

Americana Roots & Roll

LONESTAR MUSIC

October/November 2014 | vol 7 / issue 5

the power of two

SHOVELS and HOPE

Joe Ely's

NOVEL "Reverb":
Exclusive
Excerpt!

Lee Ann
Womack:

Just Like
Starting Over

BY KELLY DEARMORE

Plus:

Paul Thorn
Shakey Graves
Ruthie Foster
The Fautleroy's
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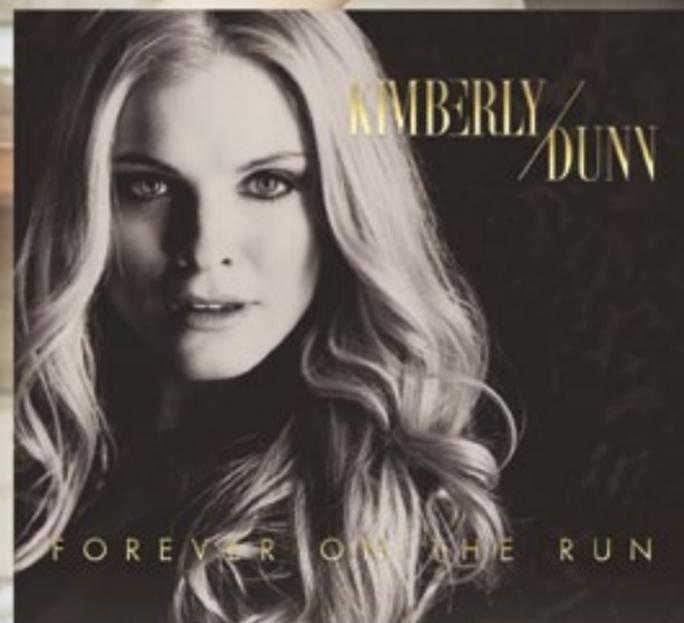
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Notes from the Editor | By Richard Skanse

Apart from the opportunity to work with a team of really good people — especially graphic designer Melissa Webb, who I'd already known and greatly respected for years — one of the things that appealed most to me about joining this magazine five years ago was owner Zach Jennings' vision that *LoneStarMusic* could be about more than just Texas music. Even more than Texas and Red Dirt music. We all agreed that we would still focus on songwriters and roots and/or country(ish) music — pretty much anything that could directly or even indirectly fall under the category of "Americana" in addition to, yes, all the usual Texas and Red Dirt subjects. But Texas residency or a Texas birth certificate would not be a requirement for an artist to be covered in our pages.

Now, don't get me wrong: I'm a native Texan, and couldn't be prouder of our musical home team. For years, I was guilty myself of sometimes thinking that an artist (well, the more "serious" singer-songwriting types, anyway) had to be from Texas in order to be ... what, *good*? Worth listening to, following, and writing about? Today, I cringe just thinking about that absurdity. Sure, the Lone Star State has always had a roster to die for: not just the likes of Willie, Shaver, the Flatlanders, and Keen, but a whole mess of blues and rock 'n' roll legends. But not being from Texas certainly didn't dilute the impact and musical genius of Hank, Dylan, Springsteen, Zevon, Young, Petty, Prine, or Hiatt — let alone artists like Lucinda, Snider, and even Jerry Jeff that we Texas music fans love to claim as our own even though we know damn well that they're not. So, just knowing that *LoneStarMusic* would not be constrained or blinded by geographic borders in its coverage of great music was very appealing to me.

All that being said, though, did y'all know that Michael Trent, the Colorado-reared "Rockamount cowboy" to Cary Ann Hearst's "Cumberland girl" in *Shovels and Rope*, was born in Houston? Doubtless the duo's latest album, *Swimmin' Time*, would be every bit as excellent — and their rise to fame as one of the best young acts in Americana music today every bit as cover worthy — even if Trent wasn't a native Texan, but I gotta admit, I get a kick outta knowing that he is.

In addition to Kelly Dearmore's cover story on *Shovels and Rope*, inside these pages you'll also find an exclusive excerpt from Lone Star Music Hall of Famer Joe Ely's debut novel, *Reverb*, plus profiles and features on Lee Ann Womack, Sunny Sweeney, Shakey Graves, Alejandro Escovedo's rockin' new band the Fauntleroy's, Ruthie Foster, Noel McKay, Shelley King, Jess Klein, Drew Kennedy, Paul Thorn, Jim Lauderdale, and Cory Branan. That's right, those last three guys aren't from Texas — they don't even *live* here — but we love 'em anyways.

Branan, in fact, was one of the artists who played at our Lone Star Music party at the killer Nashville record store, The Groove, during the Americana Music Association Festival and Conference in September. Our other featured acts this year were John Moreland, Matt the Electrician, Courtney Patton, David Ramirez, and the Howlin' Brothers. This was our second year hosting a daytime party at AmericanaFest, and we hope to make it an annual tradition. For certain we plan to keep on attending the conference, because apart from Nashville being a pretty fun town with damn good eats, the festival showcases so many of the artists from all over the Americana map that keep us fired up about championing this music — no matter where it comes from.

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Photo courtesy of Big Hassle Media

AmericanaFest busts out on

Jason Isbell, Sturgill Simpson among big winners at AMA Awards

By Lynne Margolis

15th birthday



Americana's best and brightest: (from left) Sarah Jarosz, whose *Build Me Up From Bones* was one of the nominees for Album of the Year at the Americana Honors & Awards show, held Sept. 17 at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville; Valerie June, nominated for Emerging Artist of the Year; Sturgill Simpson with his Emerging Artist of the Year award; Lifetime Achievement for Performance honoree Taj Mahal; Texas legend Billy Joe Shaver at his official AmericanaFest showcase; Alejandro Rose-Garcia, aka Shakey Graves, who packed the Basement for his showcase; (below) Triple Crown winner Jason Isbell, who nabbed awards for Album, Song, and Artist of the Year. (Photos by Lynne Margolis)

Fifteen years after the gathering that led to its formation, the Americana Music Association has done what it set out to do: Establish the genre as its own entity, not the red-headed “alternative” stepchild of country, folk or any other musical category.

The expanded 2014 AMA Festival & Conference — emphasis on festival; it’s now branded as AmericanaFest and includes a major, separately ticketed outdoor concert (the Avett Brothers headlined) — featured more than 160 acts showcasing at 10 Nashville venues over four September nights. With up-and-comers such as Shakey Graves, Parker Millsap, Sturgill Simpson, and the Haden Triplets appearing alongside favorites like Hayes Carll or revered veterans such as Ry Cooder, Rodney Crowell, Rosanne Cash, and Billy Joe Shaver, the gathering reinforced why so many artists formerly defined as rock, blues, bluegrass or other styles are now stepping under Americana’s growing umbrella.

No gain comes without sacrifice, however; at AMA, both access and intimacy have become harder to achieve. Showcases boasting big names now fill

so fast, getting in requires lining up far in advance. Events such as Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum interview/performance sessions with legends Shaver, Marty Stuart and Ry Cooder require reservations. And there are early signs of South By Southwest syndrome: the condition in which invited marquee acts suck attention from artists who still need the exposure. But there are also more events such as the annual Americanarama party at Grimey’s New & Pre-loved Music, where artists like Ian McLagan and Mike Farris can be heard in low-pressure, cool-hang environments. (Lone Star Music hosted its own day party at another record store, The Groove.)

But the single event that speaks most directly to Americana as both a musical genre and ideology — and remains one of the best nights of music in any genre — is the Americana Honors & Awards show. Held in the Ryman Auditorium, it never fails to provide both heartwarming and electrifying moments — the kind that make, and crown, careers. Jason Isbell, the night’s big winner with Artist, Song (“Cover Me Up”) and Album of the

Year (*Southeastern*) honors, confessed that writing the winning song’s nakedly vulnerable lyrics and singing them to his wife, fiddler Amanda Shires, was one of the hardest things he’s ever done. “Do the things that scare you,” Isbell advised.

Duo/Group of the Year winners the Milk Carton Kids, who should be hired immediately if emcee Jim Lauderdale ever retires, mesmerized with their song “Snake Eyes,” then captured both the joy and toll of the musical life when Joey Ryan noted that being compelled to travel to “godforsaken corners of this continent and others” to play music for anyone who will listen often means leaving families behind. “Every time we appear before you,” he said, “it’s because they let us go.”

Sturgill Simpson took Emerging Artist of the Year in a tight competition that allowed for knockout performances by Valerie June, Hurray for the Ruff Raff, Parker Millsap, and St. Paul & the Broken Bones. Instrumentalist of the Year went, for the fifth time, to house band leader (and eight-time nominee) Buddy Miller, who admitted, “I can’t tell you how foolish I feel accepting an award from Vince Gill, being onstage with [house

bandmate] Ry Cooder.”

But it’s the accolades for legends that make this night so special. Watching a tear escape accordionist Flaco Jimenez’s eye as he accepted his Lifetime Achievement for Instrumentalist Award from Cooder and hearing Lifetime Achievement for Songwriting honoree Loretta Lynn sing “Coal Miner’s Daughter” 54 years to the day after she first appeared on that very stage were emotional moments. So was the Spirit of Americana/Free Speech in Music Award presentation to Jackson Browne, who noted, “It’s part of the American character to say what you believe.”

Lifetime Achievement for Performance honoree Taj Mahal stole the show, however, first by saying, “This is one of the most powerful and wonderful things that could ever happen in my life,” then by his National Steel delivery of “Statesboro Blues.” [Even the band applauded, and Robert Plant, walking onstage to perform with ex-girlfriend Patty Griffin, declared, “That was amazing.”]

As he presented the posthumous President’s Award to Jimmie Rodgers, Marty Stuart held the railroad lamp

entrusted to him by Rodgers’ estate and said, “Sometimes when I lose my way, I just light it and I look into it, and I can see the past, present and the future of American music.”

Witnessing artists young and old gather at AMA each year fills one with the sense that the proverbial circle

encompassing America’s musical past, present and future will indeed remain unbroken, as long as they keep finding ways to pour their hearts into our souls.

(Highlights from the Americana Honors and Awards show will be shown on ACL Presents: Americana Music Festival 2014, airing on PBS Nov. 22.)



In Memoriam

Johnny Winter

Feb. 23, 1944 – July 16, 2014

By Rob Patterson

One feels just a twinge of guilt to say there is an upside to the passing of some significant musical artists. But the recent death of Texas blues guitar wizard Johnny Winter on July 16 at 70 years old makes the case that when influential musicians long out of the mainstream spotlight depart this earthly realm, it can and does help reassert why they matter and the impact they had on popular music.

It's not totally like "you had to be there" to understand. But when Winter emerged from Texas onto the international music scene in the late 1960s,

"[Johnny] is rightly known as a blues master, but he was an all-around phenomenal musician. He was a man on a mission to show the world what he could do." — Jon Paris

white musicians playing blues guitar for a rock audience was still something rather new since the emergence of blues-influenced British rock bands like the Rolling Stones, Animals and Yardbirds a few years before. Guitarists like Winter, Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck and Mike Bloomfield upped the ante with their fleet-fingered extended workouts and fiery tone. What distinguished Winter was how fully-steeped his style and sound was in genuine blues and the ferocity of

his musical attack. Even the highly-regarded Bloomfield, who learned his craft on the South Side of Chicago — ground zero for black urban blues — hailed Winter as the best of the white blues players.

Winter leapt to fame in 1968 by bringing a crackling intensity to the electric blues canon with the independent *Progressive Blue Experiment*, recorded at Austin's legendary Vulcan Gas Company nightclub on a night it was closed. He followed it lightning quick in 1969 with his self-titled major label debut on Columbia Records, for which he was paid a reportedly then-unprecedented \$600,000 advance. Both *Johnny Winter* and *Second Winter*, a three-sided LP released later that same year, proved he could translate the blues tradition into a rock 'n' roll mode. A *Rolling Stone* cover story and his appearance at Woodstock helped make Winter a star through the 1970s.

Born in Beaumont in 1944, both Johnny and younger brother Edgar were encouraged in music by their parents. "An albino in ever-so-conservative Beaumont was going to stand out," says noted music photographer Stephanie Chernikowski, who went to the same schools as Winter, who was a few years younger than her, and first heard him play when she was in high school. She says that even from a young age, "the Winter brothers were known as accomplished musicians and recognized as 'others' in a community

that was not fond of others."

Jon Paris, a skilled blues guitarist and songwriter himself who played bass with Winter throughout the 1980s, recalls Winter talking about feeling ostracized as a youth. "Johnny told me how he and Edgar were just treated like crap in school," Paris says. Where Winter did find acceptance was, ironically, in Beaumont's black music clubs he began to frequent as a teen.

He'd obviously learned his lessons there well when Chernikowski heard him again in Austin in the mid '60s. "He'd come a long way, and he was awesome," she recalls. A Winter show this writer saw in New York City in the late '70s was not only stunning for his searing guitar work-outs, but also for how he performed with such intensity that at the end of the show, soaked in sweat, Winter had to be all but carried offstage by his road manager. He literally gave everything he had to playing his music.

"He was just a well of musical knowledge," notes Paris. "He is rightly known as a blues master, but he was an all-around phenomenal musician. He was a man on a mission to show the world what he could do."

Dropped from Columbia after his last record for the company in 1980, Winter carried on recording for the independent Alligator label and consistently touring. "All of us around Johnny when I was working with him in the

Photo by John Carrico

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Punks in love (with everything): The Fauntleroy's, from left, are Nicholas Tremulis, Alejandro Escovedo, Ivan Julian, and Linda Pitmon. Photo by Jeff Fasano

MEET THE FAUNTLEROYS

Hurricane survivor Alejandro Escovedo teams with friends Ivan Julian, Nicolas Tremulis and Linda Pitmon to revisit his punk roots and channel the “immediacy of the streets”

By Lynne Margolis

Being Alejandro Escovedo's manager can't be the easiest job even on good days. The guy's got his finger in so many pots that trying to figure out which ones need stirring could make anyone's head spin. One minute, he's releasing a new EP, *Below the Pink Pony*, as a member of the post-punk supergroup the Fauntleroy's. The next, he's touring with Peter Buck. Or Joe Ely. Or the reunited True Believers. Or his regular band, the Sensitive Boys & Girls. Or he's writing songs with Chuck Prophet. Or arranging all-star projects like the Lou Reed tribute that rivaled Lady Gaga's show as one of the hottest events at this year's South By Southwest.

And then there are the not-so-good days. Shortly before *Pony's* mid-September release on Plowboy Records, Escovedo slipped in a tub and had to cancel some shows. That, however, was nothing compared to his honeymoon hurricane experience, a harrowing near-death encounter with a category 4 beast that devastated Mexico's Baja Peninsula, where he and new bride Nancy Rankin

were visiting friends following their Sept. 6 wedding. Manager Jan Stabile had to intervene to help them get home after they spent days in hard-core survival mode, stranded, as civil unrest set in amid the ruins. (Their plans had included joining Buck at his home in Todos Santos, but Hurricane Odile — the strongest-ever to hit the peninsula — ravaged the village.)

When they got home, Escovedo jumped into rehearsals for a British Invasion-themed concert benefiting Austin's Health Alliance for Austin Musicians, featuring Eric Burdon and the Animals, the Zombies and other luminaries. But before all of that (except for the fall in the tub), Escovedo and Fauntleroy's bandmate Ivan Julian discussed their musical excursion — and reported the band was already plotting a follow-up their debut EP's six-song energy blast. Like *Below the Pink Pony*, the next Fauntleroy's album also will likely be recorded at NY Hed, the East Village studio co-owned by Julian, best known as the guitarist in punk band Richard Hell & the Voidoids. There's no timetable yet, but they and fellow Fauntleroy's

conspirators Nicolas Tremulis and Linda Pitmon have already written more material.

All veteran road dogs, they're adept at working on the fly. Julian's credits also include the Clash, Matthew Sweet and Shriekback, as well as his own bands, the Outsets and Lovelies; he started his career as a touring guitarist for the Foundations (who crafted the infectious pop hits “Build Me Up Buttercup” and “Baby, Now That I've Found You”). Chicago-based guitarist Tremulis is the longtime leader of the Nicholas Tremulis Band and Nicholas Tremulis Orchestra. Pitmon drums behind husband Steve Wynn in the Miracle 3 and the Baseball Project (which also features R.E.M. vets Buck and Scott McCaughey). Escovedo, of course, began as a punker in the Nuns before dipping into cowpunk with Rank & File and balls-out rock 'n' roll with the True Believers. He's also had a long and storied solo career. The Fauntleroy's *Below the Pink Pony*, however, marks the seasoned rocker's recording debut as a bassist.

“Actually, we all wanted to play bass and let everybody else play guitar — that

sums up the mood,” notes Julian. “But I'll say this about Alejandro's bass playing: He's really instinctive. He comes up with these lines that just make the song work.”

All four players came to the Fauntleroy's at a point in their lives at which they value collaborating more than spotlight-grabbing.

“The thing about this record that impresses me,” Julian continues, “is that it doesn't seem like a lot of these projects where there's four separate writers and the band goes here or there to support the writer. There's really a common thread that goes through this record. It sounds like one band.”

Escovedo is equally effusive, saying the group effort “brought out the most intense version of our New York that we know, from the mid- to late-70s, when we all lived there.”

It's a sound that Escovedo says Julian helped create with Voidoids bandmate Robert Quine. Asked to define it, Julian says, “It's the immediacy of the streets.

“There's so much impetus coming at you from all directions, even in today's tame New York, when you go out on the streets,” he explains. “That affects the

way you write and the way you play. ... Things are just happening 10 times a second, and sometimes you get up in it. There's a sound to that.”

Maybe that explains the lyric, “I was watching the crowd, trying to make it bleed,” in the song, “I'm in Love with Everything.” As conveyed on the EP and in performances such as their SXSW-closing outing at the Continental Club, it's best defined as the sound of controlled cacophony.

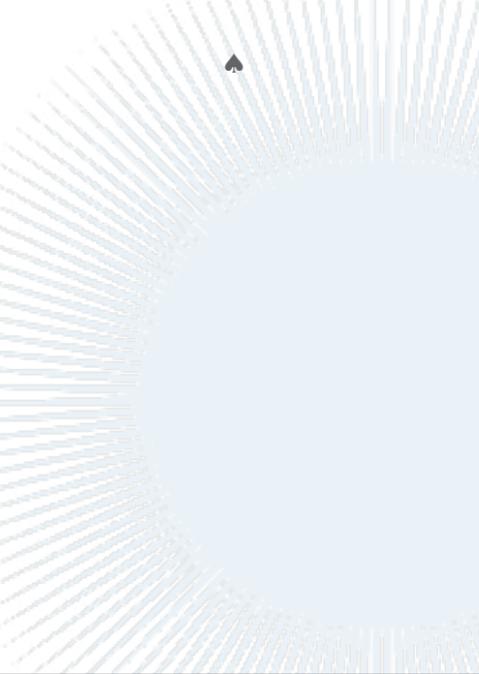
Julian attributes the recorded version, at least, to the use of “archaic” tube pre-amps and actual tape. “My own solo record, *The Naked Flame*, also has that sound,” he says. “That's what convinced them. When they heard *The Naked Flame*, they thought, ‘we want to sound like *that*.’ Basically, it's just recording raw, onto tape, through tubes. And using a minimal amount of reverb.”

There's also something to be said for the immediacy of their process.

“The studio was right underneath the Pink Pony restaurant,” Escovedo says. “We just wrote and recorded. We'd get a track going and then Nick and I would go upstairs and finish the lyrics over cups

of coffee and go back down and record from there. By the time we left, we had all those songs. It was awesome.”

As for heading in so many musical directions at once, Escovedo says it all boils down to having fun. “I don't know what to say,” he adds, “other than, if you're gonna be a musician, you should play all the time.”



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GIMME SOME!

Reunited Skunks Jon Dee Graham and Jesse Sublett recall their Cheatham Street days

By Brian T. Atkinson

Legendary Austin punk band the Skunks frequently played at San Marcos' Cheatham Street Warehouse during their early 1980s heyday. Owner Kent Finlay recognized a spark few other Lone Star state clubs could. "At that time in Texas, there were a limited number of places a punk rock band could play," recalls guitarist Jon Dee Graham, who post Skunks would go on to join the True Believers and eventually launch his own solo career. "You had Raul's in Austin, DJ's in Dallas, Paradise Island in Houston and Cheatham Street Warehouse in San Marcos. The punk rock thing was so new and people were so unclear on what it was about."

Answer: Punk was about combustibility. Accordingly, the Skunks imploded after five fiery years. However, the group's most celebrated lineup — Graham, Jesse Sublett (vocals, bass), and Bill Blackmon (drums) — recently reunited at the Woodshed in San Marcos to record a new original song. "The Boy from Armageddon" will appear on a companion disc with the forthcoming book, Kent Finlay: Dreamer (Texas A&M University Press), co-written by Jenni Finlay (Kent's daughter) and Brian T. Atkinson. Plans are also in the works for a Skunks reunion show at Cheatham Street sometime in the not too distant future, though a date has yet to be set. Here, Atkinson talks with Graham and Sublett about their history with Finlay and playing at his landmark Texas music venue.



Jesse Sublett and Jon Dee Graham of the Skunks. Photo by Brian T. Atkinson

How well do you remember your first gig at Cheatham Street?

Jesse Sublett: We had a buzz going for some reason ... maybe a story had just come out. We got good press in the *University Star*. We played there and it was packed. I remember vividly taking home like \$900 after Kent's take and I doubt we charged more than two bucks. I remember really well because there weren't a lot of places paying that kind of money on the door. It was great and we made decent money later but never that much again. We probably played a dozen, two dozen shows at Cheatham Street.

Jon Dee Graham: Kent never seemed to differentiate between us and any other rock bands that would come through Cheatham Street. He would never talk down to us. He gave us great nights. He would hang out with us and talk. It was so weird because Texas was so polarized between the cosmic country culture and the punk rock. Joe Ely had not yet played with the Clash, so there was no melding of the cultures. But we never felt anything from Kent except this open armed, "Yeah, come play."

Did Kent say he liked any originals in particular?

Sublett: We played all our hits at Cheatham Street: "Gimme Some," "Cheap Girl," "Something About You Scares Me." I remember Kent liking "Something About You Scares Me," which was one the earliest songs I wrote for the Skunks. It's basically about a dim-witted friend of Bela Lugosi as Dracula, the dim-wit taking four verses of the song to put it all together that he's a vampire: "Your skin is a little too white/Is it 'cause you only go out at night?/You're richer than a Rockefeller/Then how come you're sleeping in a cellar?"

Describe the common ground you guys shared with Kent.

Graham: Honestly, I think it was that Jesse grew up in Johnson City, Billy Blackmon grew up in Beeville and I grew up on the border. We were all guys who grew up in these little Texas towns and in some weird way I think it was an avuncular thing, like he was this uncle taking us under his wing and giving us a place to play.

Sublett: A lot of people who weren't part of that scene wouldn't like us because we weren't trying to be in the scene, [but] we knew that we hadn't just bought guitars because we'd just heard the Sex Pistols and we were mad or political. We just wanted to play music. Kent was an anomaly to me. He was really sweet and easy going and I just love the guy. You'd think it wouldn't be his cup of tea at all, but Kent just liked the band and he wouldn't just pay me and I'd leave: we talked after the gigs for a while. That's another reason I like him: He's really genuine.

Yet he's not really known as a punk rock promoter.

Graham: I wouldn't say he's known for promoting punk rock, but look at all the stuff Todd Snider has done. He pushed the boundaries of the singer-songwriter thing as far as he can go. Several of his records are pretty avant-garde as far as singer-songwriter things go and Kent loved him. I just think Kent is a really open-minded, open-hearted fellow who took an interest in us. He could sense that we were testing boundaries and seeing how far we could go. There's nothing more outlaw than that. Kent Finlay likes people who fuck with the rules.

For more information on Kent Finlay: Dreamer, visit the book's website at www.kentfinlaydreamer.com



Photo by Jeremy Frechette

black fret mentor spotlight: kevin wommack

By Lynne Margolis

Resurrecting the artist-salon model to foster career development in Austin's music community, the nonprofit Black Fret organization was founded to support creative growth in the post-record-label era. Founded by Colin Kendrick and Matt Ott, who created the Austin Music Foundation, Black Fret offers mentorship and cash grants to artists selected by dues-paying members and industry advisors; in return, members receive opportunities to hear top Austin talents perform at intimate, private events and take part in fostering their futures. The group will announce its first 10 grant winners at its Black Fret Ball, Nov. 8 at Austin's Paramount Theater.

To learn more about the role of Black Fret mentors, *LoneStarMusic* spoke with Kevin Wommack, owner of Playing in Traffic Records and Loophole Management, whose artist roster includes Los Lonely Boys, the Dunwells and Ben Kweller.

How did you first get involved with Black Fret?

When Colin came and told me about Black Fret, I think I might have been the first mentor — I'm to really sure, but it just seemed like a great idea. Something that champions musicians in the Austin area is hard to come by. Especially when it comes to real dollars and opportunity and things like that. It's certainly put a positive focus on musicians. ... They basically came to me and said, "What do you think of this? Do you think that this is a good idea?" I thought it was fantastic and needed, and I just really like their enthusiasm; they're putting a lot of effort into this that helps the people I care deeply about.

How does Black Fret mentorship work?

It's evolving. We had one event where all the nominated musicians met with possible mentors, and then everybody got a chance to meet. That was really fun. Then it's putting together how many people want you to mentor them; you're not really working for them, but it's a matter of how to give them advice. It's having people in the industry be able to jam with them on what they should do and how they should look at [their career].

For the 20 nominated artists, it's a great opportunity. Ultimately, 10 of them get cash, but all of them benefit. Not only do you get

mentorship from real producers, real booking agents, real, vital people, you're also playing these Black Fret events, getting paid to play private gigs for people [you] probably never had access to before. You're getting a whole new crowd who actually want to champion music, go and see live music, and will buy your CDs. That's phenomenal for the artist.

Do you see this as a replacement for artist development by labels?

Unless you're an independent label like Playing In Traffic, doing it old-school, there isn't artist development. It really does take that place. I think it can really do some major things for some of these artists. It's all about how they respond to the advice — not that they have to do everything. But it's all about connecting dots in your career.

The long-term goal is to create an endowed institution that provides \$25,000 grants to 15 artists a year. Are there enough willing investors here to do that?

It's already happening. We're over 150 already. The first grant round is already paid for. And so many people are getting excited.

Can this concept work elsewhere?

It can. It will, because you have a certain element of society that really champions music, but they don't know how to do that. [This] opens the door for these people to go to private events to see artists who are really bubbling up. It's not only curating, it's discovering, it's developing, and it makes everybody excited about the possibilities. And that's what moves things forward. Making a record independently, how do you break through the morass that's out there? That's where this is helpful, to put a spotlight on people. The only problem is that some don't win grants. Most of these people became musicians because they weren't very good at sports, so winning and losing is not usually part of their process. But they're winning so much: opportunities; new fans; they're winning dollars because they're playing events and getting paid. It's not like somebody loses.

What do mentors get out of it?

Being able to hang with these people and get to know them on a personal and professional basis, it's been great, because we're all working out; we're exporters. So to get to know our community, from attorneys to producers that I didn't know or work with before, to publicity people or whoever, being able to just hang, it's a really cool thing.



HO-HO-HOLD THE BANJO!

Bluegrass album, Christmas surprise coming from Robert Earl Keen & family

Get ready to break out the confetti again: On Feb. 10, Americana icon and Lone Star Music Hall of Famer Robert Earl Keen will release his first new album in four years, *Happy Prisoner: The Bluegrass Sessions*, on Dualtone Records. Keen describes the 15-track album (which will also be available in a 20-song "deluxe" version online) as his "love postcard to bluegrass," a style he's been a devout aficionado of going all the way back to his college days playing in his first band.

"I've always felt like the genesis of my songwriting comes from my lifelong love of bluegrass," says Keen, who for the first time in his long career recorded only covers for the album. Recorded at the Zone in Dripping Springs with Lloyd Maines at the production helm, *Happy Prisoner* features Keen's full band — Rich Brotherton on guitar, Bill Whitbeck on stand-up bass,

Marty Muse on dobro, and Tom Van Schaik on percussion — along with Danny Barnes of Bad Livers fame on banjo, Sara Watkins of Nickel Creek on fiddle, and Kym Warner of the Greencards on mandolin. Additionally, bluegrass legend Peter Rowan is on hand to help introduce a cover of his own song, "Walls of Time," Natalie Maines sings on the traditional "Wayfaring Stranger," and Keen's old A&M chum Lyle Lovett pops in for a duet with him on Jimmie Rodgers' "T For Texas." (Prediction: Get ready ready to hear that one a lot on Texas and Americana radio all 2015-long.)

Happy Prisoner may still be a few months from release, but Keen fans have plenty to look forward to between now and then. Robert Earl Keen's Honey Pils, his very own craft beer made by the Fredericksburg-based Pedernales Brewing Co. and unveiled at San Antonio's Alamo Ice House in mid October, is due in stores in December, right around the time Keen kicks off his annual round of wildly popular Christmas shows. This year's run begins Dec. 9 at San Antonio's Tobin Center for the Performing Arts, with

additional stops in Midland (12/11), Mission (12/17), Corpus Christi (12/18), Austin (12/19), Galveston (12/20), Houston (12/26), Dallas (12/27), and Fort Worth (12/28). Terri Hendrix opens the San Antonio, Midland, Houston, Dallas and Fort Worth dates, while Andrea Davidson does the honors in Mission, Corpus, Austin, and Galveston.

As an added treat, all of the Christmas shows will also feature a short opening-opening set by the XMas-Men — aka Brotherton, Whitbeck, Muse, and Van Schaik — performing an instrumental mix of holiday favorites featured on their own brand new album, *Santa Is Real*. Available at the Christmas shows as well as at Keen's website, RobertEarlKeen.com, and LoneStarMusic.com, the festive CD boasts both Louvin Brothers (and bad Christmas sweater)-inspired album art and a cover of Keen's "Merry Christmas from the Family." — RICHARD SKANSE

SHAVER SALUTED AT 75TH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION IN AUSTIN

Billy Joe Shaver may still consider himself just an "old chunk of coal," but the quality of artists who turned out to pay tribute to the old five-and-dimer for his 75th birthday celebration at Austin's Paramount Theater on Sept. 24 proves that the songs he's spun are already as treasured as the most precious diamonds.

