in which Miller narrates a fantasy about the band pulling off a bank heist. Whether it’s all just a tongue-in-cheek daydream or actually a clever metaphor waxing nostalgic



Satellite Rides is where you either get off the train for good to seek solace in your copy of *Wreck Your Life* and wonder where it all went wrong, or strap in, let go of the past, crank it up and sing along with “King of All the World” like it’s one of the greatest pop songs ever — because it pretty much is.

affected faux Bowie/Morrissey British accent, as a high-school fling). According to Miller, *The Instigator* was comprised of songs passed on by the rest of the band, which is baffling because most if not all of them (in particular standouts like “Our Love” and “Hover”) would have fit right

and diehards will want to download that one track and skip over the rest of *Hit By a Train* in favor of 2012’s *They Made a Monster: The Too Far to Care Demos* (Omnivore), a surprisingly listenable bare-bones/no-drums peek into the album’s fetal period, and the 2013 *Old 97’s &*

about their days being wined-and-dined by major-label A&R scouts (an early version of the song can be heard on the aforementioned *They Made a Monster* collection of *Too Far to Care* demos) is open to interpretation, but either way, it’s a laugh-out-loud hoot.

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Preceded by the fun but throwaway *Mimeograph* (2010, New West), a four-song EP of covers bookended by the Rolling Stones' "Rocks Off" and David Bowie's "Five Years," the Old 97's next unveiled their most ambitious — at least in theory — endeavor to date: a sprawling, 25-song double album project called *The Grand Theatre*. Unfortunately, what could have been an epic (if gluttonous) feast was lessened somewhat by the band's and New West's admittedly more sensible but less special-feeling decision to spit it in half and release the two parts a year apart, with *The Grand Theatre Volume One* issued in 2010 and *The Grand Theatre Volume Two* following in 2011. To be fair, there's still a wealth of good material spread out across the two volumes, and it's easy enough to make one's own "complete" *Grand Theatre* playlist on iTunes. But on their own, neither half feels quite like a wholly satisfying and cohesive album, a la *Too Far to Care*, *Satellite Rides*, and *Blame It On Gravity*, so much as a random collection of mostly pretty good songs thrown together by chance. Quibbles aside, though, as potlucks go

