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The People's Poets: Literature Born of the Texas Singer-Songwriter Movement of the Last Forty Years

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The People's Poets:
Literature Born of the Texas Singer-Songwriter Tradition
of the Last Forty Years

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
The University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

by

Phyllis Dunham

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Abstract

The People's Poets of Texas: Literature Born Within the Singer/Songwriter Tradition of the Last Forty Years is a creative nonfiction exploration of the poetry found within the songs of multiple generations of modern Texas singer/songwriters and a case for the consideration of their work as a genuine regional literature. Studying the roots of Texas music, the musicality of Texan manners of speech and storytelling, and re-examining the Austin, Texas music scene of the 1970s that brought a national focus to the organic, reciprocal manner in which Texas music is traditionally experienced, radically altered the ways in which the songs were written, recorded, and marketed. An examination of this phenomenon allows us to understand that, first, a proliferation of Texas singer/songwriters of unprecedented quality has emerged in recent decades and that, second, a legitimate people's literature is emerging from their song-craft.

Keywords: ethnomusicology, Texas music, singer-songwriters, song lyrics, song lyrics as literature, lyrics as poetry

Foreword

I'm not sure why all the great ones [songwriters] come from Texas, but they do.

– **Keith Urban, Grammy-winning singer/songwriter from Australia (Atkinson 33)**

Texas is the only place I know of where little Billy Bob might come home from school one day and tell Mom and Dad that he wants to grow up to be a singer/songwriter, and Mom and Dad are likely to say, “Well, okay, son. Here’s a guitar and a pad and a pencil. Get after it!”

– **Pablo Menudo, singer/songwriter, Terlingua, Texas**

It ain't country. It ain't rock. It's Texas.

– **T-Shirt Slogan**

I've been absorbing live, original Texas music since my parents first took me to the Quihi (pronounced *Kwee hee*) Gun Club dance hall in Quihi, Texas. I was about seven years old at the time, and the Quihi Gun Club building was at least a hundred. The men were required to hang their cowboy hats on pegs around the walls and to take off their boots if they were hob-nailed—an attempt at protecting the nearly perfect hardwood dance floor. Little kids like me and my brother, who tired fairly early in the evening, fell asleep on the piles of adults' coats that topped the tables lining the dance floor while our parents danced polkas, schottisches, waltzes, two-steps, and the Cotton-Eyed Joe. Adolph Hofner and the Pearl Wranglers, a touring band sponsored by the Pearl Brewery in San Antonio, played expertly—on steel, fiddle, guitar, bass, and accordion—from the stage at the end of the building, and the kids occasionally sneaked a sip or two from the longnecks that the dancing grown-ups left unattended.

A few months later, I learned to waltz and dance the Texas two-step, myself. My Uncle Lester, my favorite cowboy, set me on top of the long table at a rodeo dance at the old Ranch House Café in Sabinal and pulled my boots off. Then, in a common and time-honored rite of

passage for little girl Texans, he placed my socked feet on top of his cowboy boots and began to whirl me around the floor. It was the most exciting experience of the seven and a half years I had spent on Planet Earth until that time. I wanted more. For the rest of my life, I wanted more.

By the time I was in high school in the early seventies, Willie Nelson had famously left Nashville to return to Texas to make what eventually came to be called Outlaw Country music. He found some songwriters back home who weren't doing it the cookie cutter way. Willie was ready to take on Nashville and prove that there was a market for less manufactured and more artistic compositions, or, as Texas music critic Rick Koster says, "Nelson didn't give a rat's ass about the old-line Nashville establishment" (35). Willie proved the Nashville guys wrong. In the process, he and a handful of others, most notably his buddy Waylon Jennings and a transplanted New Yorker named Jerry Jeff Walker, began recording music in new ways and, in so doing, inspired new generations of Texas singer/songwriters to become equally determined to make their music their way. Manufacturing hits was no longer the principal objective, and commercial success (although it certainly occurred for Willie and Waylon and a few others) was no longer the primary goal.

These new generations of songwriters, no matter what genre or convention they write and perform within, seem determined, as Texas singer/songwriter Hayes Carll has said, to "stay close to the art and close to the song." In Texas, these troubadours have found not only appreciative audiences for their music, but also the traditional honky-tonks, dance halls, juke joints, and, in some cases, folk clubs where they can hone their song-craft to perfection in the early stages of their careers while possibly making enough money to quit their day jobs. In other words, there is opportunity.

There is also inspiration. Texas traditionally was, and still is, a hotbed of rich musical cross-influences that provides these artists with a plethora of genres and traditions to draw from. Furthermore, Texans, who naturally speak rhythmically and musically and in simile and metaphor, are often great storytellers, themselves, and they appreciate and expect genuine poetry in the lyrics as much as they do a rollicking, diverse accompaniment. Songwriters have often found that, when playing to a typical Texas audience, it is okay to throw in a cover song once in a while, but it had better be a good one (Hank, Willie, Billy Joe, Guy or Townes, maybe). But, for the most part, in the places where Texans traditionally gather to hear the real deal—if you can't create your own music, if you don't have something fresh and original to say, get off the stage. Or, as a crusty Texan might express it, "If you can't run with the big dogs, son, stay on the porch."

What this particular segment of the Texas music-listening audience is longing for may be best expressed by ethnomusicologist Manuel Pena's separation of music into organic and super-organic categories. According to Pena, organic music evolves over time within a community, while super-organic music is quickly- and commercially-produced for the sake of display and commodity. He makes the distinction between music-as-cultural-performance and music-as-spectacle (3-7). An audience engaging in reciprocity by dancing to Dale Watson's band while hollering out requests for old songs not on the set list is a lived, organic experience. At Ginny's Little Longhorn Saloon in Austin, Watson once commented from the eight-inch riser that serves as a stage how delightful the ladies' perfume smelled as they whirled past the band. Evenings like that are almost a contact sport.

A spoon-fed Garth Brooks concert, on the other hand, complete with light show and super-graphics is a bought and paid for spectacle, even if the audience booty-shakes and claps

along. Not that Garth Brooks hasn't delivered such spectacles in arenas in Dallas or Houston. He has. And not that a Garth Brooks concert can't be fun. It can. But that sort of over-produced concert is not what Texans at the local dance hall or honky-tonk or folk club are looking for. They prefer, instead, to engage with the singer/songwriter in a bona fide way that is a participatory cultural event celebrating the authenticity, and often the diversity, of Texas music roots.