As fellow outlaw troubadour Ray Wylie Hubbard observed, the consistent factor in the progressive country movement was, and is, Shaver writing great songs that songwriters should study. Following that lead, relative newcomer Jason Eady admitted that when he writes a new song, he asks

himself, "Would I play this for Billy Joe?"

In addition to Hubbard and Eady, other artists on hand to salute the great outlaw poet (who was born Aug. 16, 1939 in Corsicana, Texas) were fellow Austin Music Hall of Fame inductee (or, as Shaver allegedly put it, "indictee") Joe Ely, who masterfully covered Shaver's "Live Forever," and Crooks, a young, bearded-and-braided Austin band whose rollicking horn section and back-bending accordion player had folks at the Paramount dancing in the aisles. James McMurtry claimed that his newest (yet to be released) song was "the most Billy Joe Shaver song I've ever written because

I wrote it when I was a little drunk and a whole lot pissed off." In the introduction to his stunning a cappella version of Shaver's "Star in my Heart," Joe Pugg said, "If you are listening Mr. Shaver, I practiced real hard."

Shaver himself, who played, prayed and proselytized his way through the second set, was indeed listening and was clearly touched by the efforts. "I love all these guys who were up here playing all my songs by heart," he enthused. "I don't know, maybe I'm in Heaven!" — TIFFANY WALKER

BARLIGHT: CHARLIE ROBISON & FRIENDS OPEN ALAMO ICE HOUSE

Charlie "Good Times" Robison wasn't about to let a little bad weather spoil his party. "Shit happens, rain's gonna fall," he said of the long overdue San Antonio downpour on Sept. 26, which happened to be the same night he was celebrating the grand opening of his newly opened Alamo Ice House on the corner of North Alamo and 8th Avenue. When the rain ruled out using the the outdoor stage and large patio area, Robison (aka the bar's "Music Guy") and his three partners — "Sports Guy" and former MLB pitcher Brooks Kieschnik, "Restaurant Guy" Jeff Fuchs and "BBQ guy" Ja-

mie Gonzalez — just moved the festivities inside. And with plenty of cold beer and BBQ sandwiches and tacos to go around — plus live music from Pauline Reese and Robison himself — nobody crammed into the joint seemed to be complaining. The Alamo Ice House is now open for business seven days a week, and odds are it won't be long before Robison starts booking a steady stream of his famous Texas music friends to help him break in that outdoor stage — weather permitting, of course. For more info, visit www.alamoicehouse.com. — TARA STAGLIK



Photo by Tara Staglik

NEW & RECENT RELEASES

on the LoneStarMusic radar

Sept. 9

Ryan Adams, *Ryan Adams*
Justin Townes Earle, *Single Mothers*
Drew Kennedy, *Sad Songs Happily Played*
Robert Plant, *lullaby ... and the Ceaseless Roar*
Bob Cheevers, *On Earth As It is In Austin*

Sept. 16

George Strait, *The Cowboy Rides Away*
Micky & the Motorcars, *Hearts From Above*
The Fautleroyes, *Below the Pink Pony EP*
Various Artists, *Dead Man's Town: A Tribute to Springsteen's Born in the USA*

Sept. 23

Lee Ann Womack, *The Way I'm Livin'*
Gary Clark Jr., *Live*
Tweedy, *Sukierae*
Marcia Ball, *The Tattooed Lady and the Alligator Man*

Sept. 30

Lucinda Williams, *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone*
Sons of Bill, *Love & Logic*
Ray Johnston Band, *No Bad Days*

October 7

Shakey Graves, *And the War Came*
Hal Ketchum, *I'm the Troubadour*
Bela Fleck & Abigail Washburn, *Bela Fleck & Abigail Washburn*
Jackson Browne, *Standing In the Breach*
Shelby Lynne, *I Am Shelby Lynne [Deluxe CD/DVD reissue]*

October 14

Josh Abbott Band, *Tuesday Night EP*
Dirty River Boys, *Dirty River Boys*
Angaleena Presley, *American Middle Class*
XMas-Men, *Santa Is Real*

October 21

Kimberly Dunn, *Forever On the Run*

October 28

Wade Bowen, *Wade Bowen*
Stoney LaRue, *Aviator*
Hard Working Americans, *The First Waltz*

Nov 4

Adam Hood, *Welcome to the Big World*
Ronnie Fauss, *Built to Break*
Bob Dylan, *The Basement Tapes Complete: The Bootleg Series Vol. 11*

Nov 17

Old 97's, *Hitchhike to Rhome* (reissue w/ bonus tracks)

January 13

Cody Canada and the Departed, *Hippielovepunk*

February 10

Robert Earl Keen, *Happy Prisoner: The Bluegrass Sessions*

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Dead Man's Town

A new crop of students delivers lessons from the Boss

By Lynne Margolis

When Bruce Springsteen released *Born in the U.S.A.* 30 years ago, he'd already blown up big nine years earlier with *Born to Run*. But this album, fueled by MTV videos depicting a pumped-up everyman at the peak of his virility delivering audience-energizing anthems, would catapult him into stadium-filling stardom. Even he wasn't prepared for the success of what would become one of the biggest-selling albums in history, spawning seven top-10 hits and rendering any remaining anonymity he had obsolete.

Nor was Springsteen prepared for the fact that his songs' meanings would be buried in a sea of beer-soaked concertgoers more eager to dance than think (not to mention the re-election campaign of a president he didn't support). Bruce had built a reputation as our chronicler of seekers, believers, impetuous youth — and luckless, downtrodden souls. But despite its arena-rock rhythms and alleged optimism, *Born in the U.S.A.* again examined the despair his characters found in a country starting its decline; the promises unfulfilled, the longings, the passion unsated — or the consequences if it was. Springsteen has since worked

hard to clarify his messages, even shushing audiences to deliver the title song as a 12-string acoustic bottleneck-blues lament, full of the festering anger and frustration his poor, PTSD-worn protagonist couldn't escape.

This is the mood captured on *Dead Man's Town: A Tribute to Born in the U.S.A.*, Lightning Rod Records' masterful 30th-anniversary recasting of the iconic 1984 release.

"It was ready for a re-imagining," says co-executive producer Evan Schlansky, the journalist and musician who conceived the project and took it to Lightning Rod's Logan Rogers. Though they sought out pre- and post-Baby Boomer Springsteen contemporaries such as Neil Young and Eddie Vedder, they landed a roster of second-generation fans that actually fulfills their vision more completely. Unlike those who watched Bruce rise to fame, they're informed by different sensibilities; as members of America's first generation who couldn't expect more prosperity than their parents achieved, they offer the stark clarity Springsteen's '80s versions don't fully convey.

Take the title tune, rendered by Amanda Shires and her husband, newly crowned Americana king Jason Isbell (win-

ner of the Americana Music Association's 2014 Album, Song and Artist of the Year awards). Their elegiac version, containing only his voice and strummed acoustic guitar and her bone-cutting, minor-key fiddle, is truly haunting. Producer Dave Cobb, who also produced Isbell's lauded *Southeastern* album, made sure there's no cool-rockin' daddy lurking anywhere in its vast emptiness.

As Rogers notes, Justin Townes Earle's fingerpicking on "Glory Days" rescues it from its sports-bar incarnation and restores it to its folk origins, etching its desperation with an insight borne of unfortunate experience. New Jersey's Nicole Atkins gives "Dancing in the Dark" — tracked in Asbury Park — a powerful, quietly eerie reading, and Ryan Culwell's gruff Southern drawl fully evokes the sadness of a friendship torn asunder on "Bobby Jean."

Blitzen Trapper, the Apache Relay, Holly Williams, Trampled By Turtles, Low and Fort Worth's Quaker City Nighthawks also deliver mostly stripped-down or rootsy versions that conjure *Nebraska's* spare, dark tones — many of these songs started out as tracks for that album — and the Woody Guthrie spirit underlying *U.S.A.'s* '80s-rock sheen.

Cover Me: Some of the artists featured on Lightning Rod Record's *Dead Man's Town: A Tribute to Born in the U.S.A.* include: (clockwise from top left) Blitzen Trapper ("Working On the Highway"); Joe Pug, ("Downbound Train"); Holly Williams ("No Surrender"); Low ("I'm On Fire"); Nicole Atkins ("Dancing In the Dark"); Quaker City Nighthawks ("Darlington County"); Apache Relay ("Cover Me"); Trampled By Turtles ("I'm Goin' Down"); Justin Townes Earle ("Glory Days"); and North Mississippi Allstars ("My Hometown"). Photos courtesy of Shore Fire Media.

Like many first exposed to Springsteen via the *U.S.A.* onslaught, Schlansky's Boss adoration wasn't automatic. "*Born in the U.S.A.* came out when I was 9 or 10," recalls the former *American Songwriter* magazine managing editor. "I quickly decided that I hated Bruce Springsteen. ... I used to hear those songs, and I was like, 'Who is this Bruce Springsteen guy? He sings in this crazy, hoarse style, and 'Born in the U.S.A.' is this repetitive song.' I was more into Huey Lewis and Genesis, George Michael, Bryan Adams, stuff like that. Bruce seemed almost like a parody."

But as Schlansky hit adolescence, he bonded over music with his best friend, Matt. They latched onto "Bruce Springsteen lite" — Bon Jovi — then Schlansky discovered one of his dad's mix tapes and heard "Thunder Road" and "Born to Run." He was transformed.

"I'd never been more affected by music like that before or since," he admits. "I remember I sheepishly told Matt one day, 'I think Bruce Springsteen actually isn't that bad,' and he was like, 'Yeah, dude, I know.' ... Springsteen became our religion — not in that collector way that adults have ... but in the original way, where music hits you so hard, and it's the soundtrack to your first love and your first

cigarette and the first time you drive a car, and it defines what you want to do with the rest of your life."

When Springsteen gave his one-for-the-ages South By Southwest keynote speech in 2012, he described that exact experience, which he so brilliantly encapsulates in the "No Surrender" lyric, *We learned more from a three-minute record, baby, than we ever learned in school.*

Schlansky ranks that song with his aforementioned holy grails "in the pantheon of moving Bruce Springsteen songs that we can all relate to." On *Dead Man's Town*, Holly Williams' breathy vocals and commanding presence give it a new dynamism; Schlansky loves the idea that she's carrying a musical torch passed from her grandfather, Hank Sr., an idol of Springsteen's, as well as the "ever so slight" re-contextualization a woman's voice gives the song, also produced by Cobb (as is the Apache Relay's dramatic "Cover Me").

Lightning Rod's Rogers says that Cobb, who became a Springsteen fan while working on the album, questioned early on "who would be crazy enough" to pick the title track. But Isbell and Shires grabbed it before anyone else signed on; Trampled By Turtles, who often covered "I'm Goin' Down" live, were next. Rogers feared having only 12 options, unlike his *High Cotton* Alabama tribute, would make

it tougher to get commitments, but he rarely even did any match-making. North Mississippi Allstars also picked what he considered the perfect choice: "My Hometown." Noting the Stonesy swagger in Luther Dickinson's vocals, Schlansky says, "It's like Bruce Springsteen meets *Exile on Main Street.*" He's also fond of the Nighthawks' Wilco-ish "Darlington County" cover.

Austinite Joe Pug (originally from Chicago) claimed "Downbound Train," transposing its famous guitar riff onto piano, adding only drums and chopped, backward-looped harmonica. Bruce himself might have created this arrangement had he written the tune today, Schlansky says; certainly, Springsteen adheres to the Guthriesque notion that keeping songs alive includes reinterpreting them over time.

"In a lot of ways, he invented a lot of what the job of the modern singer-songwriter is," says Pug.

Rogers sees Springsteen's oeuvre as the classic-rock equivalent of the Great American Songbook. *Dead Man's Town*, he says, is an homage to that spirit — as well as to the man who's still teaching us lessons we could never learn in school.

Shakey Graves

Austin folk-blues upstart shakes free of the one-man-band tag, recruits helping hands for *And the War Came*

By Michael Hoinski

Alejandro Rose-Garcia was destined to be the one and only. In 2007, the Austin native, who grew up in an artist commune on South Congress Ave. and matriculated Austin High School a few years behind the blues guitarist Gary Clark Jr., was living in Los Angeles and pursuing acting. He was making appearances on TV's *Friday Night Lights* as the character "the Swede," a lifeguard who was the fleeting object of desire for Coach Taylor's daughter, Julie. One weekend, Alejandro jetted back home to Austin to catch some live music at the Old Settler's Festival, unaware that his big break awaited him there on a different sort of stage.

While passing through the campgrounds, Alejandro and his buddies encountered a tripped-out hippie who randomly spewed gibberish at them, ending with something about "spooky wagons." They laughed it off, giving each other their own goofy names, like "Spinster Jones," "Solomon Doors," and "Droopy Weiners." Alejandro had been writing tunes in between auditions in L.A. and occasionally playing them to friends in private, but on the night of this serendipitous encounter, he lost his inhibition, grabbed his guitar, and

crashed a song circle, playing for a crowd for the first time. One really drunk guy came up afterwards and enthusiastically asked him, "What's your name, man?" Alejandro was surprised by the reaction. After giving a brief thought to the run-in with the hippie, he declared, "I'm Shakey Graves."

That christening and trial by campfire set the actor on the fast track to becoming one of the most-buzzed about homegrown Austin musicians since, well, Gary Clark, Jr. In 2011, he self-released his Shakey Graves debut, *Roll the Bones*, an enchanting, low-fi blues-folk collection featuring Alejandro playing all of the instruments. Despite giving it away essentially for free online through Bandcamp's no-minimum, "name your own price" model, he netted big returns, including around 60,000 downloads and, more importantly, a rising national reputation for having the ability to fingerpick with precision an archtop guitar while simultaneously stomping with fury a kick drum embedded into a suitcase.

"That little bit of time that it takes to find that album on the Internet, and the sort of mystery of it, I feel kind of played into a story that helped people really, like, come to Shakey Graves," Alejandro, 27, says. "I feel like everyone that found it literally felt a little bit like they discovered it."

The album and raves for his dynamic performances earned Shakey Graves slots at Pickathon, the Newport Folk Festival, South by Southwest, and, most recently, the Americana Music Festival. As momentum swelled in advance of his highly anticipated sophomore album, *And the War*

Photo by Kirk Stewart

Came, Alejandro was destined to bring the one-man band to the mainstream. That doesn't mean one-man band in the sense of a bedroom techno-wizard who manufactures sounds. Alejandro was a one-man band in a purer sense: a singer and multi-instrumentalist in the busker style, sweating through his white tank-top undershirt and Stetson cowboy hat for enough money to buy his next meal. And then "Dearly Departed," the first single, came out in July, in advance of the new album's Oct. 7 release, and it was a ... *duet*.

"I never really set out to be a one-man band," Alejandro insists. "That was just the most effective way to present my music to people and it sort of turned into its own thing. I really felt like this is a crucial pivot point and if I didn't make the change now, it would be a lot harder to dig myself out later. The story of this album is me reminding myself, or rediscovering, that I never really wanted to do this alone anyway."

That rite-of-passage theme is set with *And the War Came's* lead-off track, "Only Son," a tender number with Alejandro on acoustic guitar, singing about relinquishing his self-importance at age 10. That was the year his parents, both of whom had remarried, each had

a daughter with their new spouses, making him a big brother.

Musically, Alejandro's realization that one is perhaps the loneliest number freed him up to allow others into his creative process. Among them is Austin's Chris Boosahda, a drummer who plays live with Alejandro and co-produced the album with him. For "Dearly Departed" — and two other songs, "Big Time Nashville Star" and "Call It Heaven" — Alejandro enlisted the Denver singer Esme Patterson. Alejandro had been toying with the chorus to "Dearly Departed," walking around his empty house in the wake of a break-up, singing, "You and I both know the house is haunted/You and I both know the ghost is me." Later, while in Boulder, Colo., for a Halloween show at the Fox Theatre, Alejandro and Esme (whose band, Paper Bird, was sharing the bill) pounded out a draft of the song on the front porch of her house the morning of the gig, and debuted it that night.

"Dearly Departed" has a jaunty, handclap beat and an anthemic, singalong hook — hallmarks of the breakout hit "Ho Hey" by the Lumineers. Maybe it's easier to make that association now that Shakey Graves has signed to Dualtone Records, the

Nashville label responsible for taking platinum the Lumineers' self-titled debut album and for winning Texas stalwart Guy Clark his first Grammy for his 2013 album, *My Favorite Picture of You*.

Alejandro originally thought it might be better to independently release *And the War Came*, a relatively ebullient offering whose variety makes it seem like he is still trying to find his voice. But the Dualtone deal gave him the best of both worlds: he had the autonomy to cultivate his own image while also joining a musical family that includes his friends, Cary Ann Hearst and Michael Trent of Shovels & Rope, providing safety in numbers.

"I can't help but refer to this career, and the way that this lifestyle is, as ... an analogy I always come back to is warfare," says Alejandro, who took the album's title from President Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address.

"When I meet other people who are doing their thing, it's like meeting another battalion. You're all fighting in the same battlefields. There are similar ways to do it, but everyone fights differently. At the end of the day, it really comes down to you and your team and your allies."

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Ruthie Foster

Finding the *Promise of a New Day* in the roots of tradition

By j. poet

“I come from a gospel family,” Ruthie Foster says from her home in Austin, reflecting back on her formative years in the tiny town of Gause, Texas.

“My mother and Aunt Rosetta used to sing ‘Precious Memories’ around the house. On Sundays, I used to see my mom in the choir and watch how people reacted to her spirit. She’d be so immersed in the songs, she’d have tears streaming down her face. My earliest memories are of her singing, making her whole body move and bringing the church to an explosion. When she started getting happy, the spirit moved everybody around her.”

That spirit still moves through Foster. Although the singer-songwriter first made her name in the acoustic folk world and more recently has garnered acclaim (and even a Grammy nomination) as a soulful blues artist, her voice and phrasing have always been distinguished by a strong undercurrent of gospel. But *Promise of Brand New Day*, Foster’s ninth release in a recording career that began with 1997’s *Full Circle*, marks the first time she’s brought that aspect of her musical DNA to the foreground by design.

“I didn’t realize [how much gospel music] meant to me until I started putting together the songs I wanted to do on this album,” Foster says. “I grew up with the gospel sound and a lot of what comes out of my mouth sounds like gospel, so I decided to make a conscious shift in that direction. I’m indebted to gospel music and this album does lean in that direction.”

Although she notes that *Promise* is not, strictly speaking, a “gospel record” — “I know I need to do a gospel record, but this isn’t it,” she insists — the whole album is unabashedly inspired by and rooted in the church music tradition that served as her earliest training ground. And it wasn’t just her mother and aunt she learned from. She recalls how her grand uncle, Herbert Ayers, taught her how to play piano and organ in front of the congregation.

“I played organ from the time I was 11, sitting next to him on the bench,” she says. “My feet wouldn’t reach the pedals, but I’d shadow what he was playing. He’d let me play solo during the collection and my mom made sure I’d practice every day. I had to learn a new hymn for every Sunday and that gospel feeling is what I take with me into everything I sing — reggae, blues, country and power ballads. I wanted to pay tribute to those early days and the soul and gospel sounds that shaped me.”

“My albums have been riding the fence between blues and folk for a while,” Foster continues. “I wanted to lean more towards the soul and gospel side of things this time and chose songs my band could really shine on. My drummer, Samantha Banks, comes from the Fourth Ward of Houston, where they have that old soul/gospel feel, and my new bass player, Larry Fulcher, who plays with Taj Mahal and the Phantom Blues Band, was raised in Texas, too. I wanted songs that would sound full and soulful with a trio. I’m also moving into more of an electric sound when I play live. I’ve never played as much electric guitar onstage as I do now. I wanted to capture that feeling.”

She may have had her band and live performance in mind when she conceived the project, but Foster enlisted outside help to help her make the album in the studio. She asked Meshell Ndegeocello to step in as producer, and the noted

Photo by Mary Keating Bruton

neo-soul artist’s presence and direction gave the *Promise* sessions an extra jolt of energy. Ndegeocello cut the backing tracks with a group she assembled: guitarist Chris Bruce (Sheryl Crow), keyboard player Jebin Bruni (Aimee Mann), drummer Ivan Edwards, and Ndegeocello herself on bass. (The album also features Nayanna Holley on background vocals and Texas guitarist Doyle Bramhall II guesting on one track.) When Foster got to the studio, all she had to do was sing.

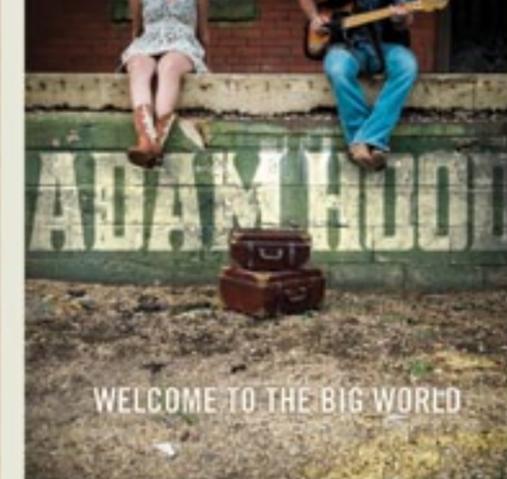
“It was a real treat to work that way,” she says. “It stretched me to use a format I’m not used to, but I’m always looking for ways to make the music different and fun. I was going to play guitar [on the album], but when I heard what Chris did, I let that idea go.”

“Meshell had the studio set up with the mics and soundboard in one room with a couch, real homey,” Foster continues. “She said she wanted to help me expand what I’m doing vocally. I don’t know if it’s because she’s an artist, or a woman, but we made a sweet spiritual connection. She made me sound more like myself. When I was singing ‘Learning to Fly,’ she was swaying and moving her arms and directing me, encouraging me to open up vocally. Her reaction to my singing helped me nail the performance.”

Ndegeocello and Foster exchanged ideas via email before they met in the studio. “I wanted to have more of my own songs on the record,” says Foster, whose last album, 2012’s Grammy-nominated *Let It Burn*, featured only three of her own compositions (compared to the seven she has on *Promise*.) “She took the demos I sent her and expanded on them for the arrangements, and she was great at bringing other tunes into the mix. She sent me ‘The Ghetto,’ a song made famous by the Staples Singers, and ‘Outlaw’ by Gene McDaniels. I knew [McDaniels] was a pop singer, but I wasn’t aware of him as a protest singer, so I got busy and looked him up. Mavis Staples sent me a personal note after we decided to record ‘The Ghetto’ that said, ‘Miss Ruthie picked a good one.’”

She *made* a good one, too. *Promise of a Brand New Day* has the intimate feel of a classic soul recording. Foster’s burnished vocals have never sounded warmer or fuller, with Ndegeocello’s arrangements giving every track its own unique identity. “Brand New Day” is a joyous a cappella ode to the salvation true love can bring. “Let Me Know” opens with Foster’s melisma-drenched vocals playing off of Bramhall’s twangy guitar, before moving into a gospel-inflected shuffle. There’s a hint of Stax in the swinging backbeat of “My Kinda Lover,” a simmering soul ballad marked by Foster’s sprightly vocal. And there’s even a hint of reggae in “Singin’ the Blues” — an observation that’s met with a chuckle from Foster.

“When I did the demo of that song, I played two bars with reggae upstrokes on the guitar,” she says. “It’s pretty subtle. It’ll be interesting to see how many people catch on to it.”



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Shelley King

Stirring the fire in her soul

By Rob Patterson

"I can't wait for the fire puns," says Austin singer-songwriter Shelley King, anticipating the reaction to the release of her seventh album, *Building a Fire*.

Okay, wait no longer. But that name is more than just kindling for puns. It's the perfect analogy for King's passion for music, fanned over time from a spark she was born with into a successful career that's earned her both critical and peer acclaim and a carefully tended, widespread fanbase.

"That's true," says King over late morning coffee at Café Crème in Southeast Austin, just a few blocks from where she lives with her husband/drummer, Perry Drake, and their son. Then she cites the album-opening title track, a slow-burning (pun intended) gospel/blues number, as a particularly apt example. "In fact, when the song began it started as that: My passion for music and the fire inside of me. But as the song progressed it became a different kind of story, a not exactly love but desire story. You have this idea and then it takes off and becomes a whole different story."

The song "Building a Fire" may have changed course, but King's love for music has been a constant in her life for as long as she can remember. "I feel like I've always had that burning in me, if you will — since I was a little kid, I enjoyed singing," recounts King, who grew up in the Arkansas countryside near Hot Springs, with stints in Amarillo and Houston as her mother

divorced and remarried. "My mom told me stories about how when she'd have a dinner party, I'd go around and tug on people's jackets, and say, 'Hey, you want to hear me sing?' since I was 3 years old. I would sing songs like 'Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head' and 'I'll Never Fall in Love Again' to my friends on the swing set."

On top of being precocious, she was gifted with a musical family. "My mother was writing songs as a hobby, and some poems and things, when I was 8 or 9 years old," King continues. "I was exposed to that and thought it was cool, so when I would write I would naturally do it in verse/chorus format, because that's what my mom was doing. So I went in that direction, but the music was the thing I was always interested in. I was in choirs in school and church, and my uncles played guitar, so there was always music around."

Naturally, she dreamed from childhood about growing up to be a singer, albeit not quite the kind she is today. "I never imagined at a young age that I would be doing what I do now," King says, then smiles. "I had more of an idea that I would be riding in limousines and singing Barbra Streisand songs when I was a little kid."

Although her limo turned out to be a van and her orchestra a road-seasoned band of versatile roots rockers, King still tugs on heartstrings with her potent alto voice and equally rich repertoire of deeply-felt songs, most from her own pen. She began performing during her college years at Sam Houston State University, transitioning from community musical theater to playing solo gigs. She kept her own early songs to herself, though, sticking to covers until she tried to land a gig

at Fitzgerald's in Houston and handed the booker a song list. "He just about laughed me out of the office," King recounts with a laugh. Fortunately, the booker also urged her to work up originals and eventually offered her a spot.

As important as Fitzgerald's was in redirecting King's musical energies, it wasn't until her move to Austin in 1992 that she began to find her true voice. "When I was in Houston, I was just trying to figure it out," says King. "But when I moved to Austin, I was exposed to really good songwriters and really good music that has a rootsy, bluesy edge, and it just made the pop-rock stuff that I had been writing fade away. The songs that I felt were my best were the ones that I started writing once I came here."

Those songs didn't go unnoticed by others, either — especially not after King finally quit her day job (sales) and committed to her music career fulltime. She released her debut album, *Call of My Heart*, in 1998 on her own Lemonade Records label (named for the old adage about how when life gives you lemons, make lemonade), and a couple of years later the title track was covered by longtime Austin favorite Toni Price on her 2001 album, *Midnight Pumpkin*. Price's recording of "Call of My Heart" won Best Song at the 2002 Austin Music Awards, boosting King's profile and own live draw and setting the stage for her AMA win for Best Roots Band three years later. But her biggest honor yet came in 2008, when she was selected as the official Texas State Musician. The fact that King, the first female artist honored with the title since its inception in 2003, was still largely unknown at the time (compared at least to previous honorees like Billy Joe Shaver and Ray Benson, not to mention her immediate successor, Willie Nelson) raised some eyebrows.

"There's a lot of people that did that," King admits. "It was a surprise. I still don't know how that happened and I'm still very grateful for that. And it's been a real help for my career. You have to step up when you realize that there are legends that haven't had that title yet."

King answered that "step up" challenge convincingly with her third studio album, 2009's *Welcome Home* — even though the finished product was actually somewhat of a happy accident. Over the years King had played a number of shows opening for the Subdudes, forging a friendship that led to her recording some demos with the band's John Magnie and Steve Amdée at Magnie's studio in Fort Collins, Colo. The plan was to take the demos back to Austin and add some of her favorite local players, but she liked the original tracks so much that she ended up releasing them as-is. "It just became a record," King says. "When it was completed, I felt like it was a time capsule of our time in the studio and suddenly I didn't want anyone else involved. All of my ideas of having so-and-so play the solo here and so-and-so play the solo there ... it was just great the way it was. I really liked the space and openness of it."

"Austin made me who I am," she continues. "[But] I really feel like the *Welcome Home* record helped me really find who I am. What they [Magnie and Amdée] do in the recording process is really relax me and help me to be myself and not be concerned about what's being recorded. They bring out the heart in me."

In fact, King had such a good experience making *Welcome*

Home with Magnie and Amdée that she teamed with them again in Colorado to record *Building a Fire*. This time around, though, she stuck to her original plan of including her Austin friends on the record, too. After starting the album in Fort Collins, she brought the tracks back to Austin to add Marvin Dykhuis on guitars, mandolin and dobro and Sarah Brown on bass. She also made room for guest players like Cindy Cashdollar on lap steel, Warren Hood on fiddle, and Carolyn Wonderland on electric guitar. (In addition to her solo career, King also plays with Wonderland and Brown in the Austin-based blues-rock band Sis Deville, an all-female side project that also includes singer-songwriter Floramay Holliday and drummer Lisa Pankratz.)

Building a Fire showcases her vocal and songwriting gifts at their finest, occupying a thematic and musical space that embraces the good times of Friday and Saturday night and the occasional morning-after melancholy as well as a spirited Sunday church meeting vibe. It melds together her love for gospel, blues, soul and country into her own trademark stylistic region that spans from the Mississippi Delta across the Gulf Coast to the Texas Hill Country.

"I'm very excited about it," King says with a smiling ebullience that is at the core of her personality and stage presence. She's so excited, in fact, that she's hired publicist Elaine Schock, who works with stars like Willie Nelson and Toby Keith, to further the national profile she's been building for years by criss-crossing America on tour. But no matter where her music takes her and how welcome her fans make her feel far from home, Austin's call on her heart remains stronger than ever.

"I fall in love with almost everyplace that I go and I could see myself living everywhere I go," she enthuses. "I love Nashville. I love Fort Collins. I love Woodstock, NY. I love San Francisco. So many places I get there and think, 'I could live here ...' But then I think, 'I love Austin.' It's about friends, it's about community."

And in "building a fire" from the city where she has lived for more than two decades, King does the Lone Star State and its capital city proud.

Photo courtesy of Shock Ink

Noel McKay

A master for a mentor, the perfect duo partner and songs aplenty — how much is “Too Much” for one guy to ask for?