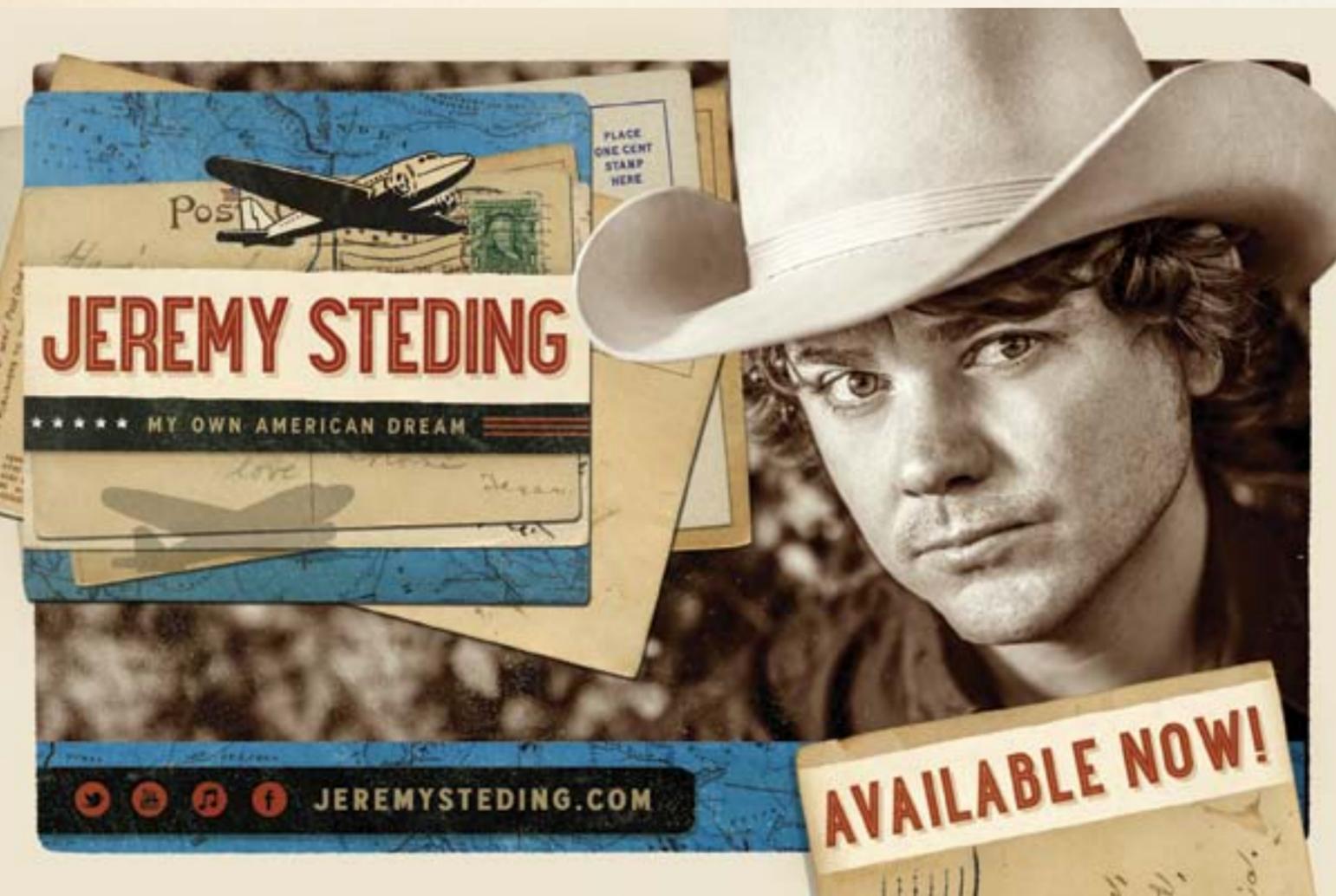
it's a decent spread, with *Volume One's* "The Grand Theatre," "Every Night Is Friday Night (Without You)," "A State of Texas" and "You Smoke Too Much" all worth going back to for seconds, along with *Volume Two's* "Perfume," "No Simple Machine," and the sublime "How Lovely All It Was" (yet another stunner from the ever-dependable Hammond.)

While *The Grand Theatre*, whether taken all-together or in halves, ultimately didn't quite measure up to the grandeur promised in its name, the new *Most Messed Up* (2014, ATO) delivers exactly as advertised. Song for song, it's the Old 97's' most rock 'n' roll record to date: as rollicking as *Too Far to Care* and tuneful as *Satellite Rides*, but really closer in spirit, attitude, and execution to the Faces or Stones at their sloppy best or the Replacements at their most endearingly, well, fucked up ('Mats vet Tommy Stinson even turns up on a couple of tracks, most notably the gloriously ornery "Intervention.") Elsewhere, Miller gleefully drops enough f-bombs that the rest of the band (all of them, like Miller himself, dads of young children) reportedly

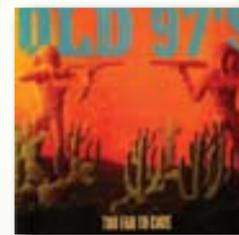
flinched before collectively saying "fuck it" themselves. The older Stewart Ransom Miller is a lot more direct than his younger self in other ways, too, dispensing with the "I'm a serial lady killer" small talk and cutting right to the chase via "Let's Get Drunk & Get It On." And though not every song on *Most Messed Up* hits as hard and fast as "Intervention," "Nashville," and the title track, there are no ballads here: The song actually called "This Is the Ballad" really isn't, and even Hammond — who's usually always good for one really pretty song per 97's album — rocks like a bastard on his one number here, "The Ex of All You See."