Much has been made of the fact that Texas is a crucible where diverse forms of music have encountered one another for the past two centuries, and it is often assumed that these mixtures alone may account for the rich musical heritage for which the state is known. Latin meets Czech meets African meets German meets Irish meets French, etc., seems to magically add up to the splendid new mixes that have kept Texas music fresh and often at the forefront of American music. Texas is, no doubt, a rich crossroads for seemingly incongruous musical roots traditions, and at least three major Texas-born genres have bubbled to the top of this glorious stew: *Conjunto*, Honky-tonk, and Western Swing. Other genres influencing any given singer/songwriter might include gospel, blues, jazz, *tejano*, folk, country, bluegrass, rock, punk, and surf among others. A musician raised in such traditions almost can't help being ridiculously versatile, and that makes for quality songwriting and musicianship.

A friend and I listened to a band a few years back at Antone's in Austin while waiting for Billy Joe Shaver to take the stage. I remarked to her that I didn't think the lead guitarist was from Texas, and she asked why. This is my recollection of our conversation.

"He's a good guitarist, but listen to him. He can't switch genres well, and he couldn't handle that Texas shuffle in the last song."

"So where do you think he's from?"

“If I had to guess, Appalachia somewhere. He seems kinda stuck in bluegrass mode.”

A couple of songs later, when the singer introduced the band, he announced the musicians’ hometowns. They all hailed from Texas towns like Waco or Galveston or Amarillo. Only the lead guitarist was from out of state. North Carolina, to be exact. My friend and I weren’t too worried about the guitarist, though. He was talented, after all, and we reckoned that if he stuck with the band long enough, he’d have to learn to hop genres.

Due, in no small part, to the diversity of roots influences and the resulting proliferation of hybrid forms, defining the Texas music of the last four decades has been a difficult feat. In recent decades, the music of the Texas singer/songwriters in its various forms has been called the following: Outlaw Country, Progressive Country, Americana, Redneck Rock, Cowpunk, Alt-country, Texas Alternative Country, and even the clever but still unsatisfactory “Y’alternative.” No single term captures it all. No single term can or should. But this constantly-evolving, wide-ranging music must be explored for its commonalities as well as its diversity, and among the common threads are a dedication to individuality and an authenticity of voice that results in a devotion to less commercial and more artistic expression, especially when it comes to what these writers have to say in song.

Ya see, the trick to this writing thing has always been to use the conventions to create an interpretation like no other. That day you and your songwriting buddies don’t sound very much alike. Instead, you have ... a lot in common.

-Vince Bell, Dallas-born singer/songwriter (Harris, 27)

The state’s musical tradition of cross-pollination doesn’t necessarily account for the outstanding poetry of the Texas singer-songwriters’ lyrics, but it is a contributing factor. With so many vibrant traditions and mixes at hand, the song-makers can write in a variety of moods and modes that best express any particular lyric thought. The vibrant and critically-acclaimed music

they make is, in fact, often much more lyrically important and accomplished than it is musically so, a subject about which astonishingly little has been studied or written.

But for a long time I wasn't interested in the lyrics. Once Uncle Lester taught me to dance, I learned to feel the music and its rhythms in my bones. Only much later, in my early twenties, did I begin to appreciate fully that quite a bit of this music came with a bonus. It didn't sound like Nashville music. There were few feeble hooks and over-stretched metaphors. Indeed, at its very best, there was poetry in this stuff—poetry sprung mostly, but not entirely, from working class dialects, speech patterns, and experiences to tell stories of heartbreak, love, the road, the landscape, and the people. It didn't sound like country music from elsewhere, and a great deal of it wasn't country music in the conventional sense of the term anyway. And while the words might indeed be catchy, they were seldom merely catchy. The lyrics were at turns profound and poignant, piercing and poetic, wise and witty, satirical and sometimes outright funny. This, then, is an exploration of and an attempt at an explanation for the abundance of outstanding poetry to be found within Texas music, specifically within the Texas singer/songwriter proliferation of the last forty years, a constantly-evolving tradition through which words have become at least as important as music, and a people's literature has emerged.

Part I: Why Texas?

Introduction: The Fertile Ground

If means, motive, and opportunity are the factors needed to make a thing happen, then it had to happen in Texas, where, when it comes to music-making, there exists an unprecedented abundance of all three. The history of Texas music spans generations of mixed traditions, and music-making there has long been recognized as a legitimate, and even honored, career path. As if that weren't enough, opportunities to perform are as common as dirt. The state seems awash in legendary and innovative figures in an astounding array of genres: from rock pioneers Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison to legendary guitarists Buddy Guy and Stevie Ray Vaughan, from country greats Ray Price and George Jones to blues masters Leadbelly Ledbetter and Lightnin' Hopkins, from *Conjunto* trailblazers Santiago Jimenez, Sr. and Lydia Mendoza to hip-hop innovators Getto Boys and DJ Screw. As critic Rick Koster says, “. . . for every musical style represented in my eclectic record collection, someone from Texas not only was damned good at it, but had probably expanded and significantly enhanced the possibilities of that style. In fact, . . . Texas has perhaps the most diverse and colorful tradition in American music history” (viii). But, in order to understand why so many great singer/songwriters come from Texas, we must first examine how a state that was relatively unpopulated 150 years ago became such a hotbed of cross-cultural musical influences in the twentieth century.

A Brief History of Texas Musical Traditions

No state is more musical than Texas . . . a state of immigrants where the melting pot is stirred to the sounds of Cajun waltzes, polkas, honky-tonk, conjunto, funk, and jazz. The Hybrid State, Texas is where new variations were created when Hispanics played German music, blacks played country, farm boys played big band jazz, and everyone played the blues.

*– Michael Corcoran, award-winning music critic, and
NOT a Texan (x)*

Texas, in spite of its reputation for braggadocio and exceptionalism, does not exist within a vacuum or on an elevated plain uninfluenced by its neighbors. Bordered by Louisiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Mexico, and the Gulf of Mexico, Texas has experienced waves of immigration over the last two centuries that flooded the countryside, towns, and cities with diverse musical influences with roots on three continents.