By D.C. Bloom

Noel McKay will never forget the day he opened that can of whoop-ass at the Jimmie Rodgers Festival in Kerrville back in 1993.

Because as he and his brother, Hollin, launched into a song about the folly of settling matters with fisticuffs, paying close attention was none other than festival headliner and venerated Texas songwriting legend Guy Clark.

Recalling the moment today in an East Austin vegetarian hangout, the ever-humble McKay still seems a tad astonished, yet rightfully proud, that Clark “kind of flipped out on my songs, particularly ‘A Can of Whoop-Ass,’ which he thought was really funny.” So much so, in fact, that after the McKay Brothers set concluded, Clark walked over to introduce himself.

“Here was this huge, towering guy with Lee press-on nails on his right hand, and he gave me his address and said, ‘I want you to send me as much of your stuff as you can.’”

Clark also gave the young Noel, then just 23, a copy of his latest album, *Boats to Build*. McKay admits that although he wasn’t completely unfamiliar with Clark’s music at the time (you don’t split your formative years between Lubbock and the Hill Country aspiring to a songwriting career without knowing the basics of Texas Music 101), it wasn’t until he gave the album repeated close listens that “the gravity of him sort of taking me under his wing began to dawn on me. I began to realize that this was a *big deal*.”

A big deal, indeed — and one that, over the years, has allowed McKay the opportunity to learn firsthand from the master craftsman himself how great songs, if not boats, are built with meticulous and tender loving care. “I’ve heard him say things like, ‘It isn’t how clever a line is or makes you seem — if it doesn’t serve the song, you’ve got to throw it out,’” McKay says. “And I’ve just sort of begun to live by that, because he’s right.”

It’s an apprenticeship that has served McKay well throughout his own songwriting career, from his days performing with Hollin as the McKay Brothers to his present solo endeavors and duo work with girlfriend Brennen Leigh. McKay and Clark have co-written four songs together over the years, including one that ended up on Clark’s first Grammy-winning album, last year’s *My Favorite Picture of You*.

That particular collaboration began during a phone call with Clark telling McKay, “Hey, I got a song idea for you ...” A few days later, McKay was handed a lyric sheet and the general framework for a song that would become “El Coyote,” a powerful ballad about the rapacious ways of the smugglers enlisted by families seeking better lives across the U.S./Mexico border. McKay recalls his trepidation about turning in his homework, and “the huge relief that lifted off my shoulders when Clark listened to it and said, ‘Good work.’” Not that it was finished by a long shot, though; that would still require months and months of subtle tweaking and the wholesale moving around of major sections.

“Really, the only way that I knew Guy considered the song finished was when I finally heard him do it live,” McKay says.

While Clark went on to record “El Coyote,” another co-write between the mentor and mentee, “Blue Wyoming Mountains,” makes its debut on McKay’s own new album, *Is That Too Much to Ask*. He released it in August, just shy

of a year after *Before the World Was Made*, his Gurf Morlix-produced duo record with Leigh (an accomplished songwriter and solo artist in her own right.)

Not surprisingly, *Is That Too Much to Ask* features a couple of co-writes with Leigh, including the album’s title track (actually a three-person co-write with David Olney). Leigh also lends a hand on guitar, mandolin, and harmony vocals, along with additional instrumental assistance from friends Ray Bonneville, Rebecca Patek, Ricky Davis, Ethan Shaw, and Jonathan Milton. But it’s still very much a DIY affair, made resourcefully “on the cheap” and with minimum fuss in every aspect except for the writing.

“I just took this little Silvertone guitar that I got for free and laid down a bunch of songs with just me and my guitar and some of them with Brennen playing guitar and singing on them,” McKay says. “I just made sure they were songs that I was really proud of. They’re mostly songs about the sort of people that make some less-than-stellar choices in life.”

If McKay himself has made any such less-than-stellar choices in his own life, partnering with Leigh certainly isn’t one of them. Although they both maintain separate solo careers and work and record with others, they can count on each other for support even when they’re not in official duo mode. “It’s nice when I have a gig and Brennen can be my accompanist, and the other way around, too,” he says, then adds with a grateful laugh, “It keeps us working!”

And that goes for writing together as much as it does performing.

“Brennen and I are in a constant state of songwriting,” says McKay. “We have so many unfinished songs right now. Eventually, we get to ‘em and write ‘em. Maybe we’ll write one today in the car heading to Tennessee.”

It’s a 15-hour drive from Austin to Nashville, but McKay and Leigh have probably made the trek enough times now to have enough songs for a whole album’s worth of car tunes. But McKay’s got another visit with Guy Clark waiting for him on the far side of this particular trip, so foremost on his mind at the moment is one last errand he needs to run before leaving town.

“He always wants us to bring him barbeque from Texas,” McKay says with a smile.

Photo by Melinda Rattle Inn

Robert Earl Keen

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Artist Profiles

Jim Lauderdale

With *I Am a Song*, “Mr. Americana” proves he can still deliver straight-up honky-tonk.

By Kelly Dearmore

The seemingly always Nudie-suited Jim Lauderdale is more than just the sharpest-dressed man in Nashville: He’s also quite possibly the most prolific, averaging an album a year and often times two (counting this July’s *I Am a Song*, a 20-song double album.) In 2013, he casually knocked out *three*.

“I like to write things and see them come to fruition,” offers Lauderdale, 57. “The songs keep coming to me, so I want to get them out sooner rather than later.”

Going all the way back to his 1991 Reprise debut, *Planet of Love*, Lauderdale has actually released an impressive 26 different titles. But it’s no coincidence that 19 of those albums came in the new millennium, coinciding with the rise of the Americana music movement. Although he’s landed many a cut on mainstream country releases by such artists as George Strait, George Jones, the Dixie Chicks, Patty Loveless, and Blake Shelton, the North Carolina native has no doubt that were he still fenced in as a major-label country artist himself — as he was for the first decade of his career — his catalog would be a *lot* slimmer.

“I wouldn’t have been allowed to do things the way I do them now,” says Lauderdale. “Maybe I’m pushing it a bit now! The way I release music probably isn’t good for business, but it’s the way I feel compelled to do it.”

Lauderdale’s compulsion to make and release his music his way, as often as he wants and in whatever particular style strikes his fancy at the moment, has resulted in such varied recent fare as 2012’s *Buddy and Jim*, his folk-rock duo record with longtime friend Buddy Miller, and half a dozen bluegrass-leaning albums co-written with Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter. Not surprisingly, Hunter has a few co-writes on the new *I Am a Song* as well, along with such seemingly disparate but notable scribes as Elvis Costello, Bobby Bare, and John Oates, among others. Lauderdale wrote a handful of the new songs at a writer’s retreat in the California desert near Joshua Tree, but also reached back into his archives to re-record “The King of Broken Hearts,” his well-regarded waltzing tribute to George Jones and Gram Parsons that George Strait covered on his smash-hit 1992 *Pure Country* soundtrack.

“Pure country,” incidentally, describes *I Am a Song* to a T: it’s Lauderdale’s most unabashedly straight-up honky-tonk record in at least a decade.

“I do usually start with wanting to make a specific style of record,” he explains. “So, if I’m leaning towards writing a bluegrass record, that’s what tends to come out of me at that point. For this new record, everything I wrote, no matter who I wrote it with, felt like country songs.”

It really should go without saying, though, that Lauderdale’s country songs don’t feel or sound much like the kind clogging the mainstream radio channels these days. After all, this is still “Mr. Americana” we’re talking about here, and he didn’t come by that nickname just from hosting Nashville’s annual Americana Music Honors & Awards ceremony for the last 10 years. As one of the genre’s most passionate ambassadors, Lauderdale walks the walk every bit as well as he talks the talk — and nobody talks that talk better than he does.

“Awareness of Americana music and the Americana Music Association has really snowballed in the past 12 years,” he says with mayoral pride. “And I’m really happy about that because it has given a home to a lot of music that needed a real home.”

Photo courtesy of Jim Lauderdale

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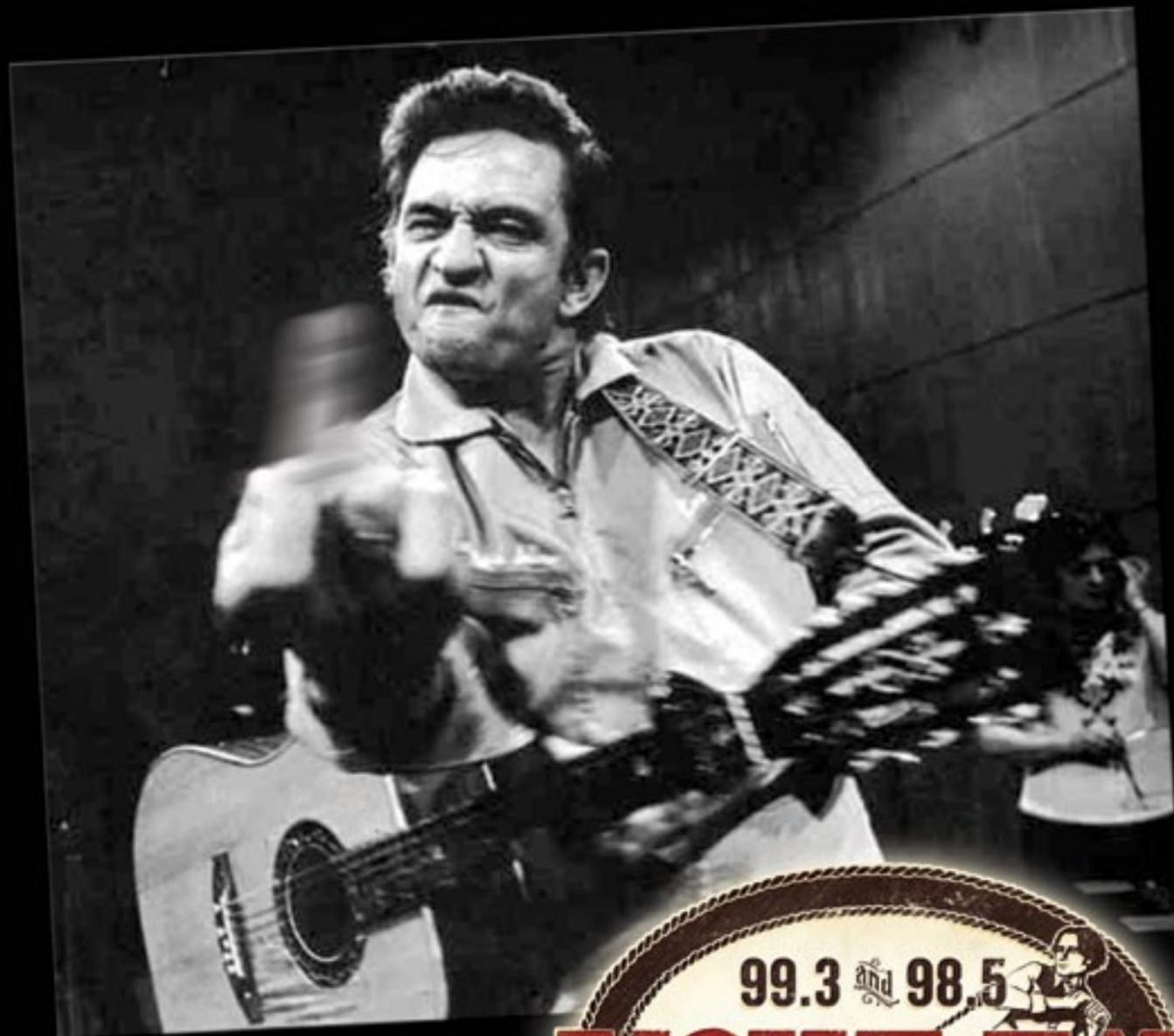


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drew kennedy

Happy accidents on the troubadour highway

By Kelly Dearmore

Drew Kennedy says he “didn’t have a clue” that he was making his latest album until it was already done.

Last November, he showed up at a little venue in tiny League City, Texas (just south of Houston) to play what was just supposed to be another regular solo acoustic gig. The turnout at League City’s Listening Room — actually an old post office — was good, with a capacity crowd of 150 people on hand

to hear the seasoned singer-songwriter play a generous selection of tunes mostly drawn from his two most recent releases, 2013’s *Wide Listener* and 2011’s *Fresh Water in the Salton Sea*. When the show was done, Kennedy mingled with the audience, sold a few CDs, and started packing up his guitar. That’s when the venue’s sound engineer informed him that he’d recorded the show and asked if he’d like a copy.

As Kennedy would later note in a blog post on his website, the show he listened back to wasn’t technically “perfect” in terms of either his performance or the recording. Had he planned ahead of time on recording the show for posterity, he might have worked out a setlist (even though he rarely ever does), paid a little more attention to how fast or slow he was playing each song, and maybe even been more conscious of the timing of his “thank you’s” and other comments to the audience throughout the set. At the very least, he for certain would have mic’d the crowd and his guitar better. But in spite of — if not *because* of — all that, he liked it so much, he decided to release the two-track recording as-is as a double live album, *Sad Songs Happily Played*. It’s what he proudly calls “a human recording” — capturing by “happy accident” what happened not only that one night in League City, but the essence of what he strives to do *every* night. Better than perfect, it’s an honest document of a true troubadour sharing his contemplative songs and equally insightful stories off-the-cuff and without a net for an intimate audience of music fans who appreciate craft and sincerity over flash.

Kennedy was born in Virginia but has lived in New Braunfels for about a decade now — pretty much for his entire recording career, which he kicked off in 2003 with *Hillbilly Pilgrim*. Counting the new live record, he’s now self-released seven albums *and* a novel (2011’s *Fresh Walter in the Salton Sea*, issued in tandem with the album of the same name). Along the way, he’s developed quite a reputation as a songwriter’s songwriter, co-writing songs with a number of other notable artists on the Texas scene ranging from younger guns like Rob Baird and Bart Crow to Red Dirt favorite Jason Boland and even Walt Wilkins. Through constant touring, he’s also established a loyal statewide following. He’s not selling out Billy Bob’s in Fort Worth, nor is he at the top of the annual Lone Star Jam bill, but 10 years into his career, he’s right where he wants to be in the grand musical scheme.

“My music seems to resonate in both the songwriter rooms that I play and those that lean more towards your standard honky-tonk,” observes Kennedy, 34. “I don’t think about where I fit very often. I’ve played coffee houses, rock clubs, dancehalls, backyards, and listening rooms, and I think my music works in all of those settings.”

Kennedy’s found encouraging evidence that his original music works in plenty of places outside of his adopted Lone Star State, too. He’s taken a more aggressive approach over the last few years exploring the Western terrain beyond the Panhandle. Along with helping to organize the annual Red River Songwriters Festival in New Mexico, which marked its third year last January, he just completed a tour of Colorado. But he notes that cultivating his out-of-state fanbase is still very much a work in progress.

“There are music fans all over the planet— you just have to work a little harder to build an audience,” he says. “The music doesn’t change based on my location, but it’s certainly more of a slower build as far as an audience goes.”

As long as the songs keep coming to him, though, he’s got the DIY drive to keep on happily playing them anywhere and for anyone he can. “The whole troubadour thing is about winning over one person at a time,” he says. “I don’t care if someone thinks of me as a folk singer or a Texas country artist, so long as they think of me.”

“I don’t think about where I fit very often. I’ve played coffee houses, rock clubs, dancehalls, backyards, and listening rooms, and I think my music works in all of those settings.”



Photo courtesy of Drew Kennedy

Artist Profiles

jess klein

An ex-pat New Yorker rediscovers her musical faith in Texas

By D.C. Bloom

time I played it, it was getting a really strong reaction. I realized that's a pretty rich question: How do you develop faith?"

With that as a centering premise, Klein set off to write an album's worth of songs "about things that scare me a bit" — then turned to Austin producer Mark "Professor Feathers" Addison to give the intimate, inquisitorial collection the vibrant sonic edge she was seeking.

Addison was one of the first Austinites to welcome Klein with open arms when she moved to the city in 2008. Within days of her arrival, Klein was invited to test run her new songs at the time at Addison's studio while he was out of town. "I'm thinking, man, Austin is so cool," says Klein now in remembering her good fortune in falling in with the man with the downy moniker she finds so amusing. "It was like I just showed up and here I have the run of this guy's studio. So I demoed songs and when he heard what I was doing and liked it, he offered to produce the album. He and Scrappy (Jud Newcomb) put together a band and we tried one song and I was like, 'Ok, I guess you know what you're doing,' and we just took off and evolved from there."

Klein was no novice herself. She'd already had a string of critically-acclaimed albums since her 1998 debut, appeared on network television and established herself as a popular touring act throughout the U.S. and Europe. But until her big move down Texas way she still felt like something was lacking in her career.

"I came through on tour, and I'd see the way audiences were responding to the music, and I thought to myself, 'I need to live where people are enjoying music like *that*,'" she says.

Today, the Empire State native is increasingly viewed as a "Texas artist," especially by her fans in Europe. Klein recently signed with the Germany-based label Blue Rose Records, of whom she says, "I think half of their artists are from Austin." (Her Blue Rose label mates include Band of Heathens, Jon Dee Graham, James McMurtry, Uncle Lucius, and Carolyn Wonderland).

Klein's rubbed elbows with some noteworthy non-Texans as well, including folk icon Arlo Guthrie, with whom she's toured three times (once through Ireland). "He's just like a really cool father figure," she enthuses of Woody's son. "He'd show me a couple of guitar tricks, and I'm like, 'Oh my God, Arlo Guthrie is playing my guitar!'" She's also collaborated onstage with emerging folk wunderkind John Fullbright, having made quite an impression on fans the first time they sang together at an Austin coffeehouse. "Afterwards people were coming up and going, 'Your voices really sound great together!'"

"John has a theory for the reason we clicked so well musically," she continues. "He once told me, 'We both just really like to dig in.'"

As proven throughout *Learning Faith*, Klein does, indeed, like to dig in. Her emotional intensity, go-for-broke mentality and astute use of dynamics bring a defiant sense of fearlessness to all 12 songs. They may all be about things that "scare" her, but she faces them head on with a voice to be reckoned with.

"It can be really healing to me, to really let those notes soar," confides Klein. "And you do get people's attention with a big voice ..."

She laughs. "People are like, 'Wow, you're loud!'"

A funny thing happened on the way to completing Jess Klein's most recent album, *Learning Faith*. The title proved to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"It actually wound up giving me back my faith and energy in playing music," says the diminutive powerhouse of her third release since moving to Texas from New York. "Before I made this album, I was super burned out and I wasn't sure how much longer I was going to be playing music. But I had written this song called 'Learning Faith' and every

"Before I made this album, I was super burned out and I wasn't sure how much longer I was going to be playing music. But I had written this song called 'Learning Faith' and every time I played it, it was getting a really strong reaction. I realized that's a pretty rich question: How do you develop faith?"



Photo by Valerie Fremmin

mike ryan

Teaming-up to grow-up with *Bad Reputation*

By Kelly Dearmore

launched a handful of singles onto the regional charts. But a young artist can grow a lot in the short span of two years, and Ryan's third album, *Bad Reputation* (released in August), represents a major stride forward in his development. His deliberate steps to both expand and improve upon his creative process have yielded a tremendously fresh batch of new songs with insightful things to say about the real life of a man living, loving, and leaving in the modern age.

It started back in March of 2013, six months after the release of *Night Comes Falling*, when Ryan landed a publishing deal with Nashville's Sea Gayle Music. Like many an independent Texas artist before him, Ryan initially had some doubts about how well he'd adapt to Music Row — or more specifically, to the practice of co-writing with strangers. Up until then, he'd only written songs by himself (or occasionally with a bit of help from a friend via email.) Flying to Nashville and participating in a group writing session would prove to be a true rite of passage.

"I was nervous about co-writing, because songwriting has always been such a personal thing to me," says Ryan. "And, I didn't want to get into a writing session with an established writer and have him think I was an idiot."

That fear dissipated quickly, though, once Ryan got acclimated to his new environment. He says getting to know the other writers "opened my eyes about Nashville," and when not taking keen notes on how they all worked their "songwriting muscles," he found time to hit some of the local bars and even attended a couple of Nashville Sounds minor league baseball games. And the more comfortable he got, the more he found himself opening up to a whole new way of expressing himself through songwriting.

"When you get two or three writers in one room, you can talk about what you want to say, and then get help in finding the way you actually want to say it," he enthuses. "We would start talking about a specific idea among the group and light bulbs would start to go on for people and we would then develop that new idea into something."

Ryan ended up co-writing every song on *Bad Reputation* with at least one other writer. But rather than dilute his own voice, the collaborative results only strengthen the conviction of his singing — just as the album's professionally polished production (all of the vocals, its worth noting, were recorded at the home studio of none other than Brad Paisley) enhances its rocking energy. Standout songs like the title track find Ryan delving into adult themes like one-night stands and the intimate nature of relationships with a maturity and confidence merely hinted at on his earlier efforts.

"Co-writing has opened up so many doors for me," Ryan says. "That's weird because I was so frightened of it just over a year ago. But now, solo writing will never work for me the way that co-writing does now."

Mike Ryan is not, strictly speaking, a "newcomer" on the Texas country scene. The San Antonio-reared, Fort Worth-based songwriter released his debut EP, *The First One*, back in 2010, and his first full-length, 2012's *Night Comes Falling*,

launched a handful of singles onto the regional charts. But a young artist can grow a lot in the short span of two years, and Ryan's third album, *Bad Reputation* (released in August), represents a major stride forward in his development. His deliberate steps to both expand and improve upon his creative process have yielded a tremendously fresh batch of new songs with insightful things to say about the real life of a man living, loving, and leaving in the modern age.

It started back in March of 2013, six months after the release of *Night Comes Falling*, when Ryan landed a publishing deal with Nashville's Sea Gayle Music. Like many an independent Texas artist before him, Ryan initially had some doubts about how well he'd adapt to Music Row — or more specifically, to the practice of co-writing with strangers. Up until then, he'd only written songs by himself (or occasionally with a bit of help from a friend via email.) Flying to Nashville and participating in a group writing session would prove to be a true rite of passage.

"I was nervous about co-writing, because songwriting has always been such a personal thing to me," says Ryan. "And, I didn't want to get into a writing session with an established writer and have him think I was an idiot."

That fear dissipated quickly, though, once Ryan got acclimated to his new environment. He says getting to know the other writers "opened my eyes about Nashville," and when not taking keen notes on how they all worked their "songwriting muscles," he found time to hit some of the local bars and even attended a couple of Nashville Sounds minor league baseball games. And the more comfortable he got, the more he found himself opening up to a whole new way of expressing himself through songwriting.

"When you get two or three writers in one room, you can talk about what you want to say, and then get help in finding the way you actually want to say it," he enthuses. "We would start talking about a specific idea among the group and light bulbs would start to go on for people and we would then develop that new idea into something."

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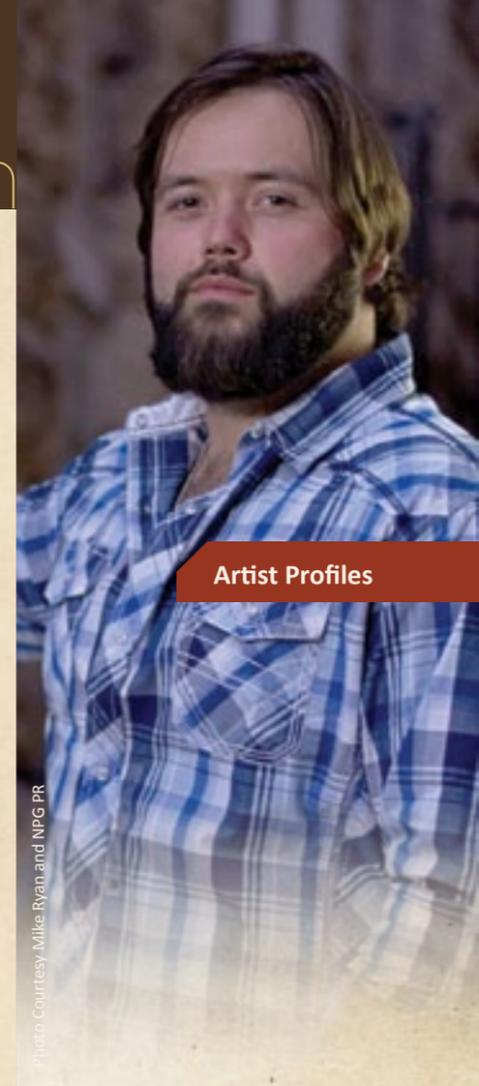


Photo: Courtesy Mike Ryan and NPG PR

True Heroes of Texas Music

By Michael Corcoran

Bobby Ramirez

Everybody's brother

Drummer Bobby Ramirez was the golden boy of the Golden Triangle in the '60s, the 11-year-old who played with teenagers, the 14-year-old who played with men. He didn't just keep the beat, he *became* the beat, with a natural rhythm that was not above further education.

When Edgar Winter and singer Jerry LaCroix set out to assemble a "blue-eyed soul" band to beat them all in 1970, they searched the country before realizing that they already had the best players for their vision in the Gulf Coast. The first to join Edgar Winter's White Trash was the brown-eyed handsome man with the sticks from Port Arthur who would anchor the sound. The next call was to guitarist Rick Derringer, who told *Modern Drummer* magazine that Ramirez laid down "the best groove of any drummer I've ever played with."

Taught to play by his uncle, a big band drummer, Ramirez was well on his way to becoming the Bernard Purdie, the John Jabo Starks of Texas rock and blues ... and then senseless tragedy stopped the roll. In July 1972, Ramirez was stomped to death on Chicago's Rush Street, by a man who had punched him earlier in the night and had friends waiting outside. Ramirez was just 23.

His best drummer friend, Willie Ornelas, then living in Houston, was "just numb" when he heard the news. "Nobody could believe it. Everybody loved Bobby. He was such a mellow cat," says Ornelas, who often competed with Ramirez for gigs, yet they shared percussion patterns and other tips.

"The first time Bobby blew me away was when I was with Jerry and the Dominoes, playing some club in Houston, and Jerry (LaCroix) called him up on 'Harlem Shuffle,'" recalls Ornelas, who has enjoyed session success in L.A. since the '80s. "Afterwards I went up to him and said, 'Hey, man, that was great. What was that one thing you kept doing?' And Bobby stood right in front of me, put his hands on my shoulders and he showed me (the beat), with the right hand being the bass drum and the left hand being the snare."

"When I met (iconic modern drummer) Steve Gadd and I told him I used to play with White Trash, he said (excitedly) 'Is that you on 'Save the Planet?'" says Ornelas. "That was a big drum part for him. And I said, 'no, that was my brother Bobby Ramirez.' I didn't think, like 'oh, why didn't he say one of my tracks?' I was proud to tell him about Bobby. He was on his way, man. He was going to be one of the all-time greats."

When Ramirez heard a cool twist from Ornelas, Willie would show Bobby the same way. Sometimes when they drove, one would sit behind the other and show him new beats on the shoulders. Then they'd pull over and change seats. "We did that for years," Ornelas says. "You know, we were both good drummers, but Bobby was the real talent. I've never bullshitted myself on that point. Bobby had a feel that we all could duplicate technically, but it was real for him."

Born in Mexico, Ramirez was raised

near the oil refineries in Port Arthur in a large, working class household. He became hooked on drums since the first time his uncle let him mess around on his kit. Port Arthur's proximity to the Louisiana border, where the drinking age lowered from 21 to 18, proved essential to the education of young Bobby. Vinton, La., had such hotspots as Big Oaks Club, Lou Anne's, and the Texas Pelican Club, where drummers could make a lot more money than factory workers or farmhands. The music was for dancing, so every band played soul music, rock stuff, some ballads for slow dances, some Fats Domino to remind everybody what state they're in. If you had horns, your man was Bobby Blue Bland, whose drummer, John "Jabo" Starks, was a Ramirez role model. "If you couldn't play 'Turn On Your Love Light,' you couldn't work," Ornelas says.

Ramirez was also heavily influenced by Louisiana drummer Clint West (nee Guillory), who led the Boogie Kings until 1965. "Clint West used to set up his drums at the front of the stage, with the band behind him," laughs Ornelas. "We thought that was the coolest."

When West split from the Boogie Kings (losing a court battle to take the name with him), LaCroix took over the raucous swamp-rock party band and tapped Ramirez to replace his idol. Finally making some decent pay, Ramirez dropped out of high school to tour. After a few stints in Las Vegas with

the Kings, word got out on Ramirez and he was hired to play some dates with Ike and Tina Turner, then a more extended gig with Hawaiian singer Dick Jensen. Ramirez was in Hawaii when he got the call to join Edgar Winter's band. "Bobby was making something like \$750 a week with Dick Jensen, but he quit that to make \$50 a week to play with Edgar and Jerry," says Ornelas. Bobby Ramirez wanted to rock out.

He played on the first two White Trash albums, including the live LP *Roadwork*, which has become a favorite YouTube stop for



Gulf Coast Rhythms: Bobby Ramirez (far right) with Edgar Winter's White Trash. Guitarist Rick Derringer enthused that Ramirez laid down "the best groove of any drummer I've ever played with." But soon after Winter disbanded the group, Ramirez was beaten to death in an altercation outside a club in Chicago. Photo courtesy Epic Records.

drummers, especially "Love Light" and the gospel-fueled "Save the Planet." "When I met (iconic modern drummer) Steve Gadd and I told him I used to play with White Trash, he said (excitedly) 'Is that you on 'Save the Planet?'" says Ornelas. "That was a big drum part for him. And I said, 'no, that was my brother Bobby Ramirez.' I didn't think, like 'oh, why didn't he say one of my tracks?' I was proud to tell him about Bobby. He was on his way, man. He was going to be one of the all-time greats."

For years, LaCroix declined to talk about

that dreadful night of July 24, 1972 in Chicago. It hurt too much. LaCroix and Ramirez were quite a soulful tandem and the chemistry continued offstage. But in 2000, the Louisiana-born/Texas-raised singer finally opened up in an interview that was later posted on www.swampland.com.

Edgar Winter disbanded White Trash in '72 to assemble the group, with Ronnie Montrose and Dan Hartman, that recorded "Frankenstein" and "Free Ride," so his former mates toured as LaCroix. They had just played a great set opening for Uriah Heep in Chicago and went out to see an all-girl band called Bertha whom they had met months earlier in L.A. It was a great, fun night for everybody.