No, subtle the Old 97's' latest album most definitely is not. Instead, *Most Messed Up* is the sound of four 40-somethings taking their younger 20-something selves to task by calling their own bluff and raising the stakes:

"Wreck your life, you say? We've been doing this longer than you've been alive, kids — and this is how it's done."



Mr. Record Man's Top Five Old 97's Albums



1. *Too Far to Care* (Elektra, 1997)

You could start with *Hitchhike to Rhome* and *Wreck Your Life*, which chart the rapid development of the Old 97's into one of the best alt-country bands of the genre's '90s heyday, but their third album is where they really got their act together. The songs are as smart as they are fun, as much rock 'n' roll as they are country, and they still sound as fresh and exciting today as they did way back in the days when a scrappy band of X-loving, insurgent Texas honky-tonkers could get major labels all hot and bothered.

Tracks: "Barrier Reef," "Time Bomb," "Broadway," "Four Leaf Clover"



2. *Satellite Rides* (Elektra, 2001)

The album on which the Old 97's learned to stop worrying about sticking to alt-country form and just love the joy of playing pure power pop. As invigorating as a shot of adrenaline to heart but a helluva lot more fun. Deliriously catchy from start to finish, and more often than not pretty rocking, too.

Key Tracks: "King of All the World," "Rollerskate Skinny," "Buick City Complex," "Bird In a Cage," "Designs on You" and, well, the whole rest of the album.



3. *Alive & Wired* (New West, 2005)

The Old 97's at their best — live in Texas — blasting through a bulletproof 30-song set list spanning their first 10 years, covering all the "hits" ("Barrier Reef," "Time Bomb," "Jagged," "Murder (Or a Heart Attack)," "Rollerskate Skinny," etc.) along with fan-favorite gems plucked from their not-quite-there-yet debut and even a couple of pretty freaking great songs (most notably the fierce "The New Kid") from 2004's otherwise sorta dull *Drag It Up*.

Key Tracks: "The New Kid," "Won't Be Home," "Murder (Or a Heart Attack)," "Wish the Worst"



4. *Blame It On Gravity* (New West, 2008)

While *Alive & Wired* showed that the 97's could deliver the goods onstage, *Blame It On Gravity* proved they could still come through in the studio, too. The songs might not all be as immediate as the ones on *Satellite Rides* were, but there are hooks aplenty here along with a pleasing undercurrent of their old-school alt-country sound. Every 97 is in peak form on this one, but bassist Murry Hammond takes MVP honors for writing and singing the two best songs, the uplifting "This Beautiful Thing" and the achingly lovely "Color of a Lonely Heart Is Blue."

Key Tracks: "This Beautiful Thing," "The One," "Color of a Lonely Heart Is Blue," "The Fool"



5. *Most Messed Up* (ATO, 2014)

The title of this one says it all. Ten studio albums and 20 years into their career, the Old 97's stare down their mid-life crisis like willful SOB's who refuse to sober up, fly straight, sit their asses down and play boring folk tunes when they can still get drunk and "get it on" better than ever. After all, they may be all grown-up now with families and kids, but all grown-up men gotta work; and as they say from the get-go on "Longer Than You've Been Alive," shaking their asses and rocking out every night isn't just what these guys do to make a living, it's really all they want to do.

Key Tracks: "Longer Than You've Been Alive," "Nashville," "Most Messed Up," "Intervention," "Let's Get Drunk & Get It On"

frontman chose to record her tune "All the Time" for a compilation Bloodshot put together of artists doing songs written by their peers.

And for all the talk of Loveless' enviable vocal abilities, it is as a songwriter that she wants to be most identified. So it's people like Nick Lowe and fellow Bloodshot artist Scott Biram, two of her favorite songwriters, who she most strives to emulate these days. She respects Lowe's ability to surprise in song ("You never really know what's going to happen," she says), and of the latter she

simply effuses, "He's just such a badass! And a really great guy."