When Spain ruled the land that is now Texas, the government was unable to attract settlers to the wild and unpopulated (by Mexicans) territory. Once Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821, the situation immediately changed. Fearing an encroachment from the U. S. settlements in neighboring Louisiana, Mexico sought colonists, and fast, for their far-flung and sparsely populated state of *Tejas*. They granted land to potential new colonists, mostly Anglos from the southern United States and Irish Catholic families fleeing British rule., and, eventually, as Texas became an independent nation and later a state, even more land was granted to Czechs, Germans, Poles, Bohemians, and Alsatians from Europe, most of whom entered Texas through the new port of Galveston (Hartman 3-27).

Each wave brought successive new cultures, foods, farming methods, and music. The Southerners brought traditional English, Irish, and Scottish folk songs and flings that later morphed into bluegrass in the Appalachians. From Europe, came the schottisches, polkas,

marches, and classical influences (and the not-to-be-underestimated accordion) that were incorporated into the stew. And, while Spanish and Mexican music were already in Texas, successive influxes of immigrants from Mexico over the years continued to influence and refresh the hybrids. Before the Civil War most Black Texans were slaves on the East Texas plantations. After the Civil War, they began to settle in more urban areas. There was also an increase in the number of Blacks migrating into Texas seeking land and a better way of making a living. According to John Lightfoot, “Almost all early Texas bluesmen were born in these [sharecropper] communities” of East Texas (95).

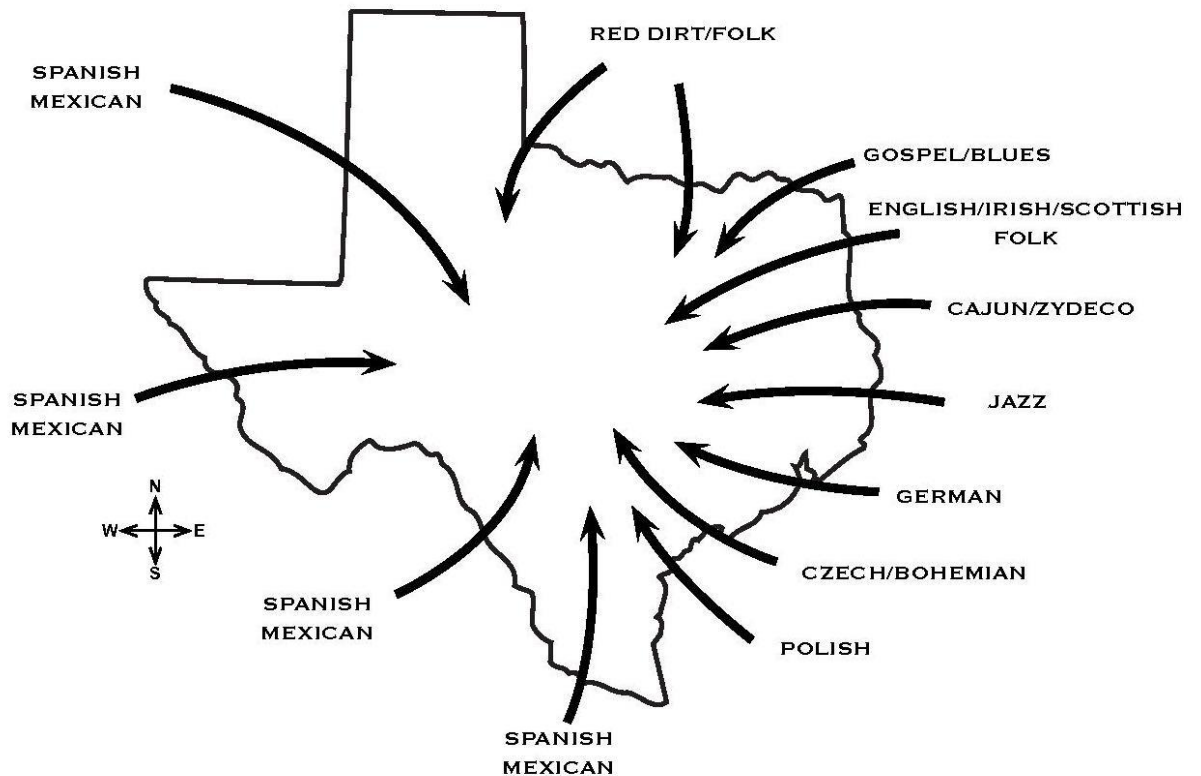


Figure 1: Map of Musical Influences

The gospel influence of African-American cultures thrived in the churches, especially in the rural enclaves of East Texas, and gospel begat the blues practiced mostly in places decidedly other than church. The porches and drink joints in the eastern part of the state were where some of the

blues masters of Texas first began to practice their craft. The undisputed Texas kings of the genre were Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter, who divided his time, including his prison time, between Louisiana and Texas, and Blind Lemon Jefferson. Both came from farming families in rural East Texas, but the two met some time around 1912 in the Deep Ellum section of Dallas where Jefferson was known to “perform almost daily at the corner of Elm Street and Central Avenue” (Govenar). The two teamed up to play in Dallas and throughout East Texas, Ledbetter learning about the blues from Jefferson and Jefferson learning much about showmanship from Ledbetter. Most significantly, unlike many great bluesmen who may have lived and died in obscurity in East Texas, both were “discovered”—Ledbetter by Texas folklorists John Avery Lomax and his son Alan Lomax (Hamm) and Jefferson by a Paramount recording scout. As a result, both were recorded and eventually heard widely by white audiences, thereby assuring that their legacies and influences would live on, even far beyond the borders of Texas. Among later musicians influenced by Jefferson were Carl Perkins, the Beatles, Elvis Presley, and Bob Dylan (Hartman *History* 69) Other early Texas blues greats include Mance Lipscomb of Navasota who was a major guitar influence on Stevie Ray Vaughn and who played the clubs of Austin in the early to mid-1970s (Koster 159) and Centerville’s Sam “Lightnin’ Hopkins whom *Rolling Stone* magazine rated number seventy-one on its all-time list of great guitarists (Govenar). Hopkins’ country blues style and songwriting greatly influenced a number of later musicians including a young Townes Van Zandt (Hardy 3).