"The show was over and Bobby went downstairs to take a leak," LaCroix recalled. "Our road manager came back upstairs and anxiously reported that Bobby had had an altercation in the bathroom." An Hispanic man with short, slicked-back hair had remarked that, because of his long hair, Ramirez should be in the ladies' room, which led to cross words, then a punch to the face that bloodied the drummer's nose. Bouncers broke up the scuffle, but the club manager declined to call the police. LaCroix said he tried to get Ramirez "to just blow it off, but he couldn't believe that someone could assault him in a public place and get away with it!" Ramirez went outside to look for the guy who punched him.

But it turned out that the man had friends and when Ramirez turned the corner, they jumped him and kicked him in the head over and over with their pointed, steel-toe shoes. LaCroix was also beaten when he tried to help. As he sat up in his fog, LaCroix saw Ramirez, his face a pulpy mess, cradled on the ground by the group's manager.

Why did this have to happen? It made no sense. These guys were not fighters, they were musicians. And now one of them was dead and one had to carry on with such a tragic memory. Death has no groove whatsoever.

"There's hardly a day goes by when I don't think about dear Bobby and what 1,000 things I could have done differently," LaCroix said in 2000. The great rock 'n' soul singer, the Bob Seeger of Southeast Texas, died in May 2014 at age 70. The great drummer Ramirez would be 65 if he had lived. And he'd still be playing, you can be sure.



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Q & A

Paul Thorn

Pricking consciences — and funnybones — with *Too Blessed to Be Stressed*

By Lynne Margolis

Though Paul Thorn didn't release his first album until 1997, it's not a stretch to say he's always been in the entertainment business. From his Pentecostal-preacher dad's tent revivals, where he started singing at 3, he learned the power of language and cadence; from his days as a professional boxer, he learned how to throw (or take) crowd-pleasing punches. And when you're born and raised in the town that produced Elvis Presley — 130 miles from Memphis and 88 from Muscle Shoals — it's entwined in your DNA. All of which helps to explain why he's so good at spinning plain-spoken tales of downtrodden souls and Southern discomfort into uplifting songs filled with insights that seem simultaneously simple and brilliant, personal and universal. In an earlier era, grandmothers would have lined their walls with renderings of Thorn's wit and wisdom as counted-cross-stitch homilies — neatly framed truths worth remembering.

The title of his new album, *Too Blessed to Be Stressed*, would be one. The track "Don't Let Nobody Rob You of Your Joy" is another. His 2010 release *Pimps and Preachers* contains humor-tinged confessions such as "I Don't Like Half the Folks I Love," "Tequila is Good for the Heart" and "I Hope I'm Doin' This Right." (His self-deprecating humor extends to his label name, Perpetual Obscurity

Records.) As that album title suggests, Thorn's always straddled the poles between heaven and hell, good and evil and right versus wrong, generally from the perspective of those who can't even grasp the ladder's bottom rung, much less climb it — but still, they might see the light when others don't.

Thorn says he's not religious, but his combustibly funky rhythms, swampy blues and rock-edged tunes are often infused with true gospel fervor. Occasionally, though, he switches to gentle, heart-tugging — and equally powerful — love ballads. Always, he reminds us that compassion might be the most important quality humans possess. Or should.

In his country-boy Southern drawl, Thorn discussed his latest work a day before heading back to his Tupelo, Miss., home — the subject of "No Place I'd Rather Be."

The new album definitely has an upbeat sound, which reflects the message you've said you want to convey about positive encouragement. Does it seem like everything's really going to hell right now, or do we just perceive that because of so much negative coverage?

It's a little of everything. The media is really negative and there's so much downer stuff goin' on. Even in music;

there's only so many songs I want to hear about missin' a girl, you know? My new record, I think of as the Americana Kool & the Gang. I liked their music because it made people feel good when you heard it. I've been around a lot of people who are smarter than me and wiser than me, and they have shared some things with me that I just decided, I'll make 'em into songs and put 'em on a record.

That makes you as wise and smart as they are if you knew what to do with the information.

Well, so much bad information is being given out, and advice that don't work. I wanted to share some nuggets that I learned *do work*. Like the song titles — one is "Don't Let Nobody Rob You of Your Joy." That was something my grandpa used to say. And what he was sayin' was, hang around people that encourage you. Because there are people who want to be your friend but not really, because they want you to be beneath them. If you ever get a leg up and do something you like, and they ain't God no more, then they get upset. Know what I mean?

Yup. There's a lot of that jockeying for position in this world, unfortunately.

Yes, there is.

This album forsakes some of the sly sarcasm and political commentary you've done in the past, although you've got "Mediocrity is King." There are also fewer narrative, story-type songs. Your press release says you wanted people to feel like you're talking directly to them. Is that why there are fewer characters?

Yeah, they're not stories, they're more like anthems. They're positive anthems. Look at the song titles: There's one called "Don't Let Nobody Rob You of Your Joy," one called "Everybody Needs Somebody," one called "Everything's Gonna be Alright," one's called "Too Blessed to be Stressed." I have to say I've probably gotten a better response at my shows singin' these songs than any songs I've ever put out. People want to sing the lyrics; the choruses are real simple, and it seems like they just start singin' along right off the bat. It's really wonderful how it's bein' received. You know, nobody's gonna like everything you do. I heard a few folks sayin' it wasn't their cup of tea, but I can't please everybody. From the majority of the people, it's been well received. And it seems like it's touchin' people, the sentiment of what we're sayin' in these songs. I can just see people out in the crowd; they're swaying [together]. Without being corny, it really is kind of like a revival. Everybody comes to the show, we sing these songs together and everybody leaves feeling refreshed. What could be wrong with that?

That's one thing I noticed about the melodies; they're just so pretty. They make you feel good all by themselves, even without the lyrics.

Good. That's what I was hopin' for. And I do admit — once again, I don't want to sound corny — but I really believe that music has healing power. And I believe that it can make people feel better. I know this because I've had people come up and tell me that it made 'em feel better. To me, that means mission accomplished. I'm proud of what me and my band and my producer produced. I'm really proud of it.

You've got [gospel singers] the McCrary Sisters on three songs. Did you originally get to know them through the Delbert McClinton cruise or was that a previous association?

You're correct. I met them on the Delbert cruise. And I actually recorded their vocals on the [2014] cruise. We brought some recording equipment, and I went ahead and logged time; we literally took some recording equipment into a cabin on the boat, and we just sang it right there. It was great. They're about the best at what they do, you know?

I know. I love hearing them, and they fit so well with what you're doing on this album.

"I don't want to sound corny, but I really believe that music has healing power ... I know this because I've had people come up and tell me it made 'em feel better. To me, that means mission accomplished."

I think so. The stars were really lined up. I'm really proud of this record, because of, mainly how I'm singing, it makes people *feel*. Y'know, if you can make people feel somethin', then that's great. It appears as



Photo courtesy of Paul Thorn



Paul Thorn

if they feel somethin', because they keep tellin' me they do when they hear these songs.

“What Kind of Roof Do You Live Under” really does sound like a sermon, as if a preacher is asking his flock, “What kind of person are you?”

Well, you know, I grew up in church. I was a preacher’s kid for 18 years, so the language of the church — even though I’m not a Christian artist or a religious artist, or a religious person, for that matter — that dialogue is just ingrained in the way I talk and the way I write.

Who’s Carlo J. Ditta, the author of “Get You A Healin’”?

He’s a songwriter out of New Orleans. I just heard the song; never even met the man. I just liked it so much that I wanted to record it. You talk of a feel-good song; that’s *really* a feel-good song. My producer and songwriting partner [and manager], Billy Maddox, found it on Spotify. It’s the only song on the record that I didn’t write. But if it’s a good song, I don’t care.

How do you and Billy approach song-writing together?

We’ve been writing together for 30 years. We just click real good together. He’s actually my songwriting mentor. He was a little older than me when I met him and he was already havin’ success as a hit country songwriter. And even though I’m not a country artist, I like the way that good country songs are put together, and that’s the style of writing I have; my songs

are like little stories.

A couple of songs on here sound kind of Stones: “This is A Real Goodbye” and “Old Stray Dog and Jesus.” They’re a nice mix of rock and blues. How do you arrive at a sound like that versus something that sounds more revivalist?

I don’t really set out to write a song that sounds like this or that. I just sit around with my guitar and play, and whatever comes out, that’s what happens. I just have fun writin’ songs.

How about “Old Stray Dog and Jesus”? It sounds like a homeless person’s perspective; not exactly uplifting. But does it help to remind people ...

Oh, no, if you listen to the whole song, it’s about the downward spiral of drug addiction. The plus side is that at the end of the song, the guy’s in rehab. When you hit rock bottom, which is where he is, you got two choices: die, or go to rehab. And so really, the guy’s recovering, that’s the hook — that’s the positive ending to that song. He’s in the Glory Road Recovery Home, he’s got a dog, he’s got a sack of dog food, a pack of cigarettes and he’s tryin’ to get back on track.

I also thought of it as possibly helping to remind people how good they really do have it. Most people are not in drug recovery.

It goes to show what I’m talkin’ about. The song can mean one thing to another person, but either way, it means something positive. Because in the beginning, it paints a picture of what the bottom looks like.

Once I asked you to describe your music and you said, “It’s influenced heavily by gospel, but it’s not gospel. It’s sort of a cross between, shoot, I don’t know, Lawrence Welk and ZZ Top.”

Yeah, I still kinda think that’s it.

And I didn’t think to ask then: Did you grow up listening to Lawrence Welk?

Of course! [Imitating the late band leader] “A one anna two anna” ... I loved that show! When I was a kid, I liked to see the bubbles flyin’ through the air. I loved

The Lawrence Welk Show.

I did for a long time, too. And then suddenly, it just felt completely unhip and I couldn’t watch it any more.

Well, the definition of hip is being who you are and enjoying what you really enjoy and not following a trend. That’s what being hip is, to me.

True.

You know, the people who dress hip, and they follow whatever Lady Gaga’s doin’, that ain’t hip, that’s just stupid.

I agree. Maybe she’s trying to be a trendsetter, but she definitely goes over the edge. When she just sits down at a piano and sings, I kind of like her.

I’m not criticizing her; she’s very talented. I just used her as an example. Her and Madonna. I like Lady Gaga, but it’s just Madonna all over again ... Some of the songs almost sound like the exact same songs. I can actually sing the lyrics of one of Madonna’s songs over a Gaga song; it’s just perfect. I think the powers that be up in the corporate world know that the new generation comin’ up never heard of Madonna or don’t hear her music, so they just do it again. They do the same thing again, ‘cause they know the work.

It’s just like fashion; they recycle it every 20 years.

That’s right.

I mentioned earlier how strong the melodies are on this album — not that they aren’t on your previous work, but they all sound sweet here, and you’ve got that beautiful ribbon tying it up at the end with that love song to your wife and family, “No Place I’d Rather Be.” Did you always know that had to be the last track?

Well, I’ve gotten into the habit of whatever the last track is on any album, I want to do something poignant and meaningful, to leave people with a thought, you know. That song is about wantin’ to be home, and people who are truck drivers, people who are soldiers, people who are traveling salesman, they all can relate to that song. I felt like it was worth putting on there, ‘cause I think it

might let some other people know exactly how they feel, being away from their loved ones.

You sang “Doctor My Eyes” on this year’s Jackson Browne tribute album, *Looking Into You*. Did you get to pick the song or did they pick for you?

That’s the song they wanted me to do. I was asked to be on that project and there were a lot of superstar singers on that record, which made it a big thrill to me to get to be on it. We flew down to Dallas, where they were recordin’, and we recorded it in one day. What you’re hearin’ was done in just one day. I’m very proud of it.

It’s one of the strongest tracks on there. I thought it really gave respect to the artist without just mimicking the original.

I’m very fortunate because I’ve had the same band for over 20 years. And it’s a real band; it’s not just a bunch of session guys who get hired to come in and play the songs. I think that comes across on the recording; because we’re such a tight unit from playin’ together, it really clicks. It’s somethin’ that I’m very proud of.

After all this time, are you guys each other’s best friends?

They’re my family. Well, I have three different families. I have my fans, that’s one of my families that I love. And I have my band, that’s a family I live with some of the time, and then I have my most treasured family, my biological family.

You’ve done several Delbert McClinton Sandy Beaches cruises and you’re slated for next year’s. Got any stories to tell about those experiences?

I don’t know if I have any good stories to tell, but Delbert is getting close to retiring. I’m making a concerted effort to take his spot and be the ambassador of the whole thing, because it’s become apparent that a lot of people are goin’ on the cruise to see me and my band. So we’re just trying to get it to where, when Delbert leaves, I can continue on and be the flag-bearer for the future.

That’s awesome, because a lot of people would not be able to face losing it; it’s

like summer camp — a big reunion every year. I’ve done a few of them, including the first one you were on. I remember dragging people to see you, because they had no clue — then they became converts. So, would you take over booking, or how would that work?

Well, it’s in a transitional phase right now. The main thing that’s gonna have to happen is, you know, there’s lots of other artists on the boat, but what it’s gonna get down to is when people call to get a ticket on the cruise, they’re going to be asked who is the main artist you’re coming to see. For lack of a better analogy, it’s like I’m running for office. I need people, when they order their tickets and they’re asked who they’re mostly coming to see, if they really mean it, to say me. Because if I’m gonna take this

street, and we just went out there and started takin’ pictures. I don’t even play piano. I can’t even play piano. But I just like the way the piano looks. It has a really nice vibe to it.

It carries the message, in a way.

Yeah. It had the words “Be the change” on it. And I thought, “Man, that’s perfect!” It went along with the positive theme of my record.

I haven’t asked anyone this question before, but I’m curious: What do you wish someone would write about you?

That’s a hard question. I wish they would — well, I don’t *wish* that anybody writes anything about me. Maybe hope

“I was a preacher’s kid for 18 years, so the language of the church — even though I’m not a Christian artist or a religious artist, or a religious person, for that matter — that dialogue is ingrained in the way I talk and the way I write.”

thing over, the company I’m working with [Sixthman], they’re gonna need to know that I can draw people on the cruise. So I’m asking all people that are my friends to let them know that they’re comin’ to see me. It would really help out a lot.

Next year, you’re also touring with Ruthie Foster and Joe Ely. How did that come about?

I received a phone call from their booking agents. And they wanted me to do this in-the-round thing, just me and Ruthie and Joe. We’ve already done a few and it really went over good and was well-received.

The piano on the album cover ... we had several decorated pianos around Austin at one time for people to play. Where was that one?

Lee Harrelson took those pictures in Clarksdale, Miss. We were just drivin’ around looking for someplace to shoot pictures. I saw that piano on the side of the road sittin’ under an overhang on the

— better than what they write about me, I hope that what they would think about me is that I’m a nice person. And that when I get onstage, I try to give the people something that they can take with them beyond just a show. I would like them to go home with a thought that will maybe help them a little bit with whatever trouble they might be havin’ in their life. I would like to be known as somebody that makes people feel good. If I could be known for anything, it’d probably be that. There’s no greater honor than to be a servant, to me. I like to be a servant to my friends, I want to be a servant to my family, be a happy servant. Yeah, the more I think about it, when I die they can put on my tombstone: “He was a happy servant.”





Photo by Leslie Ryan McKellar



Shovels And Rope

The Tradewinds Social Club is not the kind of joint where lasting musical memories are usually made. Located in a less-than-ideal area of the Oak Cliff neighborhood in southernmost Dallas — “on the corner of Carjack and Hold Up,” to borrow directions from one Yelp reviewer — it’s the kind of fabulously down-and-dirty dive bar beloved by blue-collar types and slumming hipsters alike for its cheap beer, stiff drinks, and decidedly glitz- and pretension-free atmosphere. But as a concert venue, suffice it to say that it’s a great place to play pool, darts, and shuffleboard. On the odd night when Tradewinds does feature live music, it invariably feels more like an afterthought than the main event. There’s no stage to speak of; just a side of the room with just enough space for a band to set their gear up on the ragged carpeting and do their thing for whoever cares to listen, leaving plenty of room on the *other* side of the bar for the Social Club regulars to carry on with their usual drinking, socializing, and pool shooting undisturbed.

But the night of Saturday, Feb. 25, 2012 was an exception.

It didn’t start out that way. For the first half of the night’s double bill, the pool-table side of the bar was a lot more hopping than the music side. To be fair, Buxton — an indie outfit from Houston newly signed at the time to New West Records — did the best they could, all things considered. The band members played with their backs crammed up against the front wall, facing a modest crowd of a couple dozen young fans who were all no doubt Tradewinds first-timers. You could tell as

The crowd looked like they didn’t know what hit them, but they went along for the ride, happily growing more and more ape-shit with every song. And the wilder it all got, the more **Hearst** and **Trent** seemed in complete control: two devil-may-care misfits from South Carolina, standing confidently in the eye of the storm and whipping a small Texas bar into a frenzied state of joyous raucousness.

much by the way they listened attentively the whole way through while jammed in close together in a safety-in-numbers sort of way, even leaving a good 10 or 12-foot gap between audience and band. They all looked about as uncomfortable and out of their element as Buxton’s orchestral folk-pop sounded in the room, and as soon as the set was over, most of them began to clear out as quick as they could.

That’s when two outliers who’d watched the whole show from back in a corner — a rail-thin dude in a trucker cap and a lively, grinning gal with a mop of thick auburn curls — stepped out of the shadows and got to work. Buxton was still packing up and hauling out their plethora of instruments as the new duo claimed a spot in practically the middle of the room and set up their own arsenal: two mics, an acoustic guitar and a single snare

drum. They punched out a couple of test shouts into their mics, and like the flick of a switch, the atmosphere in the entire bar seemed to change. A new crowd ambled over and formed a tight crescent around the guy and gal and their minimalist set-up, and in marked contrast to Buxton’s polite but overly reserved fans, this lot — an all-together rowdier-looking bunch sporting an impressive array of colorful, sometimes menacing tattoos and even a fair amount of leather — looked primed and ready for something more than just a little show. Fueled by a heady Saturday-night buzz and a palpable charge of pent-up, restless energy, they were ready for *release* — and Cary Ann Hearst and Michael Trent of Shovels and Rope delivered in spades.

The set started out with Trent on drum (and harmonica) and Hearst on guitar and lead vocal. But over the course of their set they harmonized together and switched roles and instruments as frequently and deftly as their up-tempo songs swerved in and out of country, rock, punk and folk, like a possessed, whirling dervish spinning wildly across a genre map. The crowd looked like they didn’t know what hit them, but they went along for the ride, happily growing more and more ape-shit with every song. And the wilder it all got, the more Hearst and Trent seemed in complete control: two devil-may-care misfits from South Carolina, standing confidently in the eye of the storm and whipping a small Texas bar into a frenzied state of joyous raucousness.

That was two-and-a-half years ago, and I can still remember that show like it was yesterday. Not necessarily all the songs they played (apart from gems like “Gasoline” and “Boxcar” from their 2008 debut, *Shovels and Rope*, and probably a preview song or two from *O’ Be Joyful*, their July 2012 sophomore album that ended up really kicking their career into high gear); but I for damn sure remember that dizzying feeling of “*whew, that was something!*”

And as it turns out, Hearst and Trent remember that show, too.

“Oh, yeah, I remember playing in the barrio on the floor,” says Hearst today with a hearty laugh. “I believe the guys in Buxton got us that gig, and we were grateful to be able to play it!” Trent,

sitting right next to her, smiles and nods in agreement.

“We’ve always been grateful to play *any* floor or stage that will have us,” he says. “It’s been a wild ride over the past couple of years, but we know that we could be back playing at the Tradewinds of the world next week possibly. So many bands have only a brief moment of success, but we’re trying to make music as our careers.”

Judging from some of the highlights from that “wild ride,” so far, so good. In the wake of *O’ Be Joyful*, Hearst and Trent found themselves touring with Jack White (who apparently still has an affinity for a killer co-ed two-piece band) and performing the album’s irresistible single “Birmingham” on the *Late Show with David Letterman*. In the fall of 2013, they took home two awards at the Americana Music Association Honors and Awards ceremony in Nashville: Song of the Year for “Birmingham” (beating such notable competition as the Lumineers’ smash “Ho Hey” and JD McPherson’s stellar “North Side Gal”) and Emerging Artist of the Year.

As career-making calling cards go, “Birmingham” still holds up a year later. But that “emerging artist” tag didn’t fit Shovels and Rope for long. It’s Sunday, May 31, the last day of the four-day Nelsonville Music Festival in central Ohio, and Hearst and Trent are sitting in a VIP tent, waiting for their time slot. Alt-country stalwarts the Bottle Rockets and Texas songwriting legend Ray Wylie Hubbard have already performed and are ambling around the backstage artists’ village. Next up is Memphis’ soulful roots marvel Valerie June, whose Dan Auerbach-helmed album, *Pushin’ Against a Stone*, garnered widespread critical acclaim throughout 2013. Not a bad day’s lineup for a festival whose first three nights were already headlined by Jason Isbell, Dinosaur Jr., and the Avett Brothers. And tonight, that honor falls on Shovels and Rope.

Consider them fully “emerged” then — even though they’re not done rising yet by a long shot. By the time you read this, Hearst and Trent will have already logged their second appearance on late-night television (playing *Conan* on Sept. 3), and their third album, *Swimmin’ Time*, will be well on its way toward roping even more

Americana music fans into their corner. Ditto the full slate of festival, theater, ballroom and other marquee concert dates lined up through the end of 2014. Fortunately, their heads have not grown in tandem with the size of their crowds and buzz.

“We’ve made this happen one Tradewinds at a time,” says Hearst.

“A few years ago, we literally wrote a plan out on a piece of paper,” she continues. “And so many things we wrote down have come to fruition and so many of our wildest dreams have come true ...”

She pauses with a grin. “Now, keep in mind, we have *very* reasonable dreams,” she adds, letting loose a gleeful, contagious laugh. Trent chuckles, too — though it’s pretty clear that they haven’t taken a moment of their ride for granted. You get the feeling these two pinch each other a lot, and not just out of genuine affection.

“We still feel like we’re getting away with something,” says Trent.

Plenty of Shovels and Rope fans would likely beg to differ. So does fellow artist Hayes Carll, who has been an avid champion of Shovels and Rope ever since he struck duet gold in 2011 by cannily casting Hearst as his foil for his tongue-in-cheek opposites-attract anthem, “Another Like You.”

“There are a lot of reasons why Shovels and Rope have taken off,” offers Carll, who won his own Americana Music Song of the Year Award in 2008 for “She Left Me for Jesus.” “They’ve worked their asses off, made the most of every opportunity and been really smart along the way — but really it just comes down to them being incredibly *good*. They are ridiculously great singers, writers and musicians. They pour their heart into it and there’s no faking it. They can sound as powerful in a living room as they can in Carnegie Hall.

“People want to see something real,” Carll says, “and they are about as real as it gets.”



A Joyful matrimony

Speaking of being as real as it gets, there is at least *one* thing Hearst and Trent have managed to “get away with” thus far in their *Shovels and Rope* career: avoiding the tricky tightrope act of pretending to be something in the spotlight together that they’re not in private. Musical chemistry and personal chemistry are by no means always in sync in such relationships; indeed, the opposite is more often than not the norm, as countless artistic partners ranging from Mick and Keith of the Rolling Stones to Joy Williams and John Paul White of the Civil Wars could readily attest to. But Hearst and Trent, married since 2009, are one very happy exception to that rule. As close as they seem and sound together when performing, it becomes clear within moments of meeting them that they’re even closer together offstage.

Whether sitting for an interview in the festival’s artist’s tent or watching another act’s set from the of the stage, they position themselves close to one another at almost all times, with Hearst lovingly putting her arm around Trent or giving him a quick peck on the cheek with a casual regularity that’s somehow more endearing than eye-rollingly sappy. She’s by far the more robustly animated of the two, coloring her conversation with all manner of funny voices, silly phrases and even sound effects to draw anyone near into her world. That makes Trent the de facto quiet one, but his more understated disposition doesn’t come across as awkward shyness or discomfort so much as genuine contentment. He smiles softly and chuckles where his wife beams or roars with laughter, and leaves the lion’s share of playful stage banter in front of crowds to her while he takes the reins in the studio as their producer.

They complement each other so well, in fact, that it’s fitting that their breakthrough song, “Birmingham,” tells their story in a nutshell, chronicling the courtship of the “Cumberland daughter” who “couldn’t fit in” and the “Rockamount

cowboy” who “spent five years going from town to town/waiting on that little girl to come around.” After a verse or two of touch-and-go near misses, the stars align in Birmingham and they begin again as one — “making something out of nothing with a scratcher and a hope/with two old guitars like a shovel and a rope.”

It ain’t your typical love song, but it says it all so well, it stands alone as practically the only love song in the *Shovels and Rope* repertoire — or at least the only one explicitly about them.

“It’s kind of silly for us, five years into this beautiful marriage, to get all lovey-dovey,” explains Hearst. “Maybe if we become estranged, we’ll write more typical love songs. But there’s too many other good stories to tell. And besides, I already wrote all my good love songs when I was pursuing this fella over here!”

She laughs heartily at this, but Trent demurs with a quiet smile. “It was a mutual pursuit,” he clarifies.

Both pursuers were already seasoned performers by the time they first crossed paths, and they continued working on their separate solo careers for a spell even after their first album together, 2008’s *Shovels and Rope*. Tellingly, that record was actually co-billed as a “Cary Ann Hearst & Michael Trent” project, making *O’ Be Joyful* their official debut under the *Shovels and Rope* banner.

Trent is a native Texan, born in Houston, but his family moved to Colorado when he was 2 and he came of age in Denver. He describes both his family and his high school as rather conservative, though neither could curb his adolescent affinity for rap, metal and hard rock. Not that they didn’t give it their best shot, trying to nudge him toward bluegrass or at least contemporary music that skewed a little more wholesome in spirit. “My parents are cool, and they do like different kinds of music, but one time, they went to a Christian bookstore and bought me a cassette from a Christian rap band called *Rapture*,” he recalls. “So I just put tape over the top of the cassette holes and I recorded *Slippery When Wet* over it.”

It was in high school that he put together and fronted his first band, an indie-rock outfit called the Films. “We practiced in my friend’s basement in

Boulder — his mom was really cool about it, and she would bring us snacks when we practiced,” he says. “We were so young, none of the bars would book us, so we just played a few battle-of-the-bands gigs for a while.”

The Films (who originally called themselves Tinker’s Punishment and relocated to Charleston, S.C. in 2003) ended up having a fairly good run, touring both nationally and in Europe and even landing a major-label record deal. That fell apart as soon as it came together, but the band went on to release two albums, 2006’s *Don’t Dance Rattlesnake* and 2009’s *Scorpio*, before ultimately calling it quits. By then, of course, Trent had already met and started collaborating with his future wife.

The oldest of three girls, Hearst was born in Jackson, Miss., but grew up mostly in Nashville, where her mother and musician stepfather (the “Delta Mama” and “Nickajack Man” from the opening line of “Birmingham”) raised her on a varied musical diet of Molly Hatchet, John Prine, John Lee Hooker, Fleetwood Mac, Motown, and ’80s soul and pop. By the time she had her first gig at 14 — at Music City’s now-closed Guido’s Pizzeria — she was already playing in two bands. “I went to a cool High School in Nashville for math and science,” she says. “So being a musician, even in Nashville, kind of set me apart in a good way and everyone there was really supportive. We would play everything from Billy Joel songs to Salt-n-Pepa.”

She moved to Charleston for college and continued playing, finding her own voice as a songwriter on the local scene and eventually picking up enough out-of-town gigs to cross paths with Trent for the first time at a show in Athens. But it wasn’t until Trent’s band landed in her college town that the wheels of fate (and love) really started turning. As Hearst recounted in a blog entry on *Shovels and Ropes’* website, she’d “been hanging out singing in bars in Charleston, half drunk most of the time, not really up to much. I felt at times like I was rusting in place, waiting for some great adventure to come along. When the Films moved to Charleston, with their ameri-trash glam rock-a-mount cowboy swagger, I was good as done for.”

It would still be another five years before they got around to making *Shovels and Rope*, though, by which time both had already released debut solo albums: Hearst’s *Dust and Bones* in 2006 and Trent’s *Michael Trent* in 2007. In 2010, a year after marrying and two years after their co-billed duo album, they each issued sophomore solo sets: Trent’s *The Winner* and Hearst’s *Lions and Lambs*. Although neither album (nor *Shovels and Rope*, for that matter) garnered quite the buzz and national attention that 2012’s *O’ Be Joyful* eventually would, a fittingly spooky cut from Hearst’s record, “Hell’s Bells,” did creep its way onto an episode of HBO’s hit supernatural drama *True Blood* (and, subsequently, onto the 2011 soundtrack compilation *True Blood: Music from the HBO Original Series, Vol. 3*, alongside tracks by Nick Cave and Neko Case, Jakob Dylan and Gary Louris, and Nick Lowe).

But it was with Hayes Carll, not Sookie Stackhouse, that Hearst made her most memorable pre-*O’ Be Joyful* splash on the Americana music scene. Out of all the quality tracks on the Texas songwriter’s acclaimed fourth album, *KMAG YOYO (and other American stories)*, it was the hilariously ribald, politically charged “Another Like You” that immediately stood out most of all — and in large part thanks to Hearst’s sassy rasp singing the lines of

“It’s kind of silly for us, five years into this beautiful marriage, to get all lovey-dovey,” explains Hearst. “Maybe if we become estranged, we’ll write more typical love songs. But there’s too many **other good stories to tell**. And besides, I already wrote all my good love songs when I was pursuing this fella over here!”

a hot-headed but drunkenly horny neocon. (The video, featuring Carll and Hearst and a cameo by left-wing/right-wing odd couple James Carville and Mary Matalin, was quite a hoot, too.)

Three years and many mornings after later, Carll and Hearst share two appropriately slightly different he said/she said versions of how their one-off musical hook-up came about.

“Hayes got lucky because he couldn’t get any of the other singers he liked!” Hearst offers with a laugh. “So, I was suggested to him by Lost Highway, even

though Hayes barely knew me from a hole in the ground. But we went out for a few drinks, had some fun, and I’m so thankful that it worked out the way it did.”

“Cary Ann actually was my *first* pick for that song,” Carll counters. “I had played with her once in Charleston a few years earlier, and I just remember being blown away by her voice. As we led up to the recording, I was kicking around a lot of well-known names to sing the song with, but none of them felt quite right. I kept thinking about Cary Ann and how much fun it would be to hear her on it. That ended up being one of the better decisions I’ve made because not only did she slay the song, but that led to us doing a lot of touring together and becoming great friends along the way.”