Loveless serves up plenty of new surprises and badass moments of her own on the aptly titled *Somewhere Else*, which came about only after she first scrapped an entire album's worth of songs because she originally felt she was trying too hard to hue to the alt-country firebrand persona thrust upon her after *Indestructible Machine*. But from "Wine Lips" and its boozy barstool plea ("I got a bad idea ... I wanna kiss your wine lips") and the steelish confessional

"Everything's Gone" to the hard-edged "Head" (inspired by the desire to get same) and the let-me-back-in-your-life-dammit rocker "Really Wanna See You," the new record finds Loveless striking the perfect balance of forceful honky-tonk and ball-busting Strat strumming.

"I'm just sort of relaxing into my songwriting personality," says Loveless. "I feel comfortable now, whereas it used to be more of a struggle ... And, ah, I guess I just really like to rock."



He cooks, too

That song highlights another Foster trait: He's a good guy. A likable, friendly, caring person, not the kind of Nashvillian (or Nashvillain) who's constantly looking over shoulders at parties for someone more important to talk to. He does a lot of charitable work, too; in addition to hosting an annual fundraiser at St. Luke's Episcopal School in San Antonio for a scholarship his family established in his father's memory, he also helped Darden Smith launch SongwritingWith:Soldiers, which works with veterans to channel damaging military experiences into healing song. He often performs at friends' fundraisers, and he and Ingram have even auctioned off gigs for each other's charities.

Foster also happens to be a gourmet chef and wine connoisseur. A few years ago, he began booking private dinner-and-concert experiences for well-heeled fans, including all the shopping and food prep. And wine selection; for an eight-person dinner party, he'll spend more than a grand on wine alone.

"It's a meal of a lifetime," he promises.

Rogers says fabulous dinners are just one of the reasons he loves heading to Foster's house for writing sessions.

"It's a big deal to get to write with Radney. He's one of the greatest we've ever had, not only from Texas but in country music," Rogers says. "It's a fun day and it's also something that means a whole lot to me."

("He's like a little brother to me. He really is," Foster responds when hearing about Rogers' praise.)

Ingram says songwriters in general don't tend to be "cheerful, cheerleading types." "They're not real nurturers," he notes, adding, "That's totally cool, but when I met Radney, I was so excited that I found a friend who was an exceptional

songwriter, that I could always go to their songs to be inspired, but then also to meet him and be like, man, he's obviously gonna be a great friend. I can tell he's a guy I can count on.

"Of all my songwriting buddies, he's probably the most reliable. I know if he and I have something on the books, when I show up, he's gonna be there. Which I can't say about everybody — and wouldn't want to. That's part of the fun and mystery of it all."

Likening his fellow songwriters to the superstition- and ritual-obsessed baseball players in *Bull Durham*, Ingram says, "Radney reminds me of the Kevin Costner character. He's like, 'Yeah, man, it's all precious and all that shit, but just fuckin' pitch the ball.' He's such a steadying force. That's why I love him."

But one of his favorite stories about his friend has to do with Foster's softer side, and their mutual respect for music and one other.

Songwriters tend to be insecure; for Ingram, that meant it was sometimes hard to tell when he hit the proverbial mark with a song. One night, he and fellow singer-songwriter Jon Randall were hanging out with Foster, discussing a potential project.

"So I played them a song. And it was a song that I had written and rewritten at my piano, late at night, over the course of a few months. I really put some effort into this song, to just be as honest as it needed to be, as honest as I could be; to really dig out the truth," Ingram recalls.

"We were drinking whiskey, and Radney gets pretty funny. He's a good drunk; an emotional drunk. And he does consider himself a mentor of mine, as I do him. But it's not something we talk about in conversation all the time. Anyway, I played him this song; it's called 'All Over Again.' And I looked up and Radney was bawling — full-on, snot-coming-out-of-his-

nose crying. And I was like, 'All right! You fuckin' did it. You made one of your heroes listen to a song all the way through — it's a fucking 6-minute song — and you nailed him.' ... It really was a moment where I was like, yes, I do think of you as a mentor, and the fact that I really did honestly nail you with this song is something that every songwriter, when you're around other songwriters, is trying to do. I've never looked back, as far as second-guessing myself. I'll never do it again."

Ingram is just about done recording a new album, but when he spoke for this story, he was searching for one more tune.