As gospel influenced the blues, the blues went on to influence jazz and, later, rhythm and blues and rock ‘n’ roll. Some of the jazz innovators from Texas include ragtime pianist Scott Joplin of Texarkana, keyboardist Joe Sample of Houston, guitarists Charlie Christian of Dallas, Herb Ellis of Farmersville, and Larry Coryell of Galveston, sax men Ornette Coleman of Ft.

Worth and Illinois Jacquet, Arnett Cobb, and Eddie “Cleanhead” Vinson, all of Houston, and trombonist Jack Teagarden of Vernon. Other Texans who have earned places of honor in the rhythm and blues pantheon include pianist/singer/songwriter Ivory Joe Hunter of Kirbyville and singer/songwriter Sippie Wallace, a major influence for Bonnie Raitt (Koster 305-319).

The waves of African American-based genres that influenced so many musicians in Texas resulted in two innovative hybrids: Texas swing (jazz-based country) and honky-tonk (a blend of Western swing, often with shuffle beats). The confluence of the Mexican *ranchera* and *corrida* genres with the German, Czech, Bohemian and Polish music of Central Texas begat Conjunto—songs sung in Spanish with Latin instrumentation (*bajo sexto* or twelve string guitar), European instrumentation (mainly accordion), and lively polka beats.

The greatest contribution made to the Texas music tradition by the European settlers, however, may have been their propensity to build and gather in the singing, gun, and brotherhood clubs that eventually became the community dance halls of rural Texas. These colonists were mostly Catholic. In Texas-speak, that means *not* Baptist. And that means they could drink, and drink they did, or, as singer/songwriter Chris McWilliams says, “They didn’t just drink beer, they made the beer, and they brought the beer.” The dances, usually held twice a month in these halls, were lively affairs where courting took place, Grandma and the kids were welcome, and a good time was had by all to the tune of a polka, a schottische, a waltz, and, eventually, a Texas two-step, swing, or jitterbug.

The dance halls were the precursors to the honky-tonks which differed somewhat in clientele and attitude. Dance halls were family places, and honky-tonks were for lovin’ and brawlin’ and slippin’ around, but both places were where music of the interactive variety, that stuff that folklorist Manuel Pena describes as organic music, organically-derived and evolved

within a culture and not manufactured as a commodity or spectacle, could be found (3). The great innovators of Western swing like Bob Wills of Turkey and Milton Brown of Stephenville played these joints, as did boogie country artist Moon Mullican of Corrigan. Later, country greats like Lefty Frizzell of Corsicana, Tex Ritter of Murvaul, Ernest Tubb of Crisp, and Floyd Tillman of Post played the dance halls and honky-tonks that kept them close to their audiences as they blended genres and broached new subject matters in their songs. Some of the great dance halls include a few named after the towns where they're found: London Hall, Greune Hall, and the Quihi Gun Club. Among the great honky-tonks are the Broken Spoke in Austin, Magnolia Gardens in east Houston, and Ft. Worth's Crystal Springs Dance Pavilion, considered to be the birthplace of Western swing (Trevino 13).

Texas singer/songwriter Johnny Bush lamented the fact that venues of this sort weren't available for musicians elsewhere, even in Nashville where, "There was no dance clubs like in Texas . . . In Texas, if I was off, I could go to Melody Ranch, Cloverleaf, or some other joint and pick up ten or eleven dollars playing as a drummer. Get on the phone and call somebody: 'Hey, get your ass out to Melody Ranch. Yeah, I can use you tonight.' Not in Nashville. When you were off, buddy, you were off" (Bush, 95).

The availability of venues in Texas (and the inter-active culture within those venues) is one of the many reasons that so many singer/songwriters find an atmosphere in Texas in which they can thrive. When your audience expects a good time as well as innovation in the music and lyrics, you have the ingredients on hand to keep you on your toes as a songwriter.

*If you're ever in Houston, you better do right.
You better not gamble, and you better not fight.
Sheriff Binford will arrest you, and his boys will take you down.
The next thing you know, boy, you're Sugarland bound.*

**– Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter, lyrics from his blues classic,
“The Midnight Special”**

I was about sixteen years old, sitting at my grandparents’ kitchen table while thumbing through a book on the history of Houston when I first came across those lyrics. Already an avid fan of the blues, I was astonished to discover that this classic blues song, “The Midnight Special” was not a generic tale of strife and encounters with the law. It was written by Leadbelly Ledbetter, who had grown up in Northeast Texas, and it was a very specific tale about a very specific time and place—not just any sheriff, and not just any prison.

Sugarland was a prison farm just southwest of Houston, complete with field laborers, chain gangs, and guards on horseback, and I had been there. My Great Aunt Bethyl took me there when she and her Seventh Day Adventist minister ran the church services on Sunday mornings for the prisoners. Aunt Bethyl played piano on hymns like “The Old Rugged Cross” and “Onward Christian Soldiers,” and I turned the pages for her and set out the hymnals on the convicts’ chairs. And now, seeing those lyrics in their original form for the first time, I knew that Ledbetter had been there, too—years before me, of course, and under far less innocent circumstances.

This was the first time I can recall that I really grasped that lyrics and music were inextricable and intertwining elements of the whole experience. To this day, as much as I love that song, “The Midnight Special,” I cannot stand to hear the homogenized, pasteurized versions with their references to any old sheriff and any old prison. They lack the power of a true story,

and, for me, this reinforces the literary reality that the universal truths can often best be expressed in the specific.