Hearst performed the song with Carll onstage at the Ryman Auditorium at the 2012 Americana Music Honors and Awards. She was back a year later with Trent as *Shovels and Rope*, stealing the show with “Birmingham” and collecting two of the evening’s biggest awards from “Mr. Americana” himself.

“Cary Ann and Michael have just blown me away from the first time I saw them,” enthuses Jim Lauderdale in his deliberate drawl. “They are so talented, charismatic and *deep* with their material. They’re what other artists aspire to be

like. They complement each other so well, too. Cary Ann has so much of what I like to call vivaciousness, and Michael has so much reserved power in what he does. And the music that comes out of them is nothing short of amazing.”



Swimming against expectations and dancing with the devil

Back in 2010, Jace Freeman of The Moving Picture Boys, a Nashville-based film production company, got a tip from a friend about a talented couple of up-and-coming songwriters from South Carolina worth checking out. After meeting Hearst and Trent and hearing their music himself, he was intrigued enough to want to work with them on a video or two, just to capture some of their chemistry and creative sparks on film. The next thing he knew they were off and running on what would become a feature-length documentary.

Shovels and Rope just have that way about them. Once they grab your attention, there’s no letting go.

“We definitely did not intend to be filming for three years,” admits Freeman. “We started out with a smaller

project, just documenting the process of making what would become *O’ Be Joyful*. But we were attracted to their DIY approach, and after filming for a couple months, we realized that there was a more interesting story developing at that point.”

The beautifully produced film, titled *The Ballad of Shovels and Rope*, has already screened at a number of festivals, including the Nashville Film Festival where it won the Ground Zero Tennessee Spirit Award for Best Feature. A DVD release is due soon. But the story of *Shovels and Rope* is still developing, with



Swimmin' Time marking the beginning of a brand new chapter — if not a whole new adventure.

“We definitely feel pressure to follow up on what we’ve done,” Trent says, acknowledging the inevitable weight of heightened expectations that comes with the territory of *Joyful*-level success. Their goal going into the studio for *Swimmin' Time* was to turn that pressure into inspiration.

“It all starts with the songs, which is the kind of pressure we put on ourselves,” Trent continues. “We didn’t try to get away with something we didn’t think was great, and when we did go into our studio, we challenged ourselves to not make something boring or something we’ve already made. At the risk of sounding pretentious, we also want to challenge the people that follow us too. We want to give them something truly new to hear.”

But Hearst is quick to add that, while they certainly didn’t want to make “*O’ Be Joyful II*,” “it’s not as if we’ve reinvented ourselves.”

“It’s still *us*,” she insists, “and people are still going to recognize what we’re doing, we think. I love the way this record’s tough moments are our toughest moments ever and the sweet moments are some of our sweetest. Like on ‘Save the World,’ we allowed ourselves to be as tender as we wanted and needed to be.

“We have this spectrum that we feel like our own music floats between,” she continues, holding her hands about two feet apart from one another. “And that spectrum seemed to widen as we made this record. We had more freedom, so we took more risks, but we also had the freedom to still be ourselves.”

On the opposite end of that spectrum from the genteel “*Save the World*” sits *Swimmin' Time*’s foreboding, low-rolling “*Evil*” and the stomping, sinister “*Ohio*,” arguably the oddest, funkiest and most intriguing song Shovels and Rope have turned out yet. It’s a sordid tale that exemplifies the impeccable manner in which they defy easy categorization even within the free-range fields of the Americana realm. Trent and Hearst purposely went a little wild on spinning a yarn that would sound as menacing as it read.

“That was a tricky one to begin with

because I didn’t know what I wanted to do with it,” Trent admits. “I felt like it was too slow, but I liked the story in the song. Cary was the one that made sure we kept working on it and that’s when we added the horns on it.”

And the horns Trent mentions aren’t your run of the mill brassy blasts.

“It’s a funeral march kind of song,” Hearst says, then punctuates her point by mimicking a deep, horn-like bellow just like the one on the record inspired by the darker sounds of the Crescent City’s musical heritage. “We’re both fans of the music of New Orleans, and I’m a little obsessed with New Orleans, actually. So the song is about a guy who’s down on his luck and doesn’t know why he’s getting his ass handed to him in Ohio. He talks to a friend of his from Dallas when he makes a trip to Louisiana, who tells him that he’s been making a ton of money running scams on people in Ohio, and the guy realizes he’s one of the people his friend has scammed. I thought it would be perfect to set that kind of story to a slow dirge, and I put my foot down about keeping it on this record.”

Fortunately for her, though, Hearst didn’t have to lock horns with an outsider in order to get her creative way. Nor did Shovels and Rope have to watch the studio clock. *Swimmin' Time* was recorded in the couple’s house in Charleston, with Trent at the helm for production and engineering — just like he was for their last two records together.

“I pity the poor producer that tries to work with us and our crazy schedule,” Hearst says with a laugh. “That producer would run away with his tail between his legs. What we have is great because Michael is patient and has a laser focus that I benefit from.”

Trent agrees with a nod. “Doing it ourselves is really working for us,” he says. “I’m not saying we’ll never have someone produce us, but we’re not out of ideas, and that’s really exciting.”

To illustrate that point, Hearst enthusiastically recalls an unexpected holiday excursion a few years ago that led the couple to dig deep and find a new way to sing together without relying on sweet harmonies alone.

“Michael and I went to a Poarch Creek Indian pow wow three Christmases ago where my Daddy lives,” she says. “And for

me, listening to the communal singing of the Creek Indians and their war singing changed the way I thought about singing forever. Now, when we sing a song that way, I call it our ‘Indian War Call,’ which is what we did for ‘*Fish Assassin*.’ It’s a pow wow song, and we just lean back with our shoulders straight, mouths wide-open, and locked-in eyes.”

Hearst is practically jumping in her seat as she says this, as if just *thinking* about belting out that particular tune — or really, any song — with her husband is enough to get her giddy. Trent as usual stays more composed but his shared enthusiasm is belied by a wide grin. “For this record, we did all of our singing with our microphones really close and facing each other,” he says. “So we were literally singing to the other the whole time.”

The resulting kinetic charge of their voices blending and whoopin’ and hollerin’ against and with each other can be heard running through the entire record, which throws off electric sparks every bit as intense as the ones Hearst and Trent effortlessly generate live. It’s a primal, sexy energy that can imbue a pow wow song about fishing with as much passion and feeling as their colorfully woven stories of struggle, desire and wicked fun. That heat you feel coming off *Swimmin' Time*’s opening track and lead single, “*The Devil Is All Around*,” is as much a gleeful summons as it is a scare-the-lights-outta-you warning couched in good-old-fashioned revival preaching. Shovels and Rope may not have a lot of love songs in their arsenal, but they can sing the *hell* out of a song about sinnin’ and redeemin’.

“We were both raised in the way where going to hell was a regular thing to fear,” Hearst explains. “Michael grew up in a more religious house than I did, but I still came up in a very hellfire-and-brimstone kind of way, and that’s a scary thing for a child! So in some ways that can be good and in some ways it can be bad, but we both speak that language and we understand the overall reasons that people look for spiritual peace, and it’s always on our minds whether we’re active in a church or not. It’s such a part of our foundations that it just comes out in our writing without us meaning for it to.”

It’s oft been said that the devil gets the best tunes, and with “*The Devil Is*

All Around," "Evil," and "Ohio," Shovels and Rope sound more than happy to oblige. But lest their folks back home or childhood preachers or anyone else get too worried, Hearst and Trent both offer assurances that however far they may roam, they're still making a joyous ruckus with their hearts in the right place.

"None of us are perfect and we're a bunch of messes, but we do the best we can," Hearst insists with disarming sincerity. "I will always choose good over evil every chance I get."

"All of this feels like a fever dream that didn't really happen, but I wish it had," Hearst enthuses — laughing a little at how convoluted her thought sounds out loud. "This stuff doesn't get old and every day we wake up now is just good. Our life is just **crazy good.**"



Rock of ages, cleave for me ...

Our conversation winds to a close just as Valerie June's marvelous set is reaching what sounds like its peak moment of intensity. Shovels and Rope, the main event, are due up next to bring the Nelsonville Music Festival to a rousing close; but rather than stealing away to find a quiet spot to get ready, Hearst and Trent elect to grab a few more beers out of the cooler in the corner of the tent and run over to catch June's last few songs from the back of the stage. They note that

although they've already played a number of other festivals with June, they've never had much of a chance to see her in action. Watching the Tennessee-born songstress tear up the stage with only her voice and her banjo, it's easy to grasp why she's generated so much buzz of her own over the last year — and even easier to imagine any act that has to follow her feeling a little nervous. But Hearst and Trent, standing arm in arm, just smile and drink it all in like happy fans enjoying the best seat in the house.

"All of this feels like a fever dream that didn't really happen, but I wish it had," Hearst enthuses — laughing a little at how convoluted her thought sounds out loud. But there's no doubting how much she absolutely means it.

"This stuff doesn't get old and every day we wake up now is just good," she marvels as her husband nods. "Our life is just crazy good."

Half an hour later, she and Trent have moved from the back of the stage to the front. Their gear arsenal has doubled in size since the first time I saw them — there's now a snare *and* a kick-drum, along with a small keyboard and an extra guitar — but it's still just the two of them, dwarfed by a stage big enough for the Polyphonic Spree. And even though June played a one-woman-show, the two of them somehow seem to take up even less of the stage — perhaps because Hearst, dressed in a cute navy summer dress with bold white polka-dots, and Trent, sporting a brown blazer over a white tank-top, never stray more than a yard apart from one another throughout their entire set.

Being a Sunday, the last day of the festival is wrapping up earlier than the first three, so it's still broad daylight, allowing them a perfect view of the few thousand music fans in front of them packing the grounds of Hocking College. Hearst beams a big, fun-loving grin out over them, nods at her husband to count off the first song, and just like that, I'm back at Tradewinds in early 2012.

Sure, everything around them is bigger: the stage, the crowd, their name — hell, even their *sound*, with their gutsy, rootsy acoustic stomp amped loud enough to reach the back of the

field and their Indian War Calls filling the stage and open sky like the indomitable flood waters they sing about in *Swimmin' Time's* title track. But at the heart of it all it's still just a Cumberland Daughter and a Rockamount Cowboy, locked-in on each other and in complete control of the moment but looking for all the world like they're getting away with having the crazy good time of their lives. And when Hearst belts out the opening line of "Birmingham" — "Delta Mama and a Nickajack Man ..." — and is answered by what sounds like the entire crowd joining in with her before the end of the first verse, well ... *whew, that's something.*



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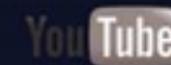
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Sunny Finds

Three years after cracking the country Top 10 with the majors, **Sunny Sweeney** returns to her feisty independent roots with the bold, confident *Provoked*.

By Holly Gleason

Sunny Sweeney can recall with vivid, multi-sensual clarity her very first musical moment of transcendence. “I remember being 5 years old, listening to ‘I’m Not Lisa,’ sitting crossed-legged and watching the words go round and round on the record player ...

“I knew sad and happy, those emotions, but I remember thinking this was something else,” she continues. “I didn’t know anything about Jessi Colter, or the piano, or guitar ... but I knew this woman was feeling something *deep*.”

After a beat, the brash-talking Texan snaps back to the present with a loud, self-effacing laugh at her precocity. How she “knew” still eludes her, but she realizes hitting that vein at such a young age may well have set her on the path to *Provoked*, an album that pulls no punches and does everything but name names.

“Hitting a nerve is a perfect way to say it,” she agrees.

Along the way, Sweeney took an indie-to-major label truth-telling turn with *Heartbreaker’s Hall of Fame*, originally self-released before being picked up by the Taylor Swift-powered Big Machine, then came back after the end of her first marriage with *Concrete*, a more radio-friendly project given a national push by Republic Nashville that yielded the Top 10 slice-of-the-other-woman’s cheating reality, “From A Table Away.” Big budget, low budget, what Sweeney wants is what’s beneath the truth we see.

That’s why she writes songs like *Provoked*’s passive-aggressive busting “Backhanded Compliment” and the unrepentant “Everybody Else Can Kiss My Ass.” She plays ‘em brazen, wide-open and brassy enough to scare men twice her size.

If *Concrete* captured a young woman’s life falling apart, *Provoked* looks at the pieces, owns the wreckage, and even finds a little light at the end of the tunnel. Laughing, Sweeney concedes she might know a little of what she speaks.

“It’s not a divorce record, or a happy ending record,” she says. “Nothing that simple! It’s just so much more than that. It’s the idea that everything happens for a reason — and the part that’s a mess is part of it.”

Sweeney knew when she walked away from the major-label machine that she needed to raise the stakes. Not so much go big or go home, but dig deeper and dump the turpentine.

the Light

Beyond her scalding cover of Randy Weeks’ obsessive “Can’t Let Go,” best known from Lucinda Williams’ rendition, *Provoked* (released in August via indie Thirty Tigers) came as the result of careful thought and the A&R sense of legendary artist advocate Kim Buie.

“We met with the Thirty Tigers people, David (Macias) and Kim,” Sweeney recalls. “I loved how they think about things, how they explain what they do. David is a genius, so smart and such a music fan, and Kim ...”

She pauses in that *I Love Lucy* way that lets you know the

next thing out of Sweeney’s mouth is gonna be good. “We were walking out of the meeting, and I said to my manager, ‘I really like Kim! I kinda have a girl crush on her...’ And Steve says, ‘Well, you know who she is, right?’ Then he explained ...”

Buie, whose career spans stints at Chris Blackwell’s Island Records and Palm Pictures, Lost Highway, and various Jimmy Bowen labels, has worked with Elvis Costello, Etta James, William Burroughs, Ryan Bingham, and Lucinda Williams. She recognized Sweeney’s need to not just tell her story, but to empower young women engaged in the same stumble through life.

“I knew there was a story to tell,” Sweeney admits. “And no matter what I ran by Kim, she never said ‘no.’ She just kept asking questions. She actually said, ‘I want to direct you, to help you make the best record you can make.’”

The story Sweeney wanted to tell on *Provoked* is very much her own, its songs (all but two of which she had a hand in writing) of emotional turmoil, “Second Guessing,” accountability and stubborn resolve unabashedly personal in a manner that *Concrete*, even at its most revealing, only hinted at.

“In the end, I didn’t want people to think I went through all this shit on my last record and that was the end of the story,” Sweeney explains. “Yes, I swore off dating, was never going to have another relationship, *all that*. But that’s not what happened. Life isn’t about now, it’s about ‘the rest of it ...’ So in making this record, I finished telling that other story, and kept going to this one. That way people *know* there’s light at the end of the tunnel.”

For Sweeney, that light comes in part in the form of Jeff Hellmer, her husband of three years. An Austin cop with two kids, he’d watched Sweeney go through all of it — and offered a steady hand to a woman in the throes.

“When you’ve been through heavy things, you second guess everything,” Sweeney says. “Jeff’s been friends with me for a dozen years, so there’s nothing he’s not seen. During the break-up of my first marriage, he suggested we should try counseling; that’s the kind of guy he is. And now? Well, he’s not just supportive; he tells me things I don’t wanna hear, but probably needed to hear them. That bond we have (of the truth) strengthens everything.”

Not that Sweeney was ever a shrinking violet. But perhaps where she was once more combusive, now she saves the fire for the music. After all, a woman who kicks off not just her new album but her beer joint and honky-tonk sets belting out the opening of a song called “You Don’t Know Your Husband” a cappella is a pretty stout contender.

“People may be talking or doing their own thing, but suddenly, they hear plain voices singing, they stop, and they *listen*,” she says. “I’ve been doing it for a while, and the only thing stronger than the fact it’s bare is what the song’s saying.”

Like Miranda Lambert, another hardcore Texas girl, Sweeney has never been one to overly sweeten her music or shy away from blunt truth when she’s got something to say. She seeks kindred spirits and attitude when choosing songs and collaborators, too, working with some of Nashville’s most progressive women songwriters: Brandy Clark, Ashley Monroe, Natalie Hemby, and Angeleena Presley. The credits on *Provoked* also find her co-writing with classicists Monty Holmes, Connie Harrington, Mark D. Sanders, and Buddy Owens, plus bad boy hit-making brothers



Photo by Jon-Paul Bruno

Brad and Brett Warren.

"Monty Holmes, who wrote Lee Ann Womack's 'Never Again, Again,' is the first person I really clicked with," Sweeney says of her "Sunday Dress" co-writer (along with Buddy Owens). "He's not afraid to talk about things nobody else wants to. I like writing with writers who don't mind talking about things that might hurt – because life does. It's why people come up and tell me their stories! By singing these songs, people know someone else has felt it, and they feel less alone. Just knowing you're not the only one, there's strength — and a whole lotta fun sometimes — in it."

She falls silent, mulling over what she's just said and where she's going with it. While she's never at a loss for words, our time is winding down and she's searching for a way to tie up everything we've talked about — life, tangles, Texas, songs, record company people — in a manner that connects it all back to the way she felt as a child, listening to a Jessi Colter song she didn't understand but felt to her core.

"Sometimes you *need* emotions," Sweeney offers finally. "When I need to bring emotions up, I go to songs. I think a lot of people do — and that's how I try to look at every song I put on my records. I even like it when they reach across albums to each other. Like if you think about it, 'You Don't Know Your Husband' is the prequel to 'From a Table Away' — It's light-hearted, but it's the same girl."

"Those songs are a bridge, which is more the way life is," she continues. "I've always made my music my way, and I've tried to be true to who I am the same way Loretta Lynn and Lee Ann Womack have been: I truly don't think either of them has a bad song."

"That's what I try to do. As long as I feel that way, I'm doing fine."



"I've always made my music my way, and I've tried to be true to who I am the same way Loretta Lynn and Lee Ann Womack have been: I truly don't think either of them has a bad song."



WHEN I COME AROUND

Lee Ann Womack finds her way from country music star to Americana free bird.

By Richard Skanse

Lee Ann Womack won't name names, let alone pinpoint the scene of the crime. But oh, the true colors of the country music industry she's seen ...

"Well, without singling out a single organization or event or anything, which I don't want to do ..." she teases over breakfast at downtown Austin's Stephen F. Austin Hotel, tiptoeing around the "tell me your best industry horror story" question as delicately as she's been picking at her plate of Eggs Florentine, "but I have found myself in a lot of situations. Very early on I recognized that, 'Oh ... these people are not all about music. That's not what this is about.'"

She smiles, bemused by the wide-eyed naiveté of youth. She's older and wiser now, but back then that was a hard epiphany to come by for an East Texas girl who grew up listening to her DJ daddy spin classic country records on the radio in Jacksonville, obsessively trying to figure out how to sing harmony over her favorites from the cocoon of her bedroom. All she ever wanted to be when she grew up was a country music singer, and there she was, living her dream in Technicolor but finding herself less and less enchanted the closer she got to the big machine behind the gilded curtain.

She stuck it out just the same, though, learning to adapt and dance the major-label dance for 15 years that, all things considered, yielded a pretty good return. Her breathtakingly pure, expressive soprano graced the charts singing everything from Patsy Cline-worthy honky-tonk laments (her 1997 debut, "Never Again, Again") to sweeping crossover pop (2000's "I Hope You Dance," which she was invited to sing at both a Nobel Peace Prize ceremony and the funeral of Maya Angelou.) She also won enough awards to fill a bookcase, including a Grammy for singing a song with Willie Nelson (2002's "Mendocino County Line") and a CMA Album of the Year trophy for her classic-country throwback collection, 2005's sterling *There's More Where That Came From*. But there were also compromises: artistic concessions made to keep her label's promotion and accounting departments happy and to remain commercially viable in a mainstream format veering ever farther afield from the kind of songs she

could sing from the heart. Somewhere along the way, Womack started to dream a different sort of dream.

"You know, I was with that label for a long time and had some great relationships there," she says of her seven-album run as part of the MCA Nashville family. "But I was trying to be a lot of things to a lot of people, trying to give everybody what they needed while also trying to be true to myself. And it was hard to balance all that stuff. But the whole time, I would look at Buddy and Julie Miller and Jim Lauderdale and Ricky Skaggs and all these people whose music I loved so much, and I would think, 'One day, I'm going to be in a situation where I can make music with and tour with those people, and that will be my community.'"

"It was something that I aspired to," she continues. "I just kept telling myself, 'One day, you'll be able to run in the circles you want to run in and only make the music you really love.' And I just lived for that."

There's a reason why Womack speaks of this aspiration in the past tense — and it's not because she had a change of heart. It's because that "one day" she used to live looking forward to is *today*, right now. The title of her new album, released Sept. 23 on Sugar Hill Records, pretty much says it all: *The Way I'm Livin'*.

Don't call this Womack record a "return to form," ala the widely acclaimed *There's More Where That Came From*, her brilliant recovery from the style-over-substance stumble of 2002's *Something Worth Leaving Behind*. And don't call it a "comeback," despite it being her first new album since 2008's Grammy-nominated *Call Me Crazy*. Instead, think of it as a brand new beginning, wherein one of the biggest country stars of the last decade-and-a-half jumps out of the mainstream to run away and join the Americana circus.

"This is starting over for me, definitely," says Womack, 16 years after winning an Academy of Country Music Award for Top New Female Vocalist. But you'd be hard-pressed to find a new artist half her age brimming with half as much excitement about the road ahead.

"I have a chance now to do some things differently than I've done in the past," she enthuses, "and I fully intend to do that."

Like Rodney Crowell's career-reviving Sugar Hill release *The Houston Kid* 13 years before it, Womack's *The Way I'm Livin'* sounds very much like the kind of album you'd expect a former major-label country artist to make for their debut on a more roots-centric indie label. But just as the case was with Crowell's record, Womack's was already in the can by the time Sugar Hill picked it up. What's more, she and her producer/husband, Frank Liddell, made it together while she was still signed to MCA — and at the behest of none other than the head of the label at the time.

"We actually started this record a couple of years ago," says Womack. "What happened was, Luke Lewis sent me and Frank into the studio saying, 'Y'all go make whatever record you want to make.' Because Luke's a real music guy, and I think he just wanted to see what would happen! Like, 'What would Lee Ann and Frank do if they could do whatever they wanted?'"

Despite her success over the years at MCA (not to mention her husband's track record producing hits for the likes of Miranda Lambert and the Eli Young Band), this was not a case of a major-label boss betting on a sure thing. For all their critical acclaim and awards show fanfare, *There's More Where That Came From* and *Call Me Crazy* yielded only one Top 10 hit between the two of them (the former's "I May Hate Myself in the Morning.") The magnanimity of Lewis' offer was not lost on Womack.

"Up until that point, I had been trying to be as true to myself as I could musically and fit into the commercial Nashville world," she says. "And the producers that I had were producers who, when they turned music into the label, they need to prove that they can make a commercial record. So you get into that machine and everybody's trying to fit in or make me fit in, you know? And so when Luke said, 'I want you and Frank to forget about all that and just go make the record you want to make,' that just completely opened up the doors. And Frank's not afraid, either — Frank doesn't feel like he has anything to prove to anybody in the commercial music world or any other ... he really only thinks about 'what's the best treatment for this song.' All of that really freed me up."

Although they'd been married since 1999 — and known each other from the start of Womack's career, given that Liddell was her A&R rep at Decca ("She hated me," Liddell says today. "I think she

just thought I was some college guy from the University of Texas, which always bugs people from East Texas, but everything I did bugged the hell out of her — until one day I guess it didn't.” — this was actually the first time that the couple worked on a whole album together.

“I just don't think the timing was ever right before this,” says Womack. “And there may have been a little bit of fear about working together and also being married, but after all this time, we know what our thing is. And it turned out to be really easy. Frank and I have never built a house together, and I won't ever build a house with him [laughs], but we're so in sync musically that there was not even a smidge of a problem at all.”

Finding the right songs for the project was no problem for them, either. In addition to his A-list production gigs, Liddell also runs his own publishing company, Carnival Music, whose roster over the years has featured such writers as Bruce Robison, Adam Hood, Gretchen Peters, and Mando Saenz. Between that and their shared affinity for other performing songwriters of the Americana persuasion, the couple had been stockpiling songs on their “one day” wish-list for years, going all the way back to their earliest days of working together.

“Even when she ‘hated’ me back when I was just the A&R guy at Decca, I could still bring her songs and know that she would really listen to them,” Liddell recalls. “I mean, she was great at it — she was the best listener. She was the one artist who, when you played her a song, it was never about ‘how will this will take me somewhere in my career.’ It was just about, I either love it or not. Some of these songs, like [Chris Knight's] ‘Send It On Down,’ we've had that one around for 12 or 13 years, waiting to do it. And [Julie Miller's] ‘Don't Listen to the Wind’ is one that she has really loved since like 1997 — I can't remember when I first played it for her. So when Luke said go in and make this record, I think right then and there we looked at each other and were like, ‘OK, we've got lots of songs lying around How many times have we sat there and gone, ‘We've got to cut this — that song's badass?’”

In addition to the those Knight and Miller tunes, their other hand-picked songs on the record include the title track (by Carnival writer and Alan Jackson

nephew Adam Wright), Mindy Smith's “All His Saints,” Adam Hood's “Same Kind of Different,” Brennen Leigh's “Sleeping With the Devil,” Mando Saenz's “When I Come Around,” Brett Cobb's “Fly,” and a pair by Bruce Robison (“Nightwind” and “Not Forgotten You,” the latter best known from Robison's wife Kelly Willis' own Americana coming-out party, 1999's *What I Deserve*.) Womack also brought “Tomorrow Night in Baltimore,” an old Kenny Price-penned Roger Miller cut, to the table, while the cover of Neil Young's *Harvest* classic “Out On the Weekend” is a nod to the early days of their romantic relationship. Womack had never actually heard *Harvest* before Liddell played it one night on a road trip, but she took note of his fondness for the album and surprised him by performing the opening track at a concert performance later on.

In the end, only one song on *The Way I'm Livin'* came to the table via a third party recommendation: Hayes Carll's “Chances Are” — a tune that the Texas songwriter originally wrote on spec for the movie *Country Strong* and later recorded on his 2011 *Lost Highway* album, *KMAG YOYO (& Other American Stories)*. It was Luke Lewis himself who presented the song to Womack for consideration, though according to Liddell, Lewis didn't even know they'd recorded it until after he heard the finished album. But Womack was sold on it from the get-go.

“I was just floored by it,” she raves of the song, which wouldn't have been out of place at all on *There's More Where That Came From*. “I didn't even know people still wrote songs like this! I grew up listening to Billy Sherrill's Tammy Wynette and George Jones records, and I love the way those songs are written, how they circle back to the hook and are just so clever. For a label head this day and age to bring an artist a song like this is just rare.”

Although Womack herself didn't write any of the songs on the album, she notes with pride that every one of them was written “to be performed,” initially by the writers themselves, rather than as songs just to be pitched on Music Row.

“A lot of things that I want to cut nobody else will cut,” she says, marveling at how a song like Knight's “Send It On Down” could go untouched for so many years by anyone but Knight himself. “When you listen to commercial country radio these days, you just don't hear

anything like that at all. If we're being honest, you just don't hear that many real, crafted songs: you hear a lot of stuff that sounds like it was just made up, not written. I think we've gotten away from that in Nashville, which is a shame because there's still a fantastic writing community there.”

Having the freedom to pick and choose material from some of their favorite songwriters was only part of the luxury of getting to make an album on their own terms, though. Womack and Liddell were determined to make a record that captured the intimacy of a live performance rather than the usual bells and whistles of glossy mainstream production. It started with Liddell asking Womack what she *didn't* want her record to sound like.

“I told him it just seems like with all that I hear going on in Nashville right now, everything's so bombastic: everything's more, more, faster, faster, louder, louder,” she says. “And that's not who I am. I told him I wanted to make sure that we didn't get caught up in that game, and that I just wanted it to be as if the listener was sitting in a room and hearing the real musicians the way they really sound.” And she wanted to be in that room, too, singing with the musicians with her vocals right in the middle of the mix rather than dropped on top of a “bunch of instrumentation” after the fact. Consequently, most of her vocals on the record were tracked live with the band.

Liddell points out that although that's not the way most records usually get made in Nashville, it wasn't long before it became apparent to all involved that it was the *only* way to make this one. He recalls one moment when his wife was in the lounge tending to other business while the band was fussing with an arrangement, trying to run a song down. It was drummer Matt Chamberlain who noted, “There's no sense in doing this without her being in here, too.”

“The interesting thing about this record is, rather than having a band over here doing their thing and then doing the vocal over there, it was like having a four-to-seven piece band, depending on the song, with her vocal as just another instrument,” Liddell says. “And that's something that I had never seen before that I thought was really special.”

There was something else he'd never

really seen before that struck him as pretty special, too.

“As you might have noticed, Lee Ann's not very tall,” he says with a smile (she stands 5' 1”). “And we were in the studio, talking about ‘what have you missed hearing on your other records that you want to hear on this one,’ and she was sitting in this chair with her feet not touching the ground and just swinging, like she was a 4-year-old girl getting ready to get ice cream. And it's funny because she's always been my wife and she's this really intense person, and for the first time, I just saw this little girl in her as she was talking about what she's always wanted to do.”



In early 2012, Luke Lewis, the man who had given Womack and Liddell carte blanche to make their record, stepped down from his position as the head of Universal Nashville. The news didn't quite hit Womack from out of the blue, given that Lewis had asked her to sit tight with her finished record for nearly a year, lest it end up coming out right when he was walking out the door and thus wind up orphaned without a champion in its corner. After Lewis' departure, his successor, Mike Dungan, asked Womack if she would mind sitting on the album just a little bit longer while the company sorted out its release calendar. When her turn to meet with him again finally came up several months later, Dungan explained to her that *Lost Highway*, Universal's Americana imprint, was gone, and asked if she'd consider going back into the studio to cut some additional tracks “for radio.” She respectfully declined.

“I just wasn't interested in changing it,” she says today. “Not in that classic stubborn ‘I'm going to do things my way, I'm mad at them' way — it wasn't anything like that. It was just that I've been in this business long enough and I just wasn't interested in what was going on.” She stood her ground, but the scene played out nothing at all like the contentious showdown between Connie Britton's fictional country star Rayna Jaymes and the ruthless CEO of “Edgehill Republic” on TV's *Nashville*. Given that her contract with MCA had actually been up before she even started making *The Way I'm Livin'*, she was free to go, and Dungan, as

a show of appreciation for her patience, even let her walk with her masters.