"I want a Song of the Year," he admits. "I want something that's, like, a game-changer for me. If I'm gonna go in and cut one more song, I'm just lookin' for something that's the best that I can find."

"That's why I'm looking through Radney's stuff. I'm looking for those kinds of songs."



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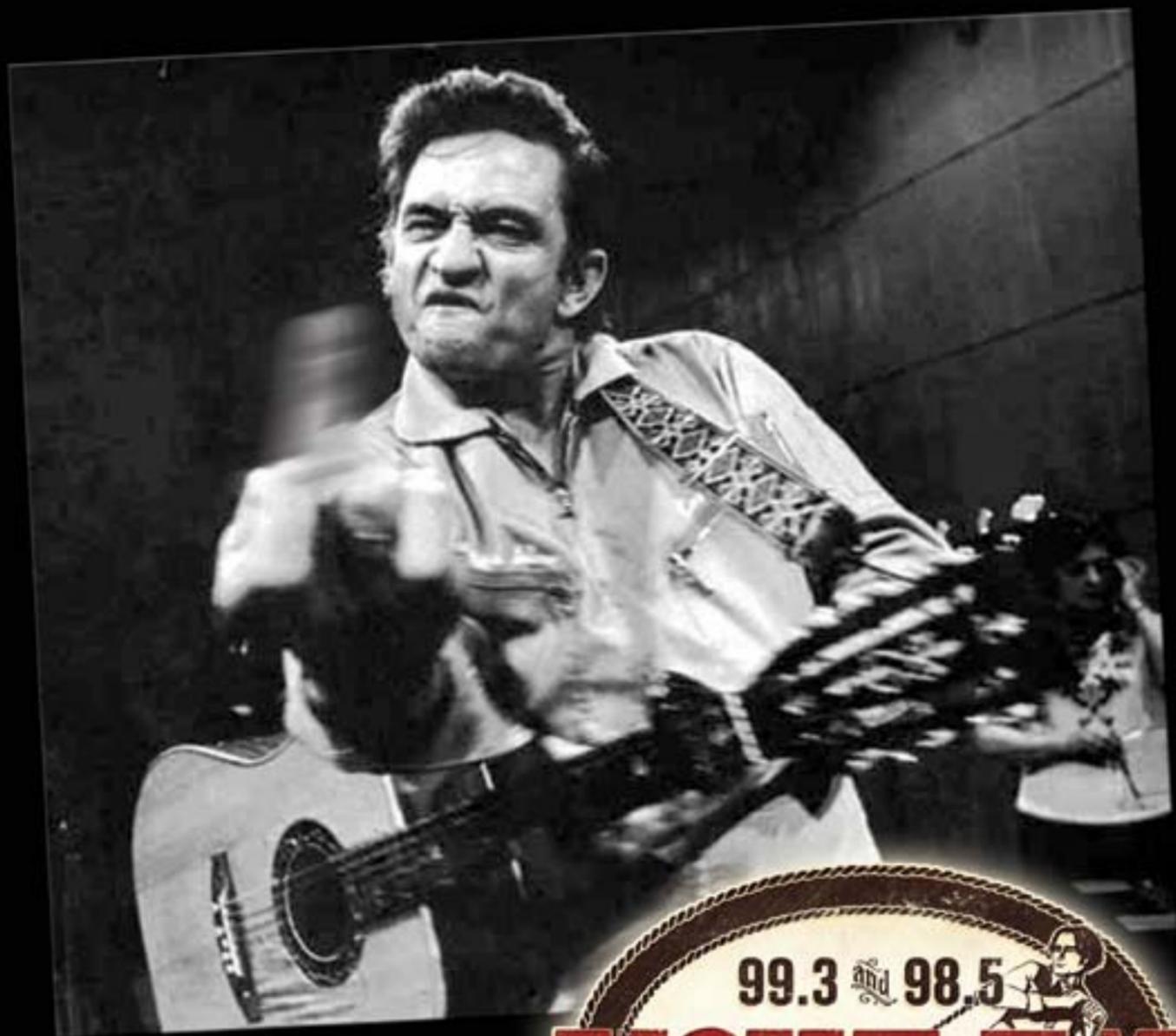
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1. Randy Rogers Band,
*Homemade Tamales: Live at
Floore's*