Seeing Ledbetter's original lyrics was an eye-opening experience that catapulted me into learning more about blues music, its roots, and the early blues masters from Texas, and that exploration led to a similar one regarding jazz. I began to haunt the clubs around Old Market Square in downtown Houston while still in high school, and new worlds opened to me. Under-aged as I was, I was still allowed into a basement joint called La Bastille where touring jazz greats like Dizzy Gillespie often appeared. The club also featured a number of Texas blues artists like Freddie King, T-Bone Walker, Gatemouth Brown, and Lightnin' Hopkins. It was heaven. That the folks who ran La Bastille let me in was probably due to my precocious interest in older folks' music. They took me under their kind wings, sometimes introducing me to the musicians and educating me on the music, always letting me know who would be coming soon. There were sometimes surprising artists that I might have otherwise missed like Roky Erikson and The Thirteenth Floor Elevators, a seminal psychedelic rock band, another genre-bending Texas act that is now critically hailed for their innovations and firsts, including the use of electric jug percussion (Koster 101). Unbeknownst to me, just around the corner on Old Market Square, young, folk- and blues-influenced singer/songwriters Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark were playing and singing regularly at a club called the Old Quarter, and Townes was taking advantage of the proximity to his mentor, Lightnin' Hopkins, to spend time with him and learn the slow, country blues guitar that he would later incorporate into his own style (Hardy 3). I was sixteen years old and just beginning to appreciate my Texas music roots. Little did I know that my interest in Texas music would become a lifelong passion.

“In most places,” according to singer-songwriter and Texas music history expert, Pablo Menudo, “the singer/songwriter is the black sheep of the family, the guy who can’t get a real job.” In Texas, however, singer-songwriters may be the family’s star, the one everyone gathers around at family reunions as he or she picks and plays and stories are swapped. East Houston singer/songwriters Johnny Bush and Rodney Crowell (though a generation apart) both recall in their autobiographies that their daddies and mommas were always encouraging and proud of the paths they had taken. Their fathers were both blue collar boys with families to support who could not take the risk of dropping their day jobs to play in bands, although both had the desire to do so. These parents, as many Texas families did, encouraged their children in pursuing music. Why not? It was all around.

Growing up in Houston, particularly on the east side as Bush and Crowell had done, offered a number of musical experiences. As a port city, Houston was a cosmopolitan place, even back when it still had a small town feel. My father grew up in the teeming, immigrant-packed neighborhoods near the Houston Ship Channel off Navigation Boulevard, and he took my brother and me back there occasionally, especially when there was a Greek ship in port. That’s when we’d go to Steve’s Athens Bar and Grill for the exotic music and the passionate dancing. Opa! Then, because our family lived mostly in Galveston County, we were exposed to the Cajun and Zydeco tunes of the migrant Louisiana shrimpers whose celebrations were always about food and music. There was also a German restaurant nearby with a dance hall in the rear where my aunts, uncles and grandparents would gather on Saturday nights to eat sausage and kraut and polka till the cows came home. And as if that weren’t enough, when I was thirteen years old, a genuine Texas country star moved in across the street from us. I didn’t know who Floyd Tillman was at the time, but my parents insisted that he was, or had been, famous in the forties and fifties.

As I rode my bike around the neighborhood, I often stopped in front of Tillman's house, straddling my Schwinn, and listened to the sounds of "Slippin' Around" or "I'll Keep on Loving You" as Tillman and his sidemen practiced in his living room. I did not know at the time that Floyd Tillman was one of country music's first electric guitarists and credited with innovations in singing and song-writing as well (Corcoran 30). When I left Galveston County for Austin (with a side trip to Lubbock for college and exposure to the fabled singer/songwriters of that windblown locale) I had little idea what a wide and wonderful window on diverse Texas musical styles I had been lucky enough to peer through thus far, and I certainly had no idea what still lay in store in the city that became ground zero for Americana music.

Austin: Ground Zero for the New Poets

What started in Austin in that fuzzy 1970 to 1973 period is still playing out. There's a continuity that you can't say about any other regional music explosions in the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century. And that ain't blowing smoke. The singer-songwriter tradition is linked directly.
– Joe Nick Patoski, Texas writer (Spong, 218)

It was Austin, and it was the early 1970s, no question. However, in the descriptions and explorations of the Austin scene of the 1970s that I've researched, the most important part of the tale is curiously missing. In Bill Malone's *Country Music USA*, considered by many to be the definitive history of American country music, he describes a town in which there was a huge divide between the hippies and the rednecks who, seemingly inexplicably, began dancing to and listening to country music together. So do Jan Reid in *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock* and Barry Shank in *Dissonant Identities: The Rock 'n' Roll Scene in Austin, Texas*. These authors seem perplexed as to the reasons that hippies would suddenly want to be in on the country

music/honky-tonk party. It's not that big a mystery. Certainly there was at the time in Austin a mixture of cultures and countercultures all enjoying the same music in the same places. One could see, on any given night in a number of venues like the Split Rail or the Broken Spoke, hippie chicks dancing with grizzled cowboy types and the like, or gangly hippie guys whirling blue-haired, elderly ladies around the floor, but what the experts above describe as a tension between cultures was, in my opinion, no tension at all. And we didn't necessarily need Willie, welcome as he was, to bring us together.

I was there, and, like many people of my generation and upbringing, the tension, if there was any in the first place, was entirely within ourselves and, perhaps, our families. We were not new to country music. It was an intrinsic component of our culture. We had listened and danced to it all our lives.

What was new to us was a hippie identity born of the Generation Gap, a split between young and older wrought by the Vietnam War, the birth of second wave feminism, and the Civil Rights movement. That divide had formed across kitchen tables around the nation. Our hippie identity may have been the backlash result of our response to the War et al, but we could not bring ourselves to abandon the music of our roots. We loved it. Many of us had flocked to Austin precisely because it was the liberal oasis in a conservative state. When we got there, we went to the places that played the music we loved, and we were comfortable dancing and mixing with people of other ages and political ilks because many of us may have done just that the month before at a family reunion or at a dance hall on a trip back home.

That some of the Austin musicians were mixing rock into their country was welcome because that, too, was our music. The counterculture folks who gathered in Austin did not drop fully-formed from the sky. We had come to Austin from cities like Ft. Worth or Houston or from

small towns like Luling or Floydada. Many among the Texas-born counterculture who weren't gathering in Austin had already left for the West Coast, and that migration included such Texas music luminaries as Doug Sahm, Boz Scaggs, Roky Erikson and the 13th Floor Elevators, and Janis Joplin, all of whom became major influences on the music of the San Francisco Bay area. In other words, far more Texans were dropping in on the hippies of Haight-Ashbury than the reverse, and their music was having an impact. But for young people like me who came to Austin, let it be said that while I may have been wearing a halter top, cut-off jeans, and love beads while I two-stepped at the Broken Spoke, I never traded in my Tony Lamas for sandals.