For the better part of the next two years, Womack spent some much needed time away from the business of being a country music star in order to reconnect with her family and kids and friends, “just being normal.” But she also kept listening to and writing new songs, because, she says, “there's a lot of music at our house, all the time, and it never stops.” And by the time Sugar Hill came a courtin', she was charged and ready to begin the next chapter of her career.

“Sugar Hill kept coming back, going, ‘We want this record — we heard a copy of it and we want to put it out,’” she says. “And you know, I was thrilled. Their whole approach to the music business is ‘we do music that matters.’ It's roots music, and I love their catalog. So many of their records that they've put out over the years have just been brilliant. So I thought it would be nice to do some business with them.”

The Womack record *Sugar Hill* got fits right in with that roots music catalog. But truth be told, even if it had ended up being released by her last label as-is, chances are that songs like “Chances Are” and “Same Kind of Different” wouldn't have thrown any fan who loved the classic '70s-country feel of *There's More Where That Came From* or even much of *Call Me Crazy* for too much of a loop. And when pressed on the matter, Womack concedes that, given the right kind of push — even from an indie label — *The Way I'm Livin'* is a record that conceivably *could* still get played on country radio.

“But, is that a game I'm interested in playing?” she asks with a smile. “Not really.”

Instead, she'd rather take these songs, and whatever ones she records or writes next, and sing them “in rooms that were built to play music, not basketball.” She's more interested in seeking and playing in the company of Buddy Millers and Jim Lauderdale and John Hiatts — as she did in January as part of the Cayamo Music Cruise and in September at the Americana Music Festival in Nashville — than she is in walking awards show red carpets. And if the folks at MusicFest in Steamboat, Colo., should ever ask her back again, or some scrappy Texas or Red Dirt act like Cody Canada and the Departed wants to hook up for a studio session or roadhouse gig somewhere down the road, count her in. Womack joined Canada's last band,

Cross Canadian Ragweed, onstage as a special guest when they played their final show together at Joe's Bar in Chicago in September 2010.

“I first met those guys in Corpus Christi a few years ago,” she recalls. “I was playing a show there and I can't remember if they were playing somewhere else in town or if it was a festival or something and we were on the same bill, but a mutual friend of ours said, ‘My buddies are going to come over,’ and I just said, ‘OK.’ And when they walked in, they didn't look like any other country stars out of my friends or anything. In fact, my daughter said, ‘Are those pirates?’”

She laughs at this, along with the suggestion that her hanging with the Ragweed set sounds rather like a straight-laced good girl slumming with the stoners out at the back of the school parking lot. “I was just totally enamored with them,” she admits, “because there was a lot of faux stuff in my world, and they were just *real*, you know? And then they introduced me to Wade Bowen and Stoney LaRue, and it was just a whole new world of music lovers that I got to hang out with and have fun with.”

It is, without question, a very different world from the one she first made her name in. It's rather different, too, from the world of artists like Buddy and Julie Miller and Rodney Crowell that she marveled at from the fringes for years, cutting their songs every chance she could while still keeping up appearances as a contemporary country star. And it's very different from the bluegrass world, which she's been a fan of and mingled with going all the way back to her college days in Levelland. But the way Lee Ann Womack's livin' these days, all of those worlds and even the best bits of her old one are all hers to roam freely now. And whatever or however many circles she chooses to run in, chances are she's gonna fit right in and do just fine.

“When I first started out, I remember doing an interview where I said that I hoped that I could work toward being a Willie Nelson,” she says. “Willie fits everywhere. He's not this, he's not that — he's Willie. And that's still what I want to be, too.”



CORY BRANAN



The wandering musical spirit of Americana's free-ranging "No-Hit Wonder"

By Adam Dawson

"I don't try to record in the studio like I play live, to the chagrin of some people ..."

Cory Branan, an artist known for his very energetic and dynamic concert performances where a song may never sound the same twice, says he gets asked the question a lot: "Why don't you do what you do live in the studio?" The Memphis-reared songwriter offers his standard answer with a hearty laugh: "Because it would be the most annoying thing you've ever heard on your radio — it would be so fast and slow and loud and quiet ..."

The truth, though, is that Branan actually *does* make records very much like the way he plays live shows. He may be a bit more mindful of tempos and tuning and getting the best take he can of any given song worth making the final cut, but if anything, he's even more free-wheeling in the studio than he is onstage, making full use of the medium and tools to explore and exploit whatever musical urge or direction he fancies. The results, as typified by his latest album, *The No-Hit Wonder* (released in August), find him veering both willfully and confidently all over (and often beyond) the Americana/roots music landscape. He is as comfortable laying down a track inspired by the sound of a Tennessee trio ("Sour Mash") as he is embracing the delta blues of his native Mississippi ("In the Meantime Blues"), all while embellishing the songs with the edginess and honesty of the punk rock that soundtracked his youth.

While his shows may be a little crazy and his albums all over the musical map, Branan sounds perfectly settled and at ease over the phone, discussing the new record and retracing his career back to the beginning. After spending his childhood in what he calls the "last town in Mississippi" because his plane mechanic father did not want to fully commit to living in Memphis, Branan finally made his move across the border into Tennessee as

a young adult and kicked around for a few years playing guitar in an assortment of punk and country bands. It wasn't until he was in his mid-20s that the desire to write songs of his own began to surface, but he proved a quick study. His 2002 debut, *The Hell You Say*, released on the Memphis indie label Madjack Records, received a fair bit of critical praise, as did his 2006 follow-up, *12 Songs*. Neither album was necessarily a "hit" in the classic sense, but through constant touring (playing upwards of 200 shows a year) Branan built a cult following loyal enough to keep coming back despite having to wait six years for him to release another album.

Branan's third album proved worth the wait. Released in 2012 on Bloodshot, the Chicago-based label famed for its roster of energetic alt-country and punkish roots rock acts, the aptly titled *Mutt* showcased Branan at his best, using his charmingly gruff Southern voice to sing stories of richly defined characters and creating three-minute movies for the imagination while stretching his musical boundaries at every turn. And *The No-Hit Wonder* follows eclectic suit with even stronger results. From the straight-country balladry of "All the Rivers in Colorado" to the lounge-influenced "Come On Shadow," Branan doesn't just dip his toes in the water of a particular sound; he dives in headfirst with confidence and total conviction, even though he admits he doesn't always know where a song is going to take him.

"The songs themselves, I don't steer them too much," Branan explains. "Sometimes I'll kick them out of the ditch, if they end up in a ditch somewhere. But mostly I just sort of see where they go ..."

Sometimes the other musicians he's working with in the studio help the songs find their way, too. "I have the ideas and arrange it and they chart it out, but when someone plays something better than what I had in mind, I go with that."

For *The No-Hit Wonder*, recorded

with producer and fellow Memphis native Paul Ebersold in Nashville (Branan's home of the last three years), the musicians along for the ride and sometimes helping to steer the ship included the notable likes of Jason Isbell, Tim Easton, Austin Lucas, and members of the Hold Steady.

"On every record I've had my buddies sing on it, but I've never had anyone on just to have them on," Branan says. "And I know this round of people that I had on it had a little bigger names, but I try to put people where they will actually suit it."

Not that he takes any help he can get for granted.

"Yeah, I'm just really lucky ... I've fallen in with good dudes over the years of doing this," he enthuses, then adds with a laugh, "and I was lucky that, hell, they all live in town and they were all free!"

Armed with a new album's worth of quality songs, Branan's already hitting the road again, although he notes that he's cut back of late to a more manageable 120 or so shows a year. That's just about enough, he quips, to "keep the light bill paid," while also allowing him to enjoy a little more quality time with his wife and two young children, a son and daughter. Fans needn't worry about all that family time encroaching on his productivity, though; if anything, it seems to be adding fuel to his creative fire. He says he expects to have his next record out in about a year and a half.

"I'm writing constantly," he says. "I've got all kinds of things in my head. I've got some kids songs I'm working on, so I've been kicking around the idea of putting out a kids record sometime, but it won't be the next one. The next thing will probably be a more stripped-down folk record. But who knows? When it comes it time, it could be a klesmer metal record, I don't know."



Imagine Houston ...

An excerpt from *Reverb*, the new novel by Joe Ely

LoneStarMusic is proud to feature this thrilling teaser from Texas music legend (and LSM Hall of Famer) Joe Ely's newly published debut novel, *Reverb* (LettersAt3amPress). Inspired by (but not limited to) key events and characters from Ely's own life, the story follows the odyssey of a restless young West Texan named Earle who leaves Lubbock in the Summer of Love with nothing but a guitar, a Super Reverb amplifier, a journal and the clothes on his back. In this excerpt — taken from Chapter 3 — Earle has recently thumbed his way from Lubbock to Fort Worth, where he briefly reconnects with an old friend and fellow Lubbock refugee, Gene, and lands a gig playing with a local band called the Neurotic Sheep. Earle is just getting acclimated to the band's residency at a notorious Cowtown dive called the Cellar when the Sheep are informed that their residency has been transferred to the Cellar's newly-opened sister club in Houston.

[Editor's note: In addition to omitting a brief section of the chapter checking in on secondary characters back in Lubbock, for space reasons we are running this excerpt with (mostly) standard formatting, rather than Ely's stylized use of hanging indentation.]

Opening night at the Houston Cellar brought out the best and worst of Houston nightlife. The Banditos, a notoriously badass version of the Hell's Angels whose headquarters were in hideouts around the ship channel, came out in force. Harleys circled Market Square as the bikers paraded with their mamasitas straddling the rear wheel, looking like goddesses of some long lost underworld surfacing on some strange new planet for the first time. As they rolled together in a rumbling pack, they personified the very image of rebellion and defiance, yet Earle saw in their eyes the glint of despatch that an outsider always wears, and felt a strange, although distant, kinship with these roaming refugees.

Cool Daddy Winter, his snow-white

pompadour frozen hard in an invisible shell of spray net, arrived in a white limousine with a gaggle of slinky blondes at his side. His pink albino eyes squinted when the press fired their flashbulbs at him as he entered the doors of the new dungeon, and he ducked behind the curtain that concealed the band from the world.

The Neurotic Sheep parked diagonally across the street from the front of the Cellar in a fire zone. The old Chevy they arrived in was covered in so much rust that it looked like parts from an old railroad bridge drug up from some gulf salvage yard. No one had told them about any press party. The band looked so beat up that the press thought they were the clean-up crew and stepped aside to let them inside, all the while scanning Market Square for the possibility of another VIP or band member who may be late and newsworthy.

The inside of the club was just the same as the Fort Worth club with double the size and half the imagination. In fact the same clichés adorned the walls, the same flat black paint job with the same black burlap covering on parts of the walls and ceiling. Even the stage was made the same, down to the automobile dimmer switches used for the lighting system. Maybe it was designed so that neither light nor the blues could ever escape. There was a group of musicians going down to see the hotel and Earle jumped at the chance to break from this brand spanking new dungeon.

As they were about to leave, a vague and dangerous-looking man walked out of the front office and gave them a discriminatory looking-over as if he were some military officer inspecting the new recruits.

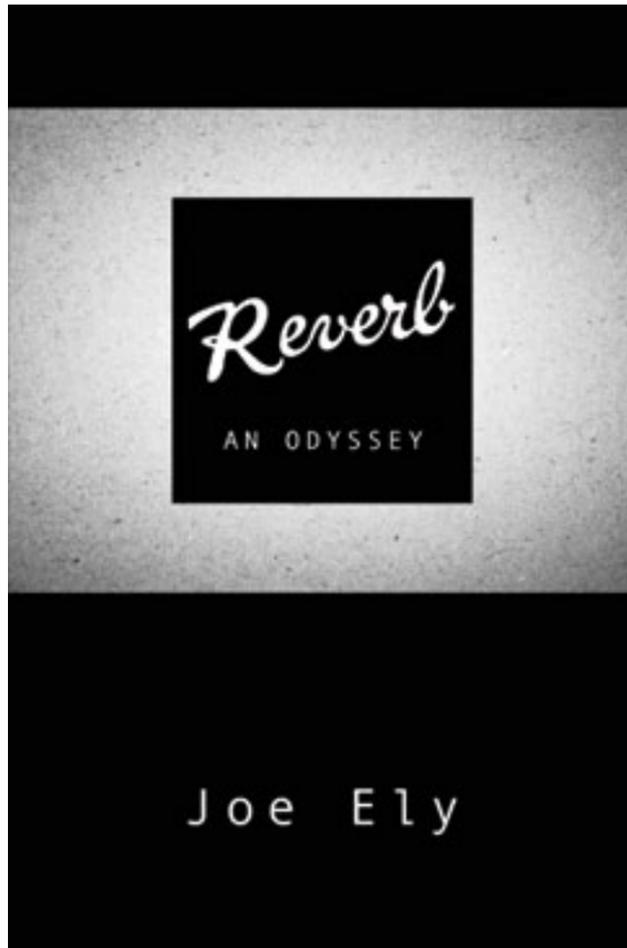
You the Fort Worth boys?

Yep, that's where we come from today.

Bad Bob. Welcome to your own private hell, where you'll be livin' and tryin' to breathe seven nights a week.

I guess we should say thanks.

You better wait on that. You might change your mind. You know the rules — nobody can be late, ever; no dating the waitresses, 'specially Candy; no alcohol inside the club; and a one-month notice if you



decide to escape.

Sounds like the Army, said Earle.

You might be wishin' for the Marines after a few weeks here, fuckface. I used to break in little shits like you in Fort Bliss. Don't ever fuck with me.

He turned back into the office and slammed the door.

They didn't spare no expense on the welcomin' committee.

You said he was no picnic, but I didn't expect him to be a fuckin' bucket 'a scorpions.

Best to take the long way around him.

The Milby Hotel had seen better days. It was obvious that the mural of the fabulous locomotive on the wall in the lobby had not always faded into a water stain, and that the painted plywood around the lobby windows used to be windows. But it was convenient, being only three blocks from the club. There was a cheap little diner next door.

Each musician made ten dollars a night and since the hotel charged forty dollars a week for rooms, it was instantly decided that the band would only rent two rooms and share them accordingly. Since Earle's entire wardrobe was on his back, he needed

very little in the way of accommodations. He only had to jump in the shower and splash some water in his face from time to time and he was ready for the night.

The Cellar was packed. The Banditos took up the entire floor section sitting on cushions and having their ladies sprawl across their laps. The bohemians gathered at the tables on the side of the stage and smoked roll-your-owns and stared expressionless. The college kids sat on the other side of the room and talked to each other, laughing carelessly between themselves as if no one else existed.

A local band, the Treeks, opened the night and then the Neurotic Sheep went on and stumbled through most of their early set. The American Blues made a grand entrance, bursting through the front door, spilling drinks and crawling over the audience to get to the stage. They had only played two songs when a particularly surly biker grabbed a waitress and began popping the elastic on her panties while grunting through his beard at his compadres. Rocky had been watching from the bandstand and suddenly threw down his instrument and leaped onto the unsuspecting customer. The bouncers were close behind. A chain reaction began, with skirmishes popping up around the floor. The band went into a drum solo that built in intensity like a runaway freight train that was a perfect soundtrack for the mayhem. Rocky returned to the stage, slightly bloody, to a rousing encore. By the end of their set, the Cellar had been christened in the style that it would repeat over and over and over again.

Earle and the band had just enough time to eat their first meal of the day before going back to the Cellar. Their next set started at eleven and the American Blues went on at midnight. The crowd was starting to come in from other clubs all tanked up and ready for trouble. Earle and the Sheep played their best set ever (in less than a week) closing with Midnight Hour, and looked at each other in surprise at the ovation they received. The Blues were feeling their oats on the back side of the clock as Cool Daddy Winter joined them for two songs.

By the third set the crowd had evolved into a drunker, sleazier bunch and the real underground of Houston was beginning to appear. The Banditos, who had left after the fight early in the night, were back — double in size and triple in defiance. The waitresses were visibly afraid to walk between them and the bouncers were beginning to wonder if they were current on their insurance policies. The musicians dug in as if to find the source of their inspiration and to use it as a shield against any outside force that might cause them harm or humiliation.

As the band began to play, the music

seemed to come, not from the surface, but from a deeper realm where the players felt a bond between all those who have come before. Now here they sat in the present moment, circled around a stage in a dive in downtown Houston. The more tribal the music became, the more unified the crowd became, until at 3 a.m. there were no differences between the most sophisticated and the most heathen in the audience. Everyone was connected to everyone and by the time the American Blues hit the stage the bikers on the cushions and the beatniks at the tables were making out with their women, squirming here and there, flowing with the passion. Everyone stirred as if on cue at about 4 a.m., when the bedroom called and the mass exodus began. When the Sheep went on for the 5 a.m. set, the Cellar had become a graveyard and the band felt like they were playing to zombies as one by one the audience nodded and were escorted to the front door by the bouncers. The main exception was the rather large gathering of the meth-headed Banditos who were just staring to kick into gear. When closing time came at 6 a.m. they raced for their scooters and zipped away into the dawn, to the warehouses in the ship channel where the week-long day was just beginning.

So much had happened in Earle's life in the last twenty-four hours that it was hard to remember what *had* happened. When he landed on the couch at the Milby he was out cold, dreaming of a place far away, of a green slope that rolled down to the sea, where the clouds floated by and all the world was as simple as that

The next afternoon Earle woke up at two and went out to explore his new neighborhood. Every bar around Market Square had their jukeboxes blasting away, churning up the brutal heat. In fact it felt as if the music itself was creating the 100-plus degrees that was turning the sidewalks into griddles. George Jones sang his blues out of a hillbilly bar while next door Lightnin' Hopkins' voice wailed his own tales of woe from a jukebox speaker aimed at the street. From the shoe-shine parlor came Sam and Dave and from a pawnshop came the Rolling Stones singing Time Is On My Side. Earle wondered how it had all evolved to become such a diverse center of sadness.

No answer came to mind so he stopped in for coffee at a burger joint on the south side of the square. The sign said St. Paul's Cafe but there was nothing to suggest that any church or charity was involved in the management of the rundown cafe. Earle sat on the ripped Naugahyde stool at the counter and found a piece of yesterday's paper at the booth behind him. He noticed that the ashtray was so packed with cigarette butts that it had become a pyramid. Earle lit

a smoke and slid a Carling Black Label ashtray from down the bar.

Earle heard the waitress come up to the counter but he kept reading the paper as he ordered coffee and toast.

Anything else?

Who's Saint Paul?

Was my old man till he bled to death in my arms.

Earle looked up from the paper and was stunned at the face of the old waitress. Her skin was the texture of sunbaked leather and the creases and folds seemed as if it had taken nature thousands of years to create such a masterpiece. There was a strange beauty to the old woman, yet there was a sadness as deep as the cracks around her eyes. There was a kind of symmetry to each line that curled and twisted like eddies in the Rio Grande. Each ravine had its mirrored equivalent but not always in the same part of her face.

Oh, my God. I'm sorry.

He saved me from a mad robber. Would'a killed us both if Paul hadn't 'a wrestled him down. Bullet went clean thorough the son-of-a-bitch, bounced off'a the hard top, went back through him and into Paul's heart.

They ought'a make a saint out of him.

We already have.

She pointed to the sign above the ordering window that said 'Saint Paul's Kitchen.' It had been stitched by hand, embroidered with crude roses and placed in a substitute frame that had previously bordered a beer sign.

And your name is?

Paulina, Santa Paulina. That's what everybody's called me since Paul's gone.

Earle, here. I just moved into your town. Playin' over at the Cellar every night.

People ain't too pleased about the Cellar movin' in.

How come?

That gangster who runs it has warned everybody in ten square blocks about what a bad ass he is. He don't scare me none. Them kind'a fellers usually get what they deserve.

I just met him, and I don't care if I ever see him again. 'Cept at paycheck time. I'm just a musician, and I don't get involved in the business end of things much.

You ever hear of Lightnin' Hopkins?

He's the King, far as I'm concerned.

He plays sometimes over at the liquor store and sometimes at the bar next door.

I can't even believe that.

He's got family down here.

Maybe I'll catch him one of these days. Damn, Lightnin' Hopkins! Never really knew if he was real or not just because he's too real. You know what I'm sayin'? Well, guess I better run. Nice meetin' you, Pauline.

I make the best French toast in Houston. I bet you do. I'll see you mañana. Sayonara, cowboy.

Earle walked back to the hotel expecting to take a shower, but when he walked into the room every square inch was occupied by the musicians and the waitresses and other employees from the club. The smoke was so thick you could hardly see the dreadful pictures on the wall. In only twenty-four hours their room had established itself as the official hangout spot of the Cellar. He walked down to the lobby and found a gigantic couch covered in ragged gold chenille and he sat at one end, imagining all the millionaires that had sat there in the Milby's heyday. He found a piece of paper by the house phone and wrote:

*The Comfortable Dead, The Happy Dead
Those who deny in public,
Deny that they are dead
Let the Dead Wake Up!
Let the Dead Watch Out!
Drowsy memory perforated!
Soon the dead will rise!
Let the Dead Wake Up!
Down the tracks of insomnia
Let the Dead Wake Up!*

He heard the elevator door open and a wall of conversation spilled out, mixed with smoke, perfume and guitars. It took him a second to realize that these were the same thirty people who had just come from his room. He glanced at the clock and saw it was close to seven, time to go to the Cellar. He walked with everyone, straggling behind, and was greeted by two women who had dropped to the back of the pack and introduced themselves.

*Hi, I'm Pam and ...
I'm Loretta and we ...
Like the way you sing and ...
We dance around the corner from ...
The Cellar and we live ...
On the same floor as you guys and ...
Sometime, if you want ...
Come by and visit Prince Albert ...*

They turned at the corner, giggling, and waved good-bye, bumping into each other and dropping this and that like a slapstick team improvising trying to walk in a rolling funhouse.

Randy dropped back and made a commentary.

It's a wonder they can make it through a day.

*What's with them?
Stoned titty dancers from the Stag.*

They could still see them two blocks away, weaving and laughing.

*Good thing they don't drive airplanes,
Randy said.
Or run the government.*

After a couple of seconds Earle recanted his last statement and they both decided that the government would, in fact, be better if these goofy girls were running the planet. They would most certainly not be involved in an obscure civil war in Southeast Asia.

They walked through the Cellar door and felt all patches of time peel away and remain outside as the blackness inside forbade any forward advancement. In fact, the evening progressed very much the same as the night before and Earle was amazed to see a pattern emerge in such a short time. It seemed there was nothing any more fulfilling about this night than the night before, much to his dismay. He had hoped that it was only himself that was disturbed by this impression, but everyone he talked to seemed to have some feeling that there was something not right about this place. Of course they would then dismiss their testimony with a shrug and a nervous laugh and change the subject to something a little lighter.

Earle began to cherish the time between sets, walking the streets, getting to know the characters around Market Square. He listened to countless stories about how each person happened to land in this stewpot of a city.

He walked to the liquor store that Paulina had mentioned and went in and engaged the man behind the counter.

*Y'all carry Southern Comfort?
Half-pint, pint, or fifth? You of age?
Just seeing if y'all carried it or not. I'm new in town. Heard Lightnin' Hopkins shows up now and then.
You never know what Lightnin's gonna do. He's like Texas weather, only more so. It might be rainin', might be cloudy. Might be blowin' like all get out. Free as the four winds but less predictable.*

*Maybe I'll get lucky.
Mondays, 'round dark. He sometime git thirsty on Mondays.
Name's Earle.
Yeah, Little Bell, here.
Pleased to meet ya.
Likewise.*

He walked back to the Cellar and slipped

into the darkness. Nothing had changed. He played the next set noticing that the band stumbled at the same places each time. Each set was like a live rehearsal only they could not go back and fix what needed fixing. The magic from the night before was missing. It seemed that they were just going through the motions. He missed his Lubbock band.

When the set was over he strolled around the square and walked over to Main where he watched the buses load and unload. The city wound down as the oil company skyscrapers flicked whole floors of lights on and off. As the last of the workers trudged out, the night crawlers arrived, one by one, to see what they could scavenge from the scene. They had an air about them that was cautious like mice, yet sinister like scorpions. Con men, dealers and pimps snaked around the dark streets, sitting low in their cars waiting to make a play.

Earle realized that since he had ventured away from West Texas and out into the world, everything around him seemed to happen in a speeded up time frame, and as a result he had ignored his daily habit of recording his thoughts. He sat on a concrete windowsill that was lit by several pulsing advertising lights. He read backwards through the pages of his journal and it felt like he was reading someone else's life, not his own. He did not feel even remotely the same person as the one from a week ago. It made his heart hurt to read his references to Patricia, as he allowed himself to reminisce about her for a beat or two from his empty chest. God, how he had loved her.

He saw himself as a fly in a huge, maniacal cowtown. He thought about his home far away and the events that led him to this unreal city and he decided he needed to jot down a couple of lines that had been rolling around in his head before going back to the Flat Black Inferno.

*The Cyclone
The Hurricane
The Tornado berserk!
The Living, The Dying
Trudging on to Work ...*

*O Volcano, Frost and Freeze
Wild fire of mad disease
Tidal Wave of the weary
Let the Dead Wake Up!
And the Dying!
And the Dying!
And the Dying!*

During the next five hours the Sheep played twice more and Earle escaped to the streets after each round. By the end of the night he had met most of the Market Square regulars. They were all curious about the

Cellar management and they all wanted to know if it was really as bad as its reputation. Earle said that he didn't know much about it but that he figured it was worse than they had heard.

The Cellar emptied out after the four o'clock set and everyone filed out joking about going home to the 'Chateau Debris.' Charlie invited everyone over to the band's room for a party. As they entered the lobby Earle saw Pam and Loretta, the two strippers from the beginning of the night, still giggling and bouncing into each other. They saw Earle and asked if he wanted to come up to their room. It seemed like a sensible alternative to his only other option.

They had obviously been living in the hotel for some time. Their room, although huge, was jam-packed with stage clothes, hangers, props, trinkets and other things that had no name. Pam, the redheaded one, told Earle to make himself comfortable on the couch while they changed.

When they returned arm in arm they were dressed in East Indian outfits and giggling hysterically. Loretta, the larger of the two, asked the room to be quiet as she had an important announcement to make. Earle, since he was the only other person in the room, did not say a word.

Loretta proceeded.

Please rise.

Earle stood up.

The Prince has arrived.

She pulled a tin from her feather boa purse, and both girls mock-ceremoniously walked the can over to the coffee table. It looked to Earle like the thin kind of Prince Albert tobacco can that had a hinged top and would fit in your hind pocket. The two girls took a pipe out of an elaborate wooden box and asked Earle if he would like to do the honors. Since he did not know what they were talking about, he shook his head and mumbled that he was the guest and he reckoned that the hostesses were supposed to initiate all honors. Pam suddenly blurted.

*Your accent is so cute.
It's luscious and delicious.*

After slurring her similar words, Loretta laughed herself into a ball on the floor.

*Is that word inside a word?
It's a wordy, wordy, wordy world.*

The two girls howled with laughter and several minutes went by before they were able to contain themselves. Earle had never seen any two creatures quite so absurd in all

his life.

When Pam was able to crawl to the coffee table, she pulled some green crushed leaves from the can and put them into the pipe and handed it to Earle. Earle smoked it just like his uncle Willis used to smoke his pipe.

No, don't let it escape. It has to bloom in your body.

Pam took a long draw from the pipe and held the smoke inside her lungs for a long time until a thought flew by and caused her to laugh. Earle followed her directions but found that, except for being a little dizzy from holding his breath, he felt nothing unusual. He even told the girls that very few things had ever had an effect on him.

They passed the pipe around again and he noticed that the room had become so quiet that his thoughts were beginning to turn inward, away from the circumstances of the situation. He closed his eyes, partly out of exhaustion and partly to concentrate on what was inside his head. He heard a rustling in the room and opened his eyes to a nude Loretta who looked like she was ten feet tall bending to soft music that seemed to be spraying out of the walls. Pam then stood and dropped the sari from around her shoulders which twirled her glitter-covered pasties as it fell in a heap around the sparkles on her chrome high heels. She began to caress Loretta in a slow swish of her hand that left trails of light behind each movement, embedded into Loretta's skin.

When he turned his head, he noticed that the candles left streams of light that stayed in his vision where he stopped his eyes. The shapes would turn into smoky spirits that seemed to dance in midair against the rolling blue and purple shadows that made up the dark space of the room. As their colors turned to blue and green, their shapes elongated and divided, giving themselves legs and arms that bent and twisted like some kind of taffy that became infinitely thinner as it stretched into the dark corners. He could hear the dancers' skin as they rubbed against each other across the room, but the streams that were in his vision had commanded his attention. A groan faded into a train whistle which faded into the rattling of the fan which gave the impression that each sound was being played, on cue, in time to the dancing spirits that were now passing through the wall. The glass doorknob on the closet door seemed to beckon him and he was unable to do anything except to obey.

When he looked closely inside the glass he could see what looked like a contorted Shakespeare play. Ladies in tall pointy lace hats were watching television on a balcony

above a huge ballroom filled with dancing shapes. Rubber Great Danes sat stretching their necks at the moon in huge spirals as if they were singing it a silent song. The ladies were fanning themselves with fans that spewed off dozens of the ghostly spirit phantoms that Earle had just seen dancing around the room. They dove in and around the waves of whirling blue velvet that had, only seconds before, been a hall full of dancing people. Golden falcons flew out of the windows of the palace and into the driveway where bishops sat on white Harley Davidsons in white robes and tall hats, revving their engines in time and in tune with the unseen orchestra that seemed to be playing just behind a wall of juniper trees at the end of the driveway. In the distance, large bonfires were burning on the tops of each of the many hills that surrounded the palace. At least it used to be a palace. Now it looked more like a huge gazebo surrounded by flagpoles hundreds of feet tall with ridiculously tiny flags attached to the top of each.

Earle watched this amazing event for what seemed like hours, only to be distracted by the smell of candle smoke from a candle by the couch that the girls had blown out before going to bed. Earle crawled over on the couch and closed his eyes to watch green and blue fluorescent road graders pave a road that seemed to be a perfect mirrored surface across the flatlands and into a crimson sunset next to a gazebo surrounded by flagpoles

Earle woke up with the afternoon sun slicing straight through the middle of his head. He was not sure if this was still his dream or if it was something left over from last night. He raised up and looked around the room. The glass doorknob caught his attention and he fell back into the scene he had witnessed inside its shell. He laid back down and closed his eyes, slipping back into recent events that now seemed mellow and unthreatening. In fact he slept for another three hours, waking when the giggling girls came out of their bedroom and asked if he'd ever been to Sugarland. When he asked where Sugarland was, they, of course, died laughing for at least another fifteen minutes.