LoneStarMusic Staff Picks

Zach Jennings: Old 97's, *Most Messed Up*

Richard Skanse: Rodney Crowell, *Tarpaper Sky*

Kris Franks: Jennifer Jackson, *Texas Sunrise*

Kristen Townsend: John Fullbright, *Songs*

Melissa Webb: Lake Street Dive, *Bad Self Portraits*

Kallie Townsend: Midnight River Choir, *Fresh Air*

Kelsi Laningham: Sean McConnell, *B Side Sessions*

Travis Russom: Midnight River Choir, *Fresh Air*

Promise Udo: Nikki Lane, *All or Nothin'*

Erica Brown: Randy Rogers Band, *Homemade Tamales: Live at Floore's*

2. Midnight River Choir, *Fresh Air*
3. Chris Gougler, *Chris Gougler EP*
4. Josh Grider, *Luck & Desire*
5. Aaron Einhouse, *Blue Collar Troubadour*
6. The Bigsby's, *Good Will Suitcase*
7. Kevin Fowler, *How Country Are Ya?*
8. Cody Johnson Band, *Cowboy Like Me*
9. Drive-By Truckers, *English Oceans*
10. Eli Young Band, *10,000 Towns*
11. Jackson Taylor & the Sinners, *Live at Billy Bob's (CD/DVD Combo)*
12. Jason Eady, *Daylight & Dark*
13. Brian Keane, *Coming Home*
14. Whiskey Myers, *Early Morning Shakes*
15. Parker Millsap, *Parker Millsap*
16. Rodney Crowell, *Tarpaper Sky*
17. Jason Isbell, *Southeastern*
18. William Clark Green, *Rose Queen*
19. Reckless Kelly, *Long Night Moon*
20. Zane Williams, *Overnight Success*
21. Cody Canada, *Some Old, Some New, Maybe a Cover or Two*
22. Hard Working Americans, *Hard Working Americans*
23. Turnpike Troubadours, *Diamonds & Gasoline*
24. Turnpike Troubadours, *Goodbye Normal Street*
25. Brandon Steadman Band, *Recovery*
26. Robert Ellis, *Lights From the Chemical Plant*
27. Brett Hauser, *A Little More Time*
28. Gary Floater, *Who Cares: The Songs of Gary Floater*
29. Curtis Grimes, *Our Side of the Fence*
30. Old 97's, *Most Messed Up*
31. Jason Eady, *AM Country Heaven*
32. Jason Boland & the Stragglers, *Dark & Dirty Mile*
33. Jeff Whithead, *Bloodhound Heart*
34. Mando Saenz, *Studebaker*
35. Walt Wilkins & the Mystiqueros, *Wildcat Pie & the Great Walapateya*
36. Sam Riggs & the Night People, *Outrun the Sun*
37. Lincoln Durham, *Exodus of the Deemed Unrighteous*
38. Dolly Shine, *Room to Breathe*
39. Thieving Birds, *Gold Coast*
40. Uncle Lucius, *And You Are Me*



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VENUE SPOTLIGHT



NOT NEW, BUT BETTER THAN EVER: (from left) The River Road Ice House in New Braunfels, perfectly located on the “Y” for those who like to chase their days on the river with nights full of live Texas music; the Court Nance Band performing on the “day” stage of the new Bier Garden at River Road’s grand re-opening in April; co-owners Nick Sisoian and his sister, Allie Sisoian, who bought the Ice House last year and spent months giving it a top-to-bottom renovation. (First photo courtesy of River Road Ice House; other two by Dale Martin)