Still, according to Malone, "The mating of rock and country, so strongly displayed in the music of Hank Jr. and Gram Parsons, was most strongly effected in Austin, Texas." Malone further states that the Austin musicians, "came close to accomplishing Parson's other dream, that of bringing youth and adult audiences together in a commonly shared musical environment" (393). Had Gram Parsons been raised in Central Texas rather than Georgia, he might have known that such mixes had been occurring in Texas dance halls for generations. It was only natural that it all came together in Austin when the counterculture from around the state moved in. With the exception of the Grand Ole Opry, all the venues listed in the index to Malone's book (among them Dessau Hall, the Broken Spoke, the Split Rail, and the Armadillo World Headquarters) were located in Austin. And the rural areas around Austin abounded in old time German and Czech dance halls, all of which packed in crowds of mixed ages. It would seem that Parson's dream of a mixed audience, admirable though it was, could have been accomplished simply by playing a gig at Gruene Hall near New Braunfels.

Folklorist Archie Green, in his essay on the Austin scene, "Austin's Cosmic Cowboys: Worlds in Collision," says that "Austin's eclectic composer/performers . . . drew upon folk or

popular expression to mark contemporary social collision and convergence” (153). That’s true. But it should be noted that, with the exception of migrants like Jerry Jeff Walker, a transplant from upstate New York, most of these composer/performers were drawing upon their own internalized and lifelong Texas musical traditions and blending the genres just as their musical forefathers, bluesman Blind Lemon Jefferson, Western swing pioneer Bob Wills, *conjunto* giant Santiago Jimenez, and countless others had done before.

Not only were dance hall and honky-tonk cultures continuing to flourish in Central Texas, but entrepreneurs in Austin were opening new venues like Soap Creek Saloon and the Armadillo World Headquarters in order to promote and capitalize on the scene. The legendary Doug Sahm, who had enjoyed hits in the sixties with “She’s About a Mover” and “Mendocino” with the Sir Douglas Quintet, moved back from the Bay Area in the early 1970s and began putting his original jazz-, blues-, and *conjunto*-influenced band back together in Austin (Reid 66). Simultaneously, Willie Nelson held the proto-type for what would later become his Fourth of July Picnics outside the town of Dripping Springs just west of Austin. The festival, though a bust from revenue perspectives, drew a mixed but enthusiastic crowd, due in no small part to the fact that the lineup was a perfect Texas cocktail: a mix of the old and new, pure country and folk and rock, established and emerging. Featured artists included Loretta Lynn and Tex Ritter (old), Kris Kristofferson and Billy Joe Shaver (new), John Prine (folk or folk-ish), Leon Russell (rock), Waylon and Willie (established), and Tom T. Hall (emerging) (Shaver 32).

In 1972, promoter Rod Kennedy and singer/songwriter Alan Damron held the first of their Kerrville Folk Festivals outside of Austin, an annual event that has become wildly well-attended and established as a venue for emerging singer/songwriters. In the decades since its founding, the Kerrville Folk Festival, with its emphasis on quality songwriting, has sponsored

the New Folk Finalists songwriting competition where established artists judge new songwriters competing for places on the various stages. Former finalists who have gone on to recording contracts and fame include such now-established songwriters as Steve Earle, Nanci Griffith, Tish Hinojosa, Lyle Lovett, Robert Earl Keen, and James McMurtry. But even in its earliest days, the ethos forming at the Kerrville Folk Festival contributed heavily to the Texas zeitgeist that the song was the thing, and that the quality of music and lyrics, the authenticity of sentiment, and the sincerity of performance were inextricable components of a good song.

Clearly, the Austin that Willie Nelson found himself in when he returned to Texas from Nashville was a world with enthusiastic, mixed audiences, a talent pool of nearly unprecedented depth and width, and an astonishing array of venues. Although Nelson had been a respected songwriter in Nashville, penning such hits as “Crazy” for Patsy Cline, “Hello Walls” for Faron Young, and “Night Life” for fellow Texan Ray Price, he was frustrated by the business itself and the shackles of making prescribed, “cookie cutter” (as many of the Texans described the Nashville process) music. That two seasoned pros like Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings should bring their knowledge, talent and savvy to the Austin scene was one of those serendipitous sets of circumstances that appear to make perfect sense in retrospect. They were looking for a better way. Here it was.

In and around Austin were all the ingredients necessary for playing and recording music that was more authentic, less-contrived and not over-produced, and drawn from a variety of traditions, including jazz, blues, country, rock, folk, honky-tonk, Western swing, and *conjunto*. Here were the audiences and clubs where interactive performance was expected and appreciated. Here, too, was a loosely-formed and passionate colony of new songwriters that included the likes of Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Gary P. Nunn, and Billy Joe Shaver, all

itching to get in on the action. As if that weren't enough, a tidal wave of talented like-minded singer/songwriters and musicians, known informally as the Lubbock mafia, rolled in from the Panhandle to give Austin a new injection of spirit and sound. Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Butch Hancock, Joe Ely, David Halley, and guitar man Jesse Taylor were among that auspicious group. It was time to make music. It was time to make their music their way.

However, none of this music would have been taken seriously on a national scale during its time if there hadn't been some commercial success. That success came in the form of three landmark albums produced during the early seventies: Waylon Jennings' *Honky Tonk Heroes* (1972), Jerry Jeff Walker's *Viva Terlingua!* (1973), and Willie Nelson's *Red-Headed Stranger* (1975). In their own way, each of these three seminal recordings opened doors for the Texas singer/songwriters of the time as well as those to come. The success of these recordings gave the Texas songwriters permission to produce work that was not formulaic—that expressed the artists' individual tastes and worldviews without regard to what the record companies demanded.

The first groundbreaking album of the period was Waylon Jennings' *Honky Tonk Heroes* which showcased the extraordinary songwriting talent of Corsicana-born Billy Joe Shaver (all songs on the album except one were either written or co-written by Shaver). While this album was recorded for Columbia in Nashville, what is significant about it is that Waylon had negotiated for complete creative control, or as Koster says, “Jennings grew tired of Nashville's cookie cutter mentality of record making and simply circumvented the bullshit by heading to New York to negotiate his own deal with the label honchos” (38).