Earle groaned at the thought that it was almost time for the first set at the Cellar. He decided to go to Saint Paul's and see if they were still making breakfast at 5 p.m. He tiptoed out the front door, hoping the girls wouldn't hear him leave.

There was an old black Cadillac in front of the cafe when Earle arrived. It had a mysterious, hand-made air about it and, when he saw Paulina, he asked her about the car.

It's a friend of Lightnin's. They were here a couple of hours ago. Saw 'em gettin' Lightnin's guitar out of the trunk. Might be over at Little Bell's. You want a menu?

How could I eat knowin' Lightnin' might be wailin' around the corner? Why don't you shut this joint down and come over?

Cain't. Paul would be reproaching me all the way there and back. Ain't nobody else to run the place 'cept Willow. And she cain't run a toaster, much less a register.

Earle skipped down to Little Bell's and, sure enough, he could hear the refrains of Lightnin's guitar from a block away. A few people were milling around out front; some listening, some smoking, and some tapping their feet and singing along. Earle was surprised there weren't more people around and most of the ones that were there were from the neighborhood. He made his way into the bar next to the liquor store and there was Lightnin', his gold tooth shining in the beer-sign light, sittin' on an old cane chair wailing away with a half-pint of gin on the floor by his chair. He was in the middle of a revved-up rendition of Mojo Hand, grinning from ear to ear like he had finally made it home after a long hard journey. There was something familiar, almost grandfather-like about Lightnin', as if his soul had merged with his music and been passed on through a tweed amplifier for the world to share. He played song after song and in-between talked and laughed with his friends in the bar. Little Bell came in the side door with a chocolate birthday cake with a sparkler implanted in the top. It appeared that Lightnin' had ordered the cake for his friend, Napoleon, the bartender. After they mumbled assorted versions of Happy Birthday, Lightnin' dedicated a song to Napoleon and as he played the floor began to shake. Earle could have spent the rest of his life in this spot had he not glanced at the clock to see that he was to be on stage in ten minutes.

He ran two blocks to the Cellar and saw Bad Bob eyeing him as he panted in the door.

*Cuttin' it purty thin, ain't ya?
Always have.*

Just don't fuck up. The Cellar ain't forgivin'.

That seems to be the consensus.

The Sheep played an all right set that ended a few minutes early when Charlie busted a bass string. Earle hit the door and made tracks for Little Bell's. The bar had returned to its pre-Lightnin', sleepy self. The light was still on the amplifier that Lightnin' had played through and an empty half-pint bottle stood at the side of the chair. Napoleon was wiping the bar in a slow circular motion as Earle asked when Lightnin' might return.

If I knew that, I might be one rich fool. He pop in like the Jack 'n a Box and he pop out the same way. He done gone 'bout 'da time the woid get aroun'.

Name's Earle. I caught a little of Lightnin' earlier before I had to run and play my set over at the Cellar.

Nice to make your acquaintance but I wouldn't brag about my place of employment if I were you.

Somethin' strange all right. I can feel it here, blocks away.

Bob ain't got much of a name 'roun' here.

We crossed swords the day we met. He don't seem to care much for the very ones that pay his bills. It sure as hell ain't his playin' that brings in the door. Funny guy. Well, Napoleon, guess I better grab a little breakfast 'fore my nex' set.

Breakfast at eight in the night? You kee-pin' my hours now

Earle sat in a booth by the window at Saint Paul's drinking coffee and watching black clouds bury the sun. Within minutes the rain came, turning to steam as it hit the broiling Houston asphalt. The windows fogged up and puddles of rain formed under the holes in the roof. Paulina was doing double duty, cooking *and* serving; Willow had to leave early to pick up her husband at the refinery. The radio was blaring that a half-million soldiers were now fighting in Southeast Asia and the war was escalating. President Johnson was saying that if America doesn't stop the Communist aggressors in North Viet Nam they will be soon be trying to take over our neighborhoods. The station played Eve of Destruction and the chorus played differently to Earle now; everything that he had taken for granted, freedom, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, was now being challenged by a war 10,000 miles away.

You look like you're lost 'cross the ocean. You ain't far off. I'm gettin' more and more worried that I might get called for the draft.

You shouldn't fret, you should pray. Pray you get called up. It'd be an honor to serve your country.

That's just it. I'm in a dilemma 'bout this whole deal. I've tried praying and the answer I get is the one that everybody says is the wrong one.

We had to stop the Germans from taking over the world.

I don't see that this is anything the same.

Well, you just follow your heart and everything else will follow along.

My heart tells me to run.

That's just what you're doing. And it's

what I better do 'fore I git swamped in the kitchen. If that Willow does this to me one more time

California Dreaming came on the radio and set a series of wheels off inside Earle's head that spun like the pointer on a compass. He remembered the times he traveled on the Santa Fe Chief with his parents, across the desert, to the palms of sunny Southern California. He remembered seeing the barracks in San Diego where his daddy had been stationed in World War II, and he remembered the ride up the coast on the Sunset Limited past great cliffs that dropped off into a wild, frothing sea. He remembered the lady who sat behind him and told his fortune by reading the bumps on his head. He remembered the fog that slithered around Alcatraz as he wondered what imprisoned killers ate for breakfast.

The other night in Fort Worth, Gene had mentioned something about knowing some people on the beach in L.A. and that he might go out there soon to see if he could find them. Earle thought that maybe it was in his fortune to see the beautiful West Coast again. On the other hand, maybe it was time for his next set in the pitch-black hellhole down the road

The days and nights crawled by and very little changed. The routine that had been established upon arriving at the Cellar soon became a deep rut. The insanity of having to be around that place for eleven hours a night was starting to take its toll on everybody. Not to mention the tension that was building at the hotel. The management had reprimanded Rocky and Dusty and Frank for turning their towels blue when they dyed their hair. In return the musicians were beginning to take out their own frustrations on the hotel's outer appearance. Several of the landscape paintings in the halls had been manipulated to include such things as flying saucers landing in the distant hills while long-tongued dogs fornicated in the foreground.

If it weren't for his friends around the square, Earle might have lost all hope. He began inviting them to drop by the club for the honor of having them as his guest. During the course of one evening he invited Bo Peep and Too Slim from the shoeshine parlor and Julio and Hector from the pawn shop. He stopped by Little Bell's the next evening on his way to the Cellar and saw Napoleon polishing the bar.

You're liable to rub a hole in it and then what would you do?

Have to shut this joint down and go fishin' I suppose.

Might be too hot, the locks might melt.

Or the fish be hangin' on to a root down on the cool bottom.

Earle looked through the glass to the liquor store.

I don't see Little Bell.

His gal friend swooped him up and they done flew to Red Bird City.

I gotta go there someday. Hey, listen, I'd like to invite you guys over some night as my guests.

That's mighty kind of you, but the word on the street ain't too favorable towards that place.

I'm out to make it better. The place is a little too wrapped up in itself, that's all.

Thursday's our only night loose.

Good, that's the new moon. Tell Little Bell or I will if I see him first.

Why, thank you Mr. Earle, I'll let him know. I'd like to see the inside of somewhere other than this bar.

Bad Bob's girlfriend, Candy, showed up that evening from Fort Worth and there was a general red alert around the club that night. No musician was to even glance at Candy, or Bob would have them vaporized by his pack of hoodlums. There was only one problem. Candy was nuts about musicians and ran around the club in a red miniskirt begging for their attention. Earle crossed from one side to the other several times to avoid this new threat to his well being and slipped in the far backstage dressing room while she was on the other side of the club. He was sitting on the couch, looking down, tuning his guitar when he heard the volume level rise in the room. When he looked up, his heart skipped a beat when he saw Candy slither into the room like a coral snake. There was no way out of the room so he stood up and faced the corner and started humming Saint James Infirmary. He could hear her slide across the room toward him. He stopped playing and began making his plea as if he were on trial.

I really really think you better leave this room.

She came back in a low seductive voice that struck fear in Earle's heart.

What if I don't want to. Are you going to make me do something I don't want to do?

I'm just asking — no, begging.

A nice boy like you shouldn't have to beg.

Look, Candy....

I didn't know you knew my name. Say it again.

Earle turned around to find a creature more drenched in sex than any girl he'd ever seen before. Her pale flesh was burst-

ing out of her clothes and she writhed before she spoke.

Say my name again.

Earle tried to say her name but the sound choked in his throat. The volume level rose suddenly in the room again, and Earle thought it was a reaction inside his own body until he saw the silhouette at the doorway. Bad Bob glared into the room.

Candy, I need to see you out here.

He stared a hole into Earle as Candy swiveled to leave the room.

And you

He slammed the door so hard that the sound in the room imploded and collapsed into a vacuum between Earle's ears. He fell in a heap on the couch and wondered how he was going to finish out the night. Larry came in and told him it was time to go on. Earle asked for a slug of the half-pint that he had stashed in the wall. He took two giant swigs and then tottered, rubber-legged, to the stage.

He felt dizzy and disconnected as he walked to his amp. The weight of his guitar had doubled since the last set. The red and green lights burned his eyes, and when the band hit the first note he could feel the kick drum slugging him in the back of his neck. He opened his mouth to sing and the sound that came out was nothing like his normal voice; it was guttural like the sounds animals make when they are cornered and about to die. As he was singing he was also making a huge conscious effort to not look at Candy. But in every direction he turned she was there. It was as if she had premonitions of which way Earle's head would be facing on each particular verse. She moved around the room and stood in whatever light happened to be there.

Bob was at the office door watching Candy priss around the room while watching Earle's every move. The two bouncers at his side were following the direction of their boss's head. They even shuffled their feet and moved their toothpicks at the same time.

From Earle's viewpoint they resembled a three-headed viper trailing a grasshopper around a dry creek bed. He needed to escape this grave situation but had no idea how to get around the hazards at the front door. After the set, Earle told the band what he was up against and how he was truly at odds over what to do about it. Larry ran out and came back in with the news that Rocky and Dusty had offered their dressing room as a refuge.

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It was the room with the safe in it and it had both a deadbolt and a padlock on the inside of the room. Earle thanked them for their kindness and locked the door behind them as they went out for their set. For the rest of the night he jumped back and forth from stage to backstage and by the end of the night he was a wreck. He asked Rocky if he would bring his amp and guitar back to him so to avoid Candy and Bad Bob. Rocky not only brought his gear but offered him a ride back to the hotel with him and his girlfriend, Misty. They left out the service entrance around back and attracted no attention.

At the Milby, it took all of Earle's strength to wrestle his amp upstairs. Rocky's girlfriend said she would lock his guitar up in her car and he could get it in the morning. He had a key to Pam and Loretta's room and fell out on the couch without even removing his boots.

In the morning he went down to the lobby for a cup of coffee and noticed some commotion outside on the street. He saw through the window a couple of Houston police cars with their lights blinking. Misty, who had given him a ride last night, was crying on the curb and a policeman was trying to comfort her. Rocky was pacing up and down the sidewalk ranting and raving. Earle walked out to investigate and immediately noticed the pile of broken glass by the side of the car.

He told himself that this could not be happening. Someone could not have taken his guitar. It was impossible. Not his guitar. Not his staff, the main tool of his holy trinity of tools. No, he decided, the police were there for some other reason; there was a shooting and the perpetrator, perhaps, missed. Maybe a gargoyle fell off the hotel roof. Each made-up explanation fell short upon his logic, although Earle refused to accept that which was obvious.

Rocky turned to find Earle staring at the scene in shock. He ran over to tell Earle what was going on.

Some son-of-a-bitchin' junkie-assed bastard broke in Misty's car and got your guitar, Misty's suitcase, and my fuckin' pistol. What in the hell is this fuckin' world comin' to?

Earle felt sick at his stomach and thought about the good Reverend who had given him a ride to Dallas and who had told him to use his tools to make the world a better place. That was less than a month ago and he had now lost two-thirds of his tools and, in his eyes anyway, the world seemed to be a considerably worse place. Anyway, he told Rocky not to worry, but after he said

it he wondered why he had said something so mundane at a time like this.

Worry, hell, I just hope the asshole shoots off his own little pecker with my .38.

After the cops had gotten a description of the guitar from Earle, he walked down to the square stunned and bewildered. Every building looked hollow with rows of dead, sunken eyes. The storekeepers seemed to physically avoid him as he walked by. This was it. It was time to move on. He walked, slightly relieved at his decision, down to Saint Paul's for coffee.

Paulina was reading the Bible when he sat down at the counter. She got up and brought him a cup of coffee before he had a chance to say anything.

Somebody shoot your horse? You want to tell me about it?

Thieves stole my guitar last night. I've pretty much had it. That was the instrument I used to speak through. I washed dishes for two years to pay for that guitar. I feel like my soul's been stolen.

No one can steal your soul but the devil. You lost something dear, but it can be replaced.

There's something about that place that's rubbin' off on me. I gotta do something before it gets too late.

That's your best call yet. You know Little Bell and Napoleon went by there last night to see you and that thug at the door pointed to a tiny sign way up by the roof that said: Cover Charge \$99.

Earle jumped up in a near panic.

That son-of-a-bitch. That son-of-a-bitch! That lowdown I've got to tell them —

I think they knew all along.

Earle thanked Paulina and ran out onto the square. He felt like he might never see her again and a wave of sadness ran over him. He walked with his head down, watching the sidewalk cracks, wondering what to say to his friends that he had invited the night before.

When he walked into the liquor store Little Bell glanced up and quickly glanced away. Earle went to the counter.

Paulina told me y'all came by last night. I had no idea that those guys were that low down. I've had it with them. I quit today. Right now. Right this minute.

You mean to say you didn't know about that place before now? You ain't got ears? I had a bad feelin' when I first walked in

the door. I thought it was just me, though. Most of the musicians are happy just to have work and a roof over their heads.

Us black folks been havin' situations like this for a long time. Maybe you seeing something for the first time.

Maybe so.

There was a long silence between them as a police siren wailed thru the city streets.

Is Napoleon around?

After we got turned away, he started drinkin' heavy. Reminded him too much of his upbringing'. He ain't showed up to open the bar yet, neither. He don't handle hangovers too well at his age.

Tell him I'm sorry about what happened last night and that I'll come by when I figure out what I'm gonna do. Thieves stole my guitar last night. Broke out a car window in front of the hotel. Reckon I'll have to start all over. Well, guess I better run.

Earle turned to leave.

*Earle?
Yeah?
Me and Napoleon ain't blamin' you.*

Earle looked straight into Little Bell's sincere eyes.

I know you ain't.

It was painful to walk away but Earle was glad that he had heard compassion in Little Bell's voice. Not that it made anything on the outside any better but it did make the understanding better.

Earle went by to see Bo Peep and Too Slim but there was a sign on the door that said 'Gone off — Be back.' He walked on down to the pawn shop and saw Hector by the back curtain but when he asked the cashier inside, he told Earle that neither Hector nor Julio was there and that he was not expecting them today and probably not tomorrow either. Earle could see the rage in the young cashier's eyes and could see that a considerable amount of damage had been done. He asked him to relay the message to Hector and Julio that he was sorry for not realizing any sooner that the people he worked for were bigots and racists but that he did now and that he had quit the Cellar and was leaving the city soon.

He walked back to the Milby to try and catch the band but there was not a soul in either of their rooms, though smoke still hung thick in the air. He went over to the window and opened it as far as it would open and sat on the ledge and looked out over the cruel city. An approaching

storm blocked the sunset and the neon signs came on as the rain lashed out and splashed into the glazed streets like molten lava. The whole city steamed and hissed like a wildcat defending something sick and unborn. The city's incessant bass pulse came from somewhere deep and secret and the two sounds were pulling at one another as if some gargantuan force was being twisted inside. It sounded as if the city itself was seeking a breaking point in order to rid each part from itself. He scribbled in his book.

*Flood Light Blind Eye
The Power Within!
Mad dogs follow
Where Fools rush in
Let the Dead Wake Up!
Oh Plastic Clock
The Timex cries
Alarm the World
Warn the Dead to rise!*

*Dead in Spirit, Dead in Nerve
Dead in Mind, no King to serve
Dead in Spark, Dead in Gut
Dead in part, Dead clear-cut
Lift your eyes, O Shaft of Light
Abandon Ye O Guillotine
Let the Dead Wake Up!
And the Dying!
And the Dying!
And the Dying!*

Some insane impulse made Earle decide to walk to the Cellar and confront Bob Crump. He had to tell him what was on his mind and ask for the money that was owed him. When he walked in the door he was whisked into the office by the bouncers at the front door. Bob sat in a well-worn office chair and raised his brow and froze his eyes on Earle when he came in the room. Earle could hear the Sheep playing on-stage and he waited for Bob to blink. Finally Bob shifted back in his chair and crossed his arms.

Maybe you don't recall our lateness policy. You've damned near missed the first set.

I ain't late. I'm quittin' this hole. Ain't my idea of a good time. That ninety-nine dollar cover charge bullshit didn't set well with my amigos.

We don't like niggers and meskins in here and don't care whose friends they are. And maybe you don't recall our quitting policy. Nobody quits the Cellar.

Bob reached into the top desk drawer and pulled out a .45 automatic and aimed it at Earle. He then grinned the evil grin he

always used when he intimidated someone. Earle felt his ribcage suddenly rise through his throat and lodge in the roof of his mouth. The bass notes hammered through the wall and matched the pounding of his heart, beat for beat. The door opened suddenly on his left and when Bob's eyes darted toward it, Earle dove for the bottom of the opening. The bouncers were in the process of throwing someone out as Earle flew past them and sailed out the front door and across the intersection with cars' brakes screeching all around him. His vision blurred at the edges of his eyes and his head felt like a spark-gun blowing fueled sparks from every cavity into the thick humid air. He could feel his lungs beating him in the back as the liquid light rippled beneath him on the wet, glassy sidewalks. As he rounded the corner his shirt caught on a piece of torn chain-link fence, causing him to fall and to skid across the asphalt. He stayed there, not moving, feeling that the pain of the fall was like a resurrection. He no longer heard footsteps behind him. He could feel a new dawn on the other side of the pain. He closed his eyes for a second and thought about the sweet girls back in Lubbock asleep in cotton quilts in rooms with little paintings hung on the walls of furry kittens hopelessly tangled in balls of twine.

He could hear Lightnin' snappin' his strings way back in the back of his head. He kissed the smooth sidewalk and when he lifted his head he could smell the bus to Fort Worth idling nearby.



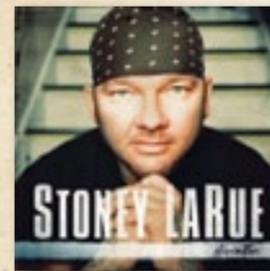
THE BRAND NEW SELF-TITLED ALBUM
AVAILABLE NOW



reviews



STONEY LARUE
 WADE BOWEN
 LUCINDA WILLIAMS
 TWEEDY
 GARY CLARK JR
 LEE ANN WOMACK
 JUSTIN TOWNES EARLE
 RYAN ADAMS
 DIRTY RIVER BOYS
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 SONS OF BILL
 THE BELLE SOUNDS
 DREW KENNEDY
 ROGER CREAGER
 MIKE RYAN
 JEREMY STEDING
 D.C. BLOOM
 RONNIE LANE AND SLIM CHANCE



STONEY LARUE
Aviator
 Entertainment One Music

One of the signature artists and biggest draws on the Texas/Oklahoma musical axis — despite having what once could have been described as a pretty slim catalog of original material — Stoney LaRue has picked up his pace considerably by only taking three years to follow up 2011's excellent *Velvet* with this year's model, *Aviator*. Three years apparently wasn't long enough to lose the thoughtful, restrained vibe that buoyed his last record; he also didn't lose the number of songwriting collaborator Mando Saenz, the under-the-radar Houston-bred talent that helped LaRue make the best of his subtle new directions on *Velvet*.

Considering that LaRue's biggest calling card has long been his gritty, expansive voice — an instrument that can rattle the crowds at the scene's biggest venues and festivals — this meditative turn in his material is kind of a bold statement in itself. Rueful self-examiners like "A Little Too Long" and "First One to Know" and spacey ballads like "Blending Colors" owe more to the psychedelic-tinged Cosmic Cowboy early days of Michael Martin Murphey and B.W. Stevenson than just about any of LaRue's modern Red Dirt friends and rivals. Even when the tempo picks up, such as on the jittery rocker "Studio A Trouble Time Jam" or the twisty, fiddle-driven "Spitfire," it still feels more like an exploration than settling into familiar crowd-pleasing grooves. Of course, it certainly hasn't hurt to bring in co-producers Frank Lidell and Michael McCarthy, known for work with envelope-pushers ranging from Miranda Lambert to Spoon, in on the adventure: They know that creative freedom can sell (and soar) if the talent's in place, and the singer up front here is more than game. Years on the road have left LaRue's voice a bit heavier and deeper, with a little more gravity in his drawl, and his songwriting and choice of material have followed suit. — **MIKE ETHAN MESSICK**



WADE BOWEN
Wade Bowen
 +180 Records

World-beating self-assuredness has served Wade Bowen well over the last few years. He's made the gradual transition from North Texas bar-band kid to one of the most successful touring country artists outside of the Nashville machine while other contemporaries have seen their careers stall out or fade. And judging by this latest batch of songs, the Power of Positive Thinking has got a lot to do with it. Songs like the lead-off single, "When I Woke Up Today" and "The Sun Shines On A Dreamer" sound like they might have been co-written with Tony Robbins. That might be a little too motivational-poster cheerful for some tastes, but fortunately a welcome complexity settles in as *Wade Bowen* moves on. For starters, his backing band is as on-point as ever: numbers like "I'm Gonna Go" and the Latin-tinged "Welcome Mat" might not be stone classics, but they do push Bowen's familiar heartland sound in some interesting, jam-friendly directions.

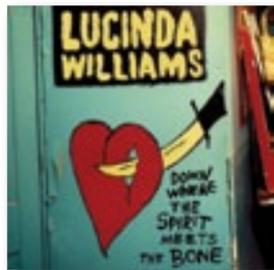
There's little danger of the band or production overwhelming Bowen as a singer, though, because somewhere along the way he's become one hell of a vocalist, both distinctive and flexible. But he smartly avoids the urge to overdo it, saving some killer vocal climaxes for moments like the tag of the satisfyingly hearty "West Texas Rain." Aside from that one, perhaps the record's most fully realized track is the tender "Sweet Leona," an unassuming love song with shades of both Van Morrison and Merle Haggard in the delivery. That being said, the fan favorite may well end up being "Honky Tonk Road," a simple yet catchy number (already known to some via Walt Wilkins & The Mystiqueros' original version) augmented by guest spots from Bowen's frequent collaborators Randy Rogers, Cody Canada, and Sean McConnell. Bowen doesn't have to take a backseat to anyone at this point, but he sure sounds energized singing shoulder-to-shoulder with his friends. Overall, this self-titled effort isn't quite the stunner that 2008's *If We Ever Make It Home* was, but it's plenty engaging to justify its maker's signature optimism. — **MIKE ETHAN MESSICK**



Photo courtesy of Wade Bowen



Photo by Michael Wilson



LUCINDA WILLIAMS
Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone
Highway 20 Records

At this point in her career, it's almost hard to believe that Lucinda Williams was ever pegged as a fussy perfectionist. She got saddled with that rep over the reportedly protracted labor pains and studio drama that eventually produced her 1998 breakthrough, *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*; but ever since that album's release to resounding critical and even commercial (for a non-mainstream record, anyway) success, she's produced a steady stream of new work like an unburdened artist in full, confident stride. What's more, she's admirably (if albeit frustratingly to some of her fans) avoided the safe route of trying to deliver a *Car Wheels II*, resulting in a no-two-alike succession of risk-taking records that have hit the mark far more often (2001's *Essence*, 2007's *West*, 2011's *Blessed*, and about half of 2003's *World Without Tears*) than not (the rest of *World Without Tears*, and pretty much all of 2008's decent but forgettable *Little Honey*).

At first pass, her 11th studio album, *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone*, seems to split that hit/miss ratio right down the middle, which seems about right for a double album spanning 20 songs stretched out over an hour and 43 minutes. Even for a hardcore fan, that's a *lot* of Lu to process all at once — and Williams doesn't really go out of her way to offer much of a helping hand, à la the irresistible, kick-ass hook of "Buttercup," which opened *Blessed* with a bang. Rest assured, though there's swagger to spare here — but it's *grooves*, not hooks, that do the heavy lifting and grabbing. Paced and sequenced like a marathon set list, it's a record that sneaks up on you; you may well be halfway through the six-minute "Foolishness" (on disc one) before you smell the smoke coming from the speakers. Then you'll crank it up and play it again, ears as keenly attuned to the rolling boil intensity of guitarists Greg Leisz and Stuart Mathis (Wallflowers) as to the hypnotic spell of Williams' chant-like admonishment of trash-talking liars and fear-mongers, her seething delivery closer in spirit to prime Patti Smith than anything remotely "Americana."

Lyricaly, Williams is as sharp and poignant as ever throughout, tapping deep into rich veins of frustration, heartbreak, and emotional resolve and tuning every line to precision. The opening "Compassion," adapted from a poem by her father, Miller Williams, sets the tone, its plea for empathy ("You do not know what wars are going on/down there where the spirit meets the bone") alternately answered and wrestled with in songs as disparate as the feel-good "Stowaway in Your Heart" and the tortured anguish of "Burning Bridges" ("You're the saddest story that's ever been told/and I stand back and watch as the tragedy unfolds.") And though a lot of her melodies this time around seem a little under developed, that rough-around-the-edges quality feels of a piece with the bottled lightning charge of the performances. Williams has always had great players on her records, but she's never come out of the studio with an album that crackles with the energy of a live *band* quite like this one. The credits reveal a fair amount of track-by-track musical chairs, but co-producer Leisz and the core rhythm section of Pete Thomas and Davey Faragher (both on loan from Elvis Costello) earn MVP nods along with Tony Joe White, whose thick, swampy guitar cloaks "West Memphis" and "Something Wicked This Way Comes" in menace, and jazz guitarist Bill Frisell, whose moody, liquid tones underscore the beautiful melancholy of "It's Gonna Rain" and infuse the long, slow closing cover of J.J. Cale's "Magnolia" with an ambient glow. Williams' singing, meanwhile, has rarely sounded better, be it dialed down to quiet, vulnerable lament or pushed to angry, feral growl. And if it's the carnal side of Lu you're looking for, well ... suffice it to say that the hot-and-bothered Williams that sang "Right On Time" back on *Car Wheels* would blush like a schoolgirl listening to the way *this* woman summons the devil on "Something Wicked This Way Comes." That song's not a warning: It's a promise. — RICHARD SKANSE

Schweiki full page



TWEEDY
Sukierae
Anti-

For a band whose name derives from the voice procedure term for “will comply,” Wilco has been at its best when dealing with conflict: Jeff Tweedy vs. personnel or Tweedy vs. addiction or Tweedy vs. depression or the stylistic tension that occurs when you set murderous lyrics to pretty melodies. But the Wilco of the past 10 years hasn’t quite found the tension of its earlier iterations. Tweedy has captained a band of tremendous dexterity, but in doing so has lost some of its scruffy soulfulness. Enter illness, though, and an old ghost is reborn.

Sukierae takes as its title a nickname for Tweedy’s wife, who was diagnosed with a pair of cancers. But this isn’t simply an album about a sick loved one, just as it’s not a Jeff Tweedy solo album: credited to the *band* Tweedy, *Sukierae* is a musical dialog between Jeff and his young son, Spencer, a gifted drummer of incredible range. Lyrically, the older Tweedy expressively writes and sings songs here that dig into a new conflict that illness pulled to the fore: the one between age and youth. Wilco began to become itself on its second album with a dark and experimental song/proclamation called “Misunderstood.” *Sukierae* opens with its aged counterpart: “I don’t wanna grow up,” Tweedy sings before getting to his point, “I don’t want to be so understood.” Why? “Boring, boring, boring.” So he spends the album kicking against the dulled pricks. On “World Away,” he wants to freeze the sun and steal a moment. On “Wait for Love,” he references “distant days” and a sweetness that slips away. A gorgeous melancholy arises when an artist fights with time. The album’s finest moment of bruised beauty is “Nobody Dies Anymore,” a song that defies time as its author tries to sweep wisdom aside to capture some elusive wisp of youth. The tune’s childlike request suggests both Daniel Johnston and Neil Young. “I’m going,” Tweedy sings, “to where nobody dies anymore.” It’s the kind of simply deep song that can leave you breathless.

Father and son designed the music to complement the songs: The softer ones are cradled, the sharper ones made to bristle with electricity. Tweedy’s guitar playing is soulful and expressive throughout, and his son provides sympathetic support; the rapport feels like the sort of vocal harmonies only family members can achieve. By most measures *Sukierae* runs long – 20 songs over 73 minutes. But it plays like a river ride. If a contemporary record exists that disregards time in our message-every-moment culture, this is the one. — **ANDREW DANSBY**



GARY CLARK JR.
Live
Warner Bros.

Blues fans can be a demanding bunch. Each time promising players emerge, they’re expected to document their authenticity. Show us your suffering, please. Extra points if your skin tone matches the genre’s originators, because then you can be appointed the savior of a supposedly endangered art form. While ethnicity might provide an edge with regard to understanding the blues’ cultural roots — unlike Robert Johnson, whites didn’t have to fear being caught outdoors after sundown — the notion that color adds capability is one most players don’t buy any more than the idea that they’re supposed to save anything besides themselves.

Fortunately, by remaining more interested in self-expression than living up to others’ ideals, Austin’s Gary Clark Jr. has found his own level of artistic purity — one steeped in the legacies of his blues inspirations (black and white), yet giving equal legitimacy to his rock, hip-hop and soul heroes. That’s what lifts him out of the realm of imitators; it’s also what caused him to flounder somewhat on his major-label debut, *Blak and Blu*. But when he stands onstage, guitar in hand, Clark somehow turns even lesser material into the stuff of performance legend. On this double album, every track sounds like lightning in a bottle. Clark seamlessly melds past and present, laying the gritty, fuzzed-up slide-guitar snarl of “Next Door Neighbor Blues” beside the deep-throated notes of “Catfish Blues” (attributed here to Muddy Waters), and channeling both Chuck Berry and admitted Berry borrower Keith Richards through “Travis County.” He turns Albert Collins’ “If Trouble was Money” into a stunning bout of improvisation, and grafts the cascading notes of Hendrix’s “Third Stone from the Sun” onto Little Johnny Taylor’s “If You Love Me Like You Say” with a break that sounds as if he’s hiding a vinyl-scratching DJ — or Tom Morello — behind his amp.