River Road Ice House — New Braunfels, Texas

By Dale Martin

As music venues in the Texas Hill Country region go, the River Road Ice House doesn’t need much of an introduction. Situated less than a quarter mile from the Guadalupe River, at the “Y” on River Road, the Ice House has long been the ideal destination for those looking to enjoy tubing and live music in the same afternoon. The original structure dates back to the 1930s, and over the years has been known as the River Road General Store, Amigo Mel’s and Molly’s Oasis. It was renamed River Road Ice House in 2001, when its owners at the time shifted their focus from tube and cabin rentals to booking live music. Since then, the place has hosted a who’s who of acts from the Texas country, Red Dirt, and Americana scene — including many an artist played in regular rotation on New Braunfels’ KNBT-FM, located less than a beer away from the Ice House’s front door. Pat Green and Cory Morrow both played to big crowds there back in the day, and the Eli Young Band got a taste of things to come when they headlined a sold-out show at River Road shortly after releasing their debut album. So when local businessman Nick Sisoian purchased the property last year, he was keenly aware that he was buying a piece of Texas music history.

He already owned Billy’s Ice, a cozy nightclub inside the city limits that features live music nightly, but with River Road Ice House, he saw a bigger picture. “I knew I wanted to get more involved in the music business, so I was looking for something when the oppor-

tunity came along to purchase River Road Ice House,” he says. “But getting it to where it is now has been an 18 month process.”

It’s that “getting it to where it is now” part that’s key here. Because from the moment he took over, Sisoian’s goal has been not just to buy into River Road’s past, but to invest in the venue’s future by taking a great venue and finding ways to make it even better. He started with the main outdoor stage, which was big enough for some of the most popular acts on the scene but awkwardly situated, facing away from an existing hillside.

“That was one of the first things we knew we needed to change,” says Sisoian. “We moved the big outdoor stage so that it faced the hill, which made full use of the natural amphitheater. We also added VIP seating on the roof of the original building, but I kept the general admission area in front of the stage. This was important to me, because I wanted fans that couldn’t afford a higher ticket price to be able to come and see a good show without having to spend a lot of money.”

He also added a Bier Garden area and acoustic stage. “The nicest part of the property was used to house a row of porta-potties,” he recalls with a laugh. “So we moved those out and put in a nice sitting area and acoustic stage. Now people will have a place to get away from the crowds, hang out and enjoy a drink.”

Sisoian looks forward to utilizing the remodeled venue for charity events, like the

ones he’s hosted at his other venue. “We’ve held many events at Billy’s Ice, like ‘Locks For Love’ and various artist benefit shows,” he says. “So far we’ve raised over \$300,000 for charity. With River Road Ice House, we can take that to the next level.”

And though all the upgrades entailed a lot of time and hard work, the end result — as revealed at a grand re-opening celebration in April — is indeed impressive. This is a night-and-day total makeover from the ground up. And it’s not just the fact that River Road now boasts four different stages, each designed for a different type of show; it’s the overall vibe of the place that’s changed, too — and for the better. Whereas the venue used to have a very touristy air about it, simply because of its location, it now has more of a hometown feel — the kind of hangout that the community can truly call its own.

Of course, visitors are still very much welcome. And with the River Road Ice House now hosting live music seven days a week — with big plans underway for a summer concert series plus major shows in the works for all coming holiday weekends *and* the annual Greenfest coming up on July 26 — it probably won’t be long before music fans from all over the Texas Hill Country and beyond start feeling right at home here, too.

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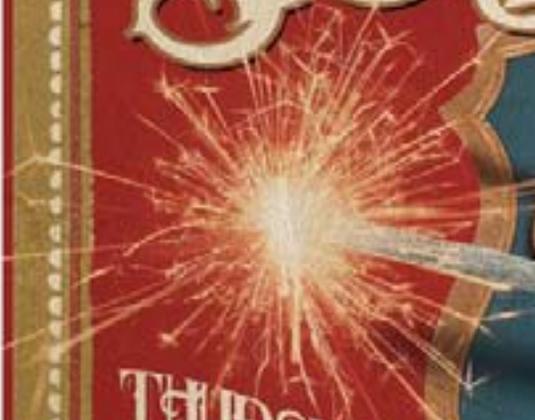
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