Jennings was the first country superstar to break out of the confines of the genre. Until this time, country music impresario Chet Atkins had a lock on how everything at RCA in Nashville was produced, and he demanded that everything be produced and recorded in the

formulaic way that had proved to be so commercially successful for the label: lush strings, rich background choruses, and the general overproduction that kept it all sanitized and generic. He even demanded wholesome subject matter. *Honky Tonk Heroes* delivered anything but the generic and formulaic in style, production, instrumentation, subject matter, or even cover art. It may have been made in Nashville, but this was unadulterated Texas music.



Figure 2: Album cover of *Honky Tonk Heroes*

Honky Tonk Heroes shattered the mold and launched the term and the genre “Outlaw Country.” What’s also significant here, in addition to Waylon’s defiant delivery of such now-classic songs as “Honky Tonk Heroes,” “You Asked Me To,” and “Black Rose” is that Billy Joe Shaver’s writing explored and introduced entirely new themes and outlooks. Unlike the squeaky-clean heroes of previous times and places, Billy Joe’s protagonists were drinkin’ and fightin’ and

lovin' unabashedly and unapologetically such that he eventually came to be called "the original outlaw."

The second trailblazing album was Jerry Jeff Walker's *Viva! Terlingua!*, recorded over a two week period in August in Luckenbach, Texas, using a sound truck with wires running into the dance hall. The two weeks culminated in an also-recorded live concert. Jerry Jeff's record label, MCA, took a calculated risk that his insistence on a loose recording style would pay off. It did, both critically and financially. The album is significant for its simplicity, raucousness, low budget, commercial success, audience participation, and for displaying the talents of some of the other lesser known and just-starting-out songwriters of the Austin scene.



Figure 3: Album cover of *Viva Terlingua!*

Included on the album are Guy Clark's "Desperados Waitin' for a Train," Ray Wylie Hubbard's "Up Against the Wall, Redneck Mother," and Gary P. Nunn's "London Homesick

Blues,” which, with its pure Texas lament about wanting to “go home with the armadillos,” became the theme song for the Public Television series *Austin City Limits*. The album received critical acclaim and sold like crazy. Heck, even my parents and their friends were buying it. A new precedent had been established, and the guidance, wisdom, and budget of a major record label were clearly no longer the only paths to success (Stimeling 87-90).

The third wave in the assault on the Nashville lockdown was Willie Nelson’s *Red Headed Stranger*. Willie had experienced critical success as well as moderate commercial success with two other post-Nashville albums, *Shotgun Willie* and *Phases and Stages*, both produced by Jerry Wexler for Atlantic and recorded in New York and both of which display Willie’s jazz- and blues-influenced vocal style. *Red-Headed Stranger*, however, was finally Willie’s music done Willie’s way—a complete escape from Nashville. Recorded in Dallas for, purportedly, less than \$20,000 and with only a few members of Willie’s backing band, the music is quiet, spare, unadorned and unembellished with hit-making bells and whistles.



Figure 4: Album cover of *Red Headed Stranger*

Red Headed Stranger included, surprisingly, a monster hit. “Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain,” an old Fred Rose tune, was Willie’s first number one hit single (Hartman 168-170). *Red Headed Stranger* made the music establishment sit up and take notice. By the old rules of how to make a hit record, “Red Headed Stranger” simply shouldn’t have been a hit. Its subject matter was sad, its instrumentation was simple, and it had no distribution network attached. It was a surprise blockbuster. This was the record that said, “You can succeed without relying on formula. Trust your gut.”

Noteworthy, too, about these albums is the fact that, although only portions of *Viva! Terlingua!* were actually recorded live (Stimeling 89), all three had the spare instrumentation that gave Texas audiences a similar feel to the dance hall and honky-tonk and folk club and pickin’ circle experiences with which they were so familiar. In fact, Travis D. Stimeling says that, “The spontaneity and audience-artist interaction that were characteristic of live performance in Austin’s progressive country venues were essential . . . to the musical aesthetics of progressive country music, which privileged the imperfections and idiosyncrasies of individual musicians over the precise playing and overt technological mediation heard in much of Nashville’s country music” (78). *Honky Tonk Heroes*, though recorded in a studio, feels like Waylon is actually stompin’ the honky-tonk stage, Jerry Jeff is clearly having a free-wheeling barn party, and Willie—well, Willie’s just singing directly to you and me. Judging from the sales of these three important albums, a sizeable segment of the American music consumer market was more than ready for a change and a musical movement, probably most correctly called progressive country at the time and, later, Americana, was getting legs.

As a final word on the Austin scene of the 1970s, I should note that, although much has been written about this extraordinary flourishing and the music created within it, I believe that

the scene itself is still largely misunderstood and misinterpreted by its chroniclers. The attempts to define it at the time and shortly thereafter by such respected experts as Jan Reid, Archie Green, and Bill Malone caught the scene too close to its birth and without the perspective that time allows. Later interpretations by experts Barry Shank and, particularly by Travis D. Stimeling, come closer, but neither writer was actually on the scene at the time, and neither utilizes the perspective of a Texan (forgive me my chauvinism, but I do have a point to make) familiar with the culture and spirit of the Texas music that came before. Some of the memes developed during the 1970s and repeated in subsequent writing deserve a deeper investigation, and in my opinion, a decent burial. Although Stimeling's book from 2011, *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks*, is a better assessment of the Austin 1970s scene than most, the title alone screams misinterpretation, and Stimeling's assertion that, "Michael Murphy's song 'Cosmic Cowboy' was one of the most significant songs of Austin's progressive country scene because it offered a unifying name for the scene participants" (46) is particularly off-base.

I never met a single soul who referred to himself as a cosmic cowboy during, and especially not after, the 1970s. It was an antithetical misnomer for the individuals, the scene, and the music from the get-go. Terms like Cosmic Cowboy and Redneck Rock fell out of favor almost from the moment they were coined and need not be repeated or revived except in footnote. A superior, if still not thorough, assessment of the scene can be found in Koster's brief chapter "Progressive Country and the Austin Spirit" (35-49), but the definitive work on the subject is yet to be written. The truth is that a convergence of musical styles was nothing new in Texas, and the music derived from the scene lived on in newer, fresher forms. It is important not to overlook what is the most significant consequence of the 1970s Austin scene: that it bushwhacked new paths for recording more authentic music and that it spawned, directly or

indirectly, an extraordinary new tradition of songwriting without which the careers of such now-prominent singer/songwriters as Robert Earl Keen, Lucinda Williams, Lyle Lovett, Nancy Griffith, Hayes Carll, Ryan Bingham and dozens of others (some of whom have done little actual time in Austin) would have been all but impossible.