The defibrillator-jolt segue from “Blak and Blu” to “Bright Lights” provides another high, and definitively conveys just how well he’s learned to moderate both his intensity and pacing. Clark deftly spins notes into whirling crescendos, then pulls back, only to hit more peaks until he finally goes for the climax — giving audiences orgasmic frenzies. But the real depth of Clark’s talent becomes evident when he switches to the soft groove of “Things Are Changin’” or the soul-blues of “When the Sun Goes Down” or “Please Come Home,” which earned him his Best Traditional R&B Performance Grammy. There’s no question he deserved it; his sweet, butter-smooth vocals dazzle even more than his fretwork. Now he just needs to find more material where that came from. — **LYNNE MARGOLIS**



LEE ANN WOMACK
The Way I’m Livin’
Sugar Hill

Given the freedom to finally make exactly the record she wanted to make after years of coloring inside the mainstream lines, certified country superstar Lee Ann Womack earns her Americana credentials with flying colors on her first new record in six years. To call the overall excellent *The Way I’m Livin’* the best record she’s ever made would be a disservice to both her exquisite 2005 classic-country throwback, *There’s More Where That Came From*, and 2002’s *I Hope You Dance*, which had a lot more going for it than just its undeniably moving smash title track; but it undeniably represents a key turning point in her artistic journey that may well prove to be the defining moment of her career. It’s telling that Womack, who in theory could have used this record as a platform to showcase her own songwriter’s voice, be it solo or with assists from any number of A-List Americana friends, instead takes a cue from Emmylou Harris and plays to her greatest strength by shining her peerless soprano on a lovingly curated playlist of tunes already road-tested by some of the best young (and some not so young) performing songwriters in the field. It’s a true “for the sake of the song” move that pays off in spades via gorgeous interpretations of Chris Knight’s “Send It On Down,” Hayes Carll’s “Chances Are” (which despite its Americana roots is arguably one of the purest sounding true country songs she’s ever sung), and especially Adam Hood’s “Same Kind of Different,” which Womack sings mostly a cappella or with backing so subtle its more felt than heard. The arrangements throughout are a key part of the magic here, with Womack’s producer-husband Frank Liddell capturing the intimate sound of a singer and band playing together as one. Regardless of whatever the future holds in store for Womack in terms of commercial and chart success, *The Way I’m Livin’* hits the artistic bulls eye. — **RICHARD SKANSE**



JUSTIN TOWNES EARLE
Single Mothers
Vagrant Records

After the old-time country stylings of his 2008 debut, *The Good Life*, Justin Townes Earle has diverged from that sawdust-covered path in favor of a more crooning, grooving catalog. The stylish son of Steve Earle’s new album, *Single Mothers*, is a 10-tune collection that continues in the vein of his last two, 2010’s *Harlem River Blues* and 2012’s *Nothing’s Gonna Change the Way You Feel About Me Now*, as an exploration of soul-inspired Americana with only occasional country flourishes — most notably with some stunning pedal steel work. Earle’s sound here is not unlike that of fellow folk-soul artists Ray Lamontagne or Amos Lee, but his voice isn’t quite hearty and bold enough to bellow out the liveliest vibes on its own; fortunately, the instrumentation carries much of the weight, as on the genuinely butt-shaking, head-bobbing muscular boogie-woogie of “My Baby Drives.” The softer songs, such as “White Gardenias,” suit Earle’s vocals more attractively. His voice shows real character as it carries some crackling pain in the sparsely adorned, acoustic “It’s Cold in This House,” in which he sings about not needing his phone as he has no one to call. Other highlights include the drumbeat-happy “Time Shows Fools” and the breezy “Wanna be a Stranger,” both of which owe far more to the cinderblock buildings of Muscle Shoals than to the more country-leaning rooms of Nashville or Austin. — **KELLY DEARMORE**



RYAN ADAMS
Ryan Adams
Pax Am/Blue Note

Being a Ryan Adams fan traditionally has not been for the faint of heart. For every “When the Stars Go Blue,” there have been moments of self-indulgence and self-destruction that rival either Gallagher brother’s. But the thoughtfulness and maturity that permeated his 2011 album *Ashes & Fire* are even more evident here; subtly shaded moods have replaced any trace of cockiness. The music on *Ryan Adams* simmers, and shimmers, with understated intensity, offsetting lyrics of restlessness and worry, even outright fear for something, or someone, he hasn’t yet lost — or maybe he has, but hasn’t faced it (because, as he notes in “Feels Like Fire,” “You will always be the hardest thing/I ever will let go”). Adams’ genius lies in marrying that darkness to near-pop melodies, and keeping the production spare — except for his layers of elegant guitar work, augmented by guest Johnny Depp (take note: this is a monumental guitar album). He’s also writing Springsteen-level lyrics in songs such as “My Wrecking Ball” and “Shadows,” and in the muted tension of “I Just Might,” evokes *Nebraska* outright. Whatever relationships his pain-baring lyrics might reference, it’s a good sign that wife Mandy Moore (“My Bug” in his thank-yous) contributes vocals. Maybe turning 40 will help settle his soul even more. — **LYNNE MARGOLIS**



DIRTY RIVER BOYS
Dirty River Boys
DRB Music

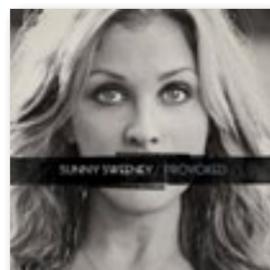
From the very first notes, it's clear that the self-titled release from El Paso's Dirty River Boys is one finely polished record. That's not always a welcome development, but the extra shine here enhances the popular live group's folk-meets-punk-meets-pop dynamic without overshadowing it with oily slick production. Recorded at the famed Sonic Ranch outside of El Paso under the distinguished ear of producer Chris "Frenchie" Smith, the vast majority of the songs here would have fit right in on any previous DRB release. The Nino Cooper-sung "Sailed Away" and "Thought I'd Let You Know," which is led by Marco Rodriguez, both offer up the trademark galloping beats and gang-style sing-alongs that hopefully will always be a part of the band's go-to bag of tricks. "Teenage Renegade," meanwhile, offers evidence of the group's continued evolution via employment of electric guitar. It may not be revolutionary a la Dylan in '65, but it's just enough of a tantalizing tease to suggest that these Boys still have a lot of surprises up their tattooed sleeves. — **KELLY DEARMORE**



CHRISTINE ALBERT
Everything's Beautiful Now
MoonHouse Records

There's a time — and music — for Texas two-stepping and knocking back cold longnecks in Texas dance halls, and then there's a time — and music — for reflecting on that cold hard fact from the Gospel of Hank Williams that none of us get out of this world alive. Veteran Austin songbird Christine Albert's *Everything's Beautiful Now* is a collection of beautifully crafted songs born out of the sorrow and contemplation from seeing several beloved friends and family members pass on in recent years. From loss comes lyrical elegance; from heartache comes harmonic convergence with the precious memories that remain. In paying this moving tribute to those dearly departed, Albert draws upon an impressive array of musical friends and family, from co-producer and long-time partner Chris Gage to Eliza Gilkyson, Jerry Jeff Walker, and her son Troupe Gammage, with whom she duets on Shake Russell and Dana Cooper's "Lean My Way," a lovely promise to be there for others through life's hard times. Albert covers Warren Zevon's plaintive and pleading "Keep Me In Your Heart," a song that in Albert's hands — and with Gage's hands on a mournful yet hopeful accordion — becomes a celebration of the staying power of remembrance. She also takes a graceful turn at Jackson Browne's elegiac "For a Dancer" and Tom Peterson's "On That Beautiful Day," a sanguine vision buttressed by Lloyd Maines' masterful dobro work. While she wisely chooses the works of others, it is Albert's own songs that make *Everything's Beautiful Now* a cherished gift. The title track, inspired by some of the last words of her mother-in-law, includes Albert's words of placid and poetic acceptance: "The window's open, the breeze is blowing, so I'll be going."

— **D.C. BLOOM**



SUNNY SWEENEY
Provoked
Thirty Tigers

If the current pack of mainstream bro-country hit churners go the way of the dinosaur in the next few years (we can hope), there's a tenacious emerging species of charmingly brash, unmistakably countrified women long overdue for their turn in the sun. Sunny Sweeney was already on a bit of a roll, breaking into the Top 40 mainstream just a few years ago, but ironically she sounds a bit younger now: the sort of tough-gal swagger that made fellow Texan Miranda Lambert famous figures more heavily into Sweeney's sound that it used to, and it's a great fit. Having collaborators like Brandy Clark and Pistol Anniens members Angaleena Presley and Ashley Monroe on board makes the aptly-titled *Provoked* a snapshot of a scene where brutal honesty, raw vulnerability, and unabashed sauciness are heartily encouraged. Some of the best songs here roll out like mini-movies from a distinctly female perspective: the chilly awkwardness of showing up "Uninvited," the catty back-and-forths of "Backhanded Compliment," the stinging self-reproach of a heartbroken woman hitting the bottle early in her "Sunday Dress." At worst, the record stumbles a bit trying to shoehorn personal tales into lyrical form ("Second Guessing," "Used Cars"), but Sweeney's sweet East Texas twang and Luke Wooten's pleasantly scuffed-up production never make it less than listenable. At best, you get the achingly pretty "My Bed" (a Will Hoge duet with some hair-raising harmonies) and "Find Me," plus the biting, almost Warren Zevon-esque "Front Row Seats." *Provoked* is easily Sweeney's best work yet, both self-deprecating and likeably assertive with the vibe of someone who'll want to hold your hand until she has to kick your ass. — **MIKE ETHAN MESSICK**



LUCERO
Live From Atlanta
ATO Records

Memphis-based roots-rockers Lucero have rightfully earned their name as a killer live act, especially after implementing a small horn section into their presentation in 2009. And with *Live From Atlanta*, recorded over a three-night stand at Atlanta's Terminal West last November, the band serves up a grand 32-song opus that captures not only the heart and soul of their stage show, but the po-tency of their catalog as honed to perfection after 16 years in the trenches. Most of the songs here are faithful interpretations of the studio versions, especially the newer, soul and horn-infused "Juniper" and "On My Way Downtown," but a sweaty grit is palpable throughout the entire marathon set. The greatest beneficiary of the live-concert treatment is "That Much Further West," the title track from the group's 2003 album. Augmented with not only new brassiness but a chugging-paced guitar licking on the heels of Ben Nichols' grizzled delivery, the song is a triumphant blend of Stax soul and late '80s Bay Area-punk. Like any great concert should, *Live From Atlanta* leaves you spent, exhilarated, and begging for an encore. — **KELLY DEARMORE**



Photo by Anna Weber



SONS OF BILL
Love and Logic
Gray Fox/Thirty Tigers

Sons of Bill may very well be the Bill Pullman of today's Americana music scene. Need a talented but ego-free band of everyman musicians versed in the Son Volt/Whiskeytown playbook of earnest, literate, and dead-serious mid-90s alt-country without a tendency to get all Wilco-y and weird on ya? Then call up Central Casting and ask for these five guys from Charlottesville, Va. Although producer David Lowery (Camper Van Beethoven/Cracker) got the Sons to pick up the tempo a smidgen on 2012's *Sirens*, the new *Love and Logic* (helmed by former Uncle Tupelo/Wilco drummer Ken Coomer) for the most part finds them settling back into their slower, more meditative comfort zone. To everyone's credit, they do this kind of stuff impeccably well, with tasteful guitars and atmospheric steel painting large swaths of the record in gloaming shades of blue and amber and James Wilson's rich, plaintive voice still a dead-ringer for Jay Farrar's. But for all the understated beauty of songs like "Road to Can-nan" and "Hymnsong" (whose line, "We will look for love and logic in the dying of the light," lends the album both its name and primary color scheme), there's an ennui-inducing sense of déjà vu to boot-gazers like "Fishing Song" and "Lost in the Cosmos (Song for Chris Bell)" that underscores just how dull this genre can be when it sticks too close to the script. Sons of Bill are really at their best here when they break form — be it just long enough to bust out a Beach Boys' (or Jayhawks') *Smile*-evoking chorus on the aptly titled "Brand New Paradigm," or even to go way out on a stylistic limb, as they do on the beguiling "Bad Dancer." A po-faced alt-country band mixing references to *The Odyssey* with hooky, '80s-style synth pop may not sound logical, but it's refreshingly easy to love. — **RICHARD SKANSE**



THE BELLE SOUNDS
Black Stone
www.thebelle-sounds.com

The Belle Sounds have one helluva sound. It's a vintage *Rumours*-esque harmonic lushness over precise, Shins-like shiny grooves. *Black Stone*, a five-song EP and the second release from the Austin-based band, kicks off with a pulsating, instantly captivating energy that serves as a love song of sorts from front woman Noelle Hampton to Mt. Tamalpais, the childhood stomping grounds of the native California Girl's youth. "The Siren," inspired by Hampton's love of Ray Bradbury's prescient 1953 classic *Fahrenheit 451*, is a soothing reflection on the hyper-ventilated, technologically possible talk-about that dominates today's collective discourse and over-sharing. And in the winsome "Ghost of Myko-nos," she turns an unsettling Nancy Grace headline about a tragic honeymoon into a lovely ode to romantic mystery and star-crossed secrets. The Belle Sounds' penchant for upbeat, pop-sensible songs over the darkest of subject matters is also displayed on "Golden Boy," a song inspired by fictional serial killer Dexter Morgan that features Andre Moran's eyebrow-arching guitar riffs augmented with a "truth is out there" synthesizer that gives the track a love-is-kinda-crazy spookiness. — **D.C. BLOOM**



DREW KENNEDY
Sad Songs Happily Played
Atlas Aurora

On the short list of live albums recorded without the artist's knowledge, Drew Kennedy's *Sad Songs Happily Played* proves what most fans would suspect: he's on his best behavior even when he doesn't know the tape is rolling. Taped at an intimate Texas gig last fall, this winning two-disc set showcases the New Braunfels-based troubadour's comfortable grace on the guitar and his pliant, immediately recognizable twang holding together an assortment of songs from his recent spate of excellent studio albums. Especially well-represented is 2013's *Wide Listener*, and the significance of the material's freshness is evident in the palpable energy that leavens the unhurried, introspective pace of the songs. An appealingly regular guy that just happens to be a little more well-travelled and critically respected than most of the rest of us, Kennedy's humorous tales of mistaken-identity drug busts, buying dead plants with his wife, and being repeatedly mistaken for Josh Grider are the seasoning on a generously hearty helping of songs like "Good Carpentry," "Age & Color," and the particularly tender "Vapor Trails." Staking out a reliable sweet spot between the gritty observations of Guy Clark and the dreamier pop sensibilities of Jackson Browne, Kennedy's recent catalog is well worth a rehash for existing fans and a new look for the uninitiated. — **MIKE ETHAN MESSICK**



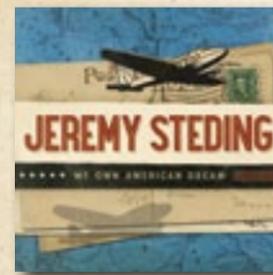
ROGER CREAGER
Road Show
Fun All Wrong Records

Back in the late '90s, Roger Creager was firmly amongst the wedge of young artists like Pat Green and Cory Morrow that split the scene wide open for aspiring Texas country singers that didn't want to wait for Nashville to assimilate and exploit. The big-voiced, endlessly energetic Creager did it as well as anyone, and by all accounts still does: *Road Show's* title track describes the day-to-days of regional superstar life pretty well. This seven-song EP's most ambitious number, "A Little Bit of Them All," amusingly catalogs the parade of sinners and saints in his DNA, but the conflict hasn't really seeped into his art: if anything, the 2014 Creager has doubled down on his party-hearty instincts. Like Jimmy Buffett except for with beer and inner tubes instead of margaritas and sailboats (not to mention Neil Diamond's vocal gifts instead of, well, Buffett's), Creager toasts river floats ("River Song") and Mexican vacations ("Where the Gringos Don't Go") with all the gusto of someone who's found a groove that works. All (or at least most) of his rowdy friends from the earlier wave of Lone Star music might have settled down, but now more than ever Creager's still there for you if you feel like feeling 21 all over again. — **MIKE ETHAN MESSICK**



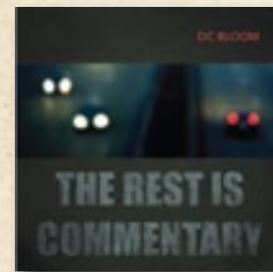
MIKE RYAN
Bad Reputation
Rock & Soul Records

The star of Mike Ryan's new album, *Bad Reputation*, isn't any one of its terrific songs, but rather the maturity of the entire collection. Ryan, who has a publishing deal with Nashville's Sea Gayle Music, co-wrote every track with fellow pro tunesmiths in Music City, but don't let that scare you off. The collaborative results, chock-full of clever lyrical gymnastics and featuring a more rock-forward, polished style than his solid 2012 record, *Night Comes Falling*, are terrific. In the R&B-inflected "Easy" and "Putting Off Telling Me Goodbye," Ryan casually but confidently details life behind bedroom doors. Likewise, in the smoky, riff-heavy title track, he begins by singing, "Another night in another bed, nothing new to me," in a relatable manner that stops short of frat-boy braggadocio, because like every song on here, it's done with a true writer's craftsmanship. On "Dancing All Around It" and "Wasting No More Whiskey," the two best songs on the album, Ryan takes standard wording and pumps the phrases with color as each song's chorus unveils pain and perspective. From start to finish, *Bad Reputation* is a record that deserves to put this Texan on the map in a very good way. — **KELLY DEARMORE**



JEREMY STEDING
My Own American Dream
Bonnie Blue Music

Although he's been getting steadily better with each record, Austin's Jeremy Steding's third album marks a giant step forward for the former University of Florida student in terms of musical maturity. On his past efforts, most notably 2009's *A Damn Good Ride*, he had a habit of flaunting a rebel attitude that could feel forced at times. But with *My Own American Dream*, he takes a gentler turn for the better. Here, everything just seems to flow with an organic grace that is highly appealing. The fiddle and mandolin-enriched "Love Love Love," along with the pedal-steel-kissed serenity of the title track, offers more pastoral storytelling than in the past, and "Home in Travis County" is a picturesque, aching ode with appealing acoustic flourishes instead of a clichéd rocker about how great Austin is. The tender "Arkansas Rain" is another gem that proves how effective Steding's plainspoken, truthful delivery sounds when set against a rustic backdrop. The rootsy approach works just as well when he picks the pace up a little, too, as he does in the barn-dance worthy "Four Hour Gig" and "Oh, Darlin'." Here's hoping Steding continues down this promising path, because while Texas music really doesn't need any more wannabe outlaws, this kind of authenticity is always welcome. — **KELLY DEARMORE**



D.C. BLOOM
The Rest is Commentary
Table or Booth Music

In the 10 years since his move down from Virginia, corporate/government speechwriter by day/singer-songwriter by nights and weekends D.C. Bloom has come a long way towards making a name for himself in the central Texas music community. He's forged meaningful friendships with a ton of notable artists, pissed off a few others via his alarmingly frequent and patently irreverent Facebook postings, secured his own weekly songwriters-in-the-round hosting gig at Austin's popular Whip In, won the hearts of San Antonio Spurs fan by penning an irresistible tribute to Manu Ginobili long before Shinyribs' Kevin Russell wrote one of his own, and even finagled his way into the staff box of this magazine as a regular contributor. But as his fourth album, *The Rest is Commentary*, makes clear, he's still a *long* way from blending in with the crowd as just another dude with a guitar. Like a scarlet Buckeye in a field of burnt orange Longhorns, the Ohio-born Bloom stands out from the Texas folk crowd he runs with by writing and recording songs that feel closer in spirit to '50s/'60s satirist Tom Lehrer — or even vaudeville — than anything inspired by Van Zandt, Clark, or Shaver. Even when he steers clear of the funny bone and plays things earnest — which he actually does more often than not on *Commentary*, favoring heartfelt songs like the lovely "The Key of You and Me" over lighter, clever fare like "Lesser Prairie Chicken" — Bloom still sounds like the oddest duck in the listening room. And just when you think you've got him figured out — as in, *of course* he'd have *tuba* all over his opening track, "I Got Questions," and *of course* he'd find a way to turn the last words of Steve Jobs into a sing-along folk gospel tune ("Oh Wow Wow") — he drops a stone-cold beautiful rendition of Stephen Foster's "Hard Times Come Again No More" on you that could floor an army of stone-faced folk Nazis. As for the rest of *Commentary*, well, suffice it to say that Bloom's tunes may not fit everyone's tastes or Americana program director's playlist, but it's hard not to root for a guy who sounds like he's having this much fun just being himself. — **RICHARD SKANSE**

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RONNIE LANE AND SLIM CHANCE
Ooh La La: An Island Harvest
Universal-Island

After co-founding two of England's greatest rock 'n' roll bands — '60s mod godheads the Small Faces and their boozy '70s successors the Faces — Ronnie Lane took off in a less raucous, yet equally audacious, direction when he went solo in 1973. Launching the sprawling acoustic combo Slim Chance, Lane set about creating a distinctive brand of rustic British alt-country/folk-rock that rocked with celebratory abandon while mining the undercurrent of introspective melancholy that Lane brought to the Faces' best work. Lane made much of his most expressive and accomplished music during this period, until his performing career was ended by the multiple sclerosis which eventually took his life (after a fondly-remembered stint living in Austin) in 1997.

The two-disc, 37-track *Ooh La La: An Island Harvest* — drawn from Lane's stint with Island Records, which yielded his two best solo efforts, 1974's *Slim Chance* and 1976's *One for the Road* — is hardly a perfect anthology. The liner notes are amateurish, the recording info is skimpy, and the sequencing reverses the chronology of the two albums. But it's still the best Lane collection currently available and a fine introduction to his post-Faces career. With various key non-Island songs (including the bittersweet title anthem) substituted by live tracks, alternate takes, BBC sessions and previously unreleased versions, *Ooh La La* proceeds in an appropriately shambling yet purposeful fashion, gathering nearly two and a half hours of music — nearly all of it memorable and affecting. — **SCOTT SCHINDER**

'80s used to say to him: 'Johnny, why don't you try and have a hit record, what's so bad about that? Do a good rocking tune and try to get a hit. Then when we get out to play you're going to have more people come that you can lay the blues on,'" says Paris. "At the time it seemed like a no-brainer: Guys like Clapton, ZZ Top and the Fabulous Thunderbirds were having hits and then getting up onstage and playing the blues.

"He said, 'Oh no, if I have a hit record, all my blues fans will desert me,'" Paris continues. "He was so into being a blues purist and respecting the genre."

During the height of his fame in the '70s, Winter produced three excellent albums for Muddy Waters that won the blues legend Grammy Awards and ushered in the most successful years of his career. Winter's hard-driving style and three-man band was an obvious influence on Stevie Ray Vaughan when he formed Double Trouble with former Winter

sideman Tommy Shannon on bass.

Winter died as he lived, in a hotel room on tour in Europe. Sadly, it was just after issuing a three-disc career retrospective box set, *The Johnny Winter Story*, and less than two months before the release of a new album, *Step Back*, that features guest appearances by Billy Gibbons, Eric Clapton, Ben Harper, Dr. John, Joe Perry, Brian Setzer and others.

"It's now a moment for celebration of his brilliance frozen for all time," says Gibbons of Winter's passing. "We've lost another of the gifted guitar greats and a truly soulful spirit."

"He once told me how when he was a kid, he wanted to be the best blues guitar player in the world — that was his goal," says Paris. "And he certainly is in the minds of a lot of people. Nobody could play like him. He was just unbeatable."



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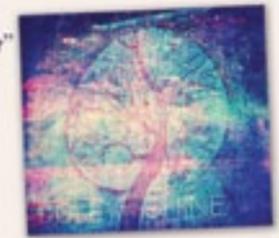


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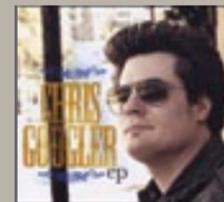
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LONESTARMUSIC TOP 40

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1. Chris Gougler — *Chris Gougler EP*

2. Micky & the Motorcars — *Hearts From Above*
3. Roger Creager — *Road Show*
4. Ryan Adams — *Ryan Adams*
5. Cody Johnson Band — *Cowboy Like Me*
6. Billy Joe Shaver — *Long In the Tooth*
7. George Strait — *The Cowboy Rides Away*
8. Canvas People — *Sirens*
9. Randy Rogers Band — *Homemade Tamales: Live at Floores*
10. Shane Smith & the Saints — *Coast*
11. Johnny Winter — *Step Back*
12. Drew Kennedy — *Sad Songs Happily Played*
13. Paul Thorn — *Too Blessed to Be Stressed*
14. Turnpike Troubadours — *Diamonds & Gasoline*
15. Washers — *Everything at Once*
16. Turnpike Troubadours — *Goodbye Normal Street*
17. Mike Ryan — *Bad Reputation*
18. Lucinda Williams — *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone*
19. Shovels & Rope — *Swimmin' Time*
20. Shelley King — *Building a Fire*
21. Kelley Mickwee — *You Used to Live Here*
22. Green River Ordinance — *Green River Ordinance*
23. John Fullbright — *Songs*
24. Gary Clark Jr. — *Live*
25. Parker Millsap — *Parker Millsap*
26. Joe Ely — *B4 84*
27. Josh Grider — *Luck & Desire*
28. Sunny Sweeney — *Provoked*
29. Sturgill Simpson — *Metamodern Sounds In Country Music*
30. William Clark Green — *Rose Queen*
31. Lee Ann Womack — *The Way I'm Livin'*
32. Sons of Bill — *Love & Logic*
33. Lucero — *Live From Atlanta*
34. Old Crow Medicine Show — *Remedy*
35. Curtis McMurtry — *Respectable Enemy*
36. Curtis Grimes — *Our Side of the Fence*
37. Jason Eady — *Daylight & Dark*
38. Dolly Shine — *All In EP*
39. Cody Canada — *Some Old, Some New, Maybe A Cover or Two*
40. Jason Eady — *AM Country Heaven*

LoneStarMusic Staff Picks

Zach Jennings: Ryan Adams, Ryan Adams

Richard Skanse: Lucinda Williams, *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone*

Melissa Webb: Shovels & Rope, *Swimmin' Time*

Kristen Townsend: Shakey Graves, *And the War Came*

Kallie Townsend: Adam Hood, *Welcome to the Big World*

Promise Udo: Leonard Cohen, *Popular Problems*

Lance Garza: Fire In the Pines, *Heart of the Machine*

Emily Hervey: St. Paul & the Broken Bones, *Half the City*



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VENUE SPOTLIGHT

Magnolia Motor Lounge | Fort Worth, Texas

By Kelly Dearmore



Get your motor running: In the three years since opening for business, Fort Worth's Magnolia Motor Lounge has distinguished itself as one of the best live music venues in North Texas — not to mention as a cool hangout that serves up a great burger and mean cocktail, too. (Photos courtesy of Bryan Beckman)

On an elevated corner in an increasingly bustling Fort Worth neighborhood sits a former transmission repair shop that now stands as the star of a district where live-music, food and great local beer have replaced power tools, empty store-fronts and general drabness. Since October of 2011, the Magnolia Motor Lounge — situated in the party-ready West 7th Cultural District just a couple of miles west of the scenic downtown — has become a destination spot for not only TCU students or people visiting the nearby Fort Worth Zoo, but for music lovers from every corner of the Dallas-Denton-Fort Worth triangle.

Things really took off for Magnolia Motor Lounge when current owners Grayland, Matthew and Bethany Smith bought the venue in August of 2012. Since that point, Bryan Beckman, a respected veteran of the north Texas music scene who previously ran Fort Worth's Woody's Tavern for 11 years, has booked the diverse array of local, regional and nationally known musical talent to fill-out the demanding seven-nights-a-week schedule.

The versatile venue can easily accommodate crowds up to 1,000 strong, like the one that came out for the Quaker City Night Hawks' *Honcho* album release

show, but also feels "just right" for more intimate singer-songwriter showcases.

"One night, Bobby Bare Jr. left it all onstage to an attentive but small crowd," recalls Beckman fondly. "And on many of our Sunday Americana and country matinee shows, you can hear a pin drop during performances by Walt Wilkins, Max Stalling, Bonnie Bishop, Susan Gibson and more."

Beckman's expertise in bringing in great acts and the venue's quality sound system and communal vibe are all certainly key ingredients to MML's success, but there's also no over-stating the added allure of adding deep-fried bacon to the irresistible mix. Truly, a trip to the MML is worth it just for the Magnolia Custom Burger alone. The decadent burger — piled high with a runny egg, strips of chicken-fried bacon, grilled mushrooms and pepper jack cheese — is but one of the stars of the varied menu. The draft beer selection is every bit as impressive, and they make a top-notch martini, too.

"I'll usually grab a few [beer-braised pulled pork] Garage Tacos before I take the stage, that's my go-to — and I always get whatever cool IPA they have on tap when I'm there, too," says singer-songwriter Drew Kennedy, who has

made MML his primary performance stop among the many choices there are to play west of Dallas.

"I love the people behind the place," enthuses Kennedy. "They truly care about music. They care about creating a meaningful partnership between the venue, the artist, and the audience. That's how you build a lasting business: Bottom line, it's the people."



Magnolia Motor Lounge, 3005 Morton St., Fort Worth, Texas; 817-332-3344; www.mmlbar.com.

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11/22 BOSSIER CITY, LA: THE STAGE AT SILVER STAR SMOKE
12/12 TERRELL, TX: SILVER SALOON
12/13 OKLAHOMA CITY, OK: DIAMOND BALLROOM
12/18 BEAUMONT, TX: JERRY NELSON'S HILL COUNTRY
12/19 GOLIND, TX: SCHROEDER DANCE HALL
12/20 SAN ANGELO, TX: MIDNIGHT RODEO

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