The Musicality of Texas-Speak,

Honky-tonk Sociolinguistics, and the Songwriting Culture of Texas

“Country music is, populist ideology notwithstanding, not simple stuff,” asserts Dr. Aaron A. Fox, in his book *Real Country: Music and Language in Working Class-Culture* (ix). I agree. Dr. Fox studied the relationships between a particular working-class community (Lockhart Texas), the residents’ manners of speaking and story-telling, and the country music they play and listen to. He did so from several perspectives (sociolinguistics, anthropology, and ethnomusicology), and he came to the conclusion that “country music is an authentic working-class art of enormous value to its blue-collar constituency” (ix). Dr. Fox’s study is thorough, and his central assertion is compelling, and when one expands such an argument to the other types of music and mixtures of music to be found within Texas, a case can easily be made that the relationships between the various forms of Texas-speak and the lyrics written by Texas singer/songwriters from traditions other than classic country also constitute a legitimate art. The verbal art practiced in Texas-speak, and which Texans appreciate in the spoken performance of conversation (widely practiced in beer joints and honky-tonks, but in no way exclusive to them) has naturally made its way into the songs of the Texas singer/songwriters. No doubt about it, Texans love a good story told in the Texas way.

As an example of the Texan penchant for telling a good story in the vernacular of the people, consider the following passages from Houston singer/songwriter Rodney Crowell's recent memoir, *Chinaberry Sidewalks*, of growing up in the fifties in a working-class neighborhood east of Houston. First, read Crowell's version of how this neighborhood on the north bank of the Houston Ship Channel came to be:

[T]he story of the house on Norvic Street began more than a half century earlier, in 1900, when Galveston was slam-dunked by the deadliest hurricane in recorded history. In the storm's aftermath, while its survivors pondered the rubble of what had been an up-and-coming international seaport, a team of entrepreneurial Houstonians was busy cajoling the special-funding branch of the federal government into donating two million dollars for a dredging operation that would convert a series of salt-marsh bayous into the world's largest man-made shipping lane. When the digging was done, the Houston Ship Channel stretched fifty miles inland from Galveston Bay to the corner of Wayside Drive and Navigation Boulevard, three blocks south of Avenue P. (10).

The passage above is straightforward, colorfully-rendered, and possesses a flow, rhythm, and language choices that make it a nugget of well-crafted, creative non-fiction prose. Now consider the same set of events as told by Rodney's Grandpa Willoughby, a night watchman for the Hughes Tool Shipping and Receiving Company:

After all them people died down there by the gulf, that crew of wildcatters jewed the government out of a shit-pot full of tax-payers' money and dug 'em a ditch all the way from Galveston up to Wayside Drive. If it weren't for that bunch, wouldn't none of us be where we are today. (10)

The embedded ethnic slur aside, I much prefer Grandpa Willoughby's version. While the first passage displays the gifts of a talented wordsmith, and while both passages render the same set of events and are much more enjoyable and readable than most journalism and pretty much all

academic writing, the second passage is shorter, more pithy, colorful, rhythmic, melodic, and, well, just plain musical and poetic. Grandpa Willoughby also does a superior job of making the point. He simply has a better conclusion, or as Texas singer/songwriter, writer, and ex-gubernatorial candidate Kinky Friedman has said, “When someone takes something simple and makes it complicated, we call him an intellectual. When someone takes something complicated and makes it simple, we call him an artist” (Harris, 1). Grandpa Willoughby is skilled in the art of Texas-speak.

Borrowing the techniques of ethnomusicologist Aaron A. Fox for capturing the nuances of Texas-speak (italicization indicates a rise in pitch, capitalization indicates an increase in volume and emphasis, and the transition between lines indicates pause), read the same passage as a Texan might speak it and hear it:

After all them people *died* down there by the gulf
that crew of WILDcatters
jewed the *government* out of a SHIT-pot full of *tax*-payers’ MONEY
and dug ‘em a DITCH
all the way from GALveston up to *Wayside* Drive.
If it weren’t for *that* bunch,
wouldn’t NONE of us be where we are *today*.

Of course, Rodney Crowell wrote both versions, and, with the publication of his memoir, he has proven that he is as skilled at prose as he is at writing song lyrics, but two points are significant here. First, Crowell has a heck of an ear for dialogue, and, second, he can slip in and out of Texas-speak, or perhaps more correctly working-class speak, with ease. Perhaps his ear for Texas-speak has allowed him to express himself lyrically in a manner that is accessible to his audience. No doubt, as we will explore in the section about his music, Rodney Crowell is talented at expressing complex ideas in simple, musical language.

Dr. Aaron A. Fox suggests that the Texans he studied for over a decade in the community of Lockhart have an ear for dialogue in their story-telling that is an innate part of the beer joint culture in which they live. He observed that, often, the folks he studied broke into performing dialogue, complete with separate voices for the characters, in the routine relating of a story. I had recently noticed this same thing during an exercise in which I was required to write about my writing. I, too, seem to have pretty good ear for dialogue. In trying to explain this, I noted that my mother, a sixth generation Texan, simply cannot tell a story without resorting to dialogue of a play-by-play sort complete with accents, dialect, and exaggerated variations in intonation, volume, and pitch—all designed to relate the story while emphasizing and underscoring meaning. I discussed my mother's story-telling talents with a friend who pointed out to me that I, too, speak in this manner when telling a story.

Most Texans I know do the same, in many cases utilizing sound effects. This manner of story-telling is actually quite musical. This manner of story-telling is also essentially performance art, and to its practitioners, it is as natural as breathing. We don't think about it, and we certainly don't remark about it because, to us, it is unremarkable. I would suggest that this art is not reserved for beer joints alone, although that is where Dr. Fox encountered it. Nor is Texas-speak practiced exclusively among the working-class as we'll discuss later in this section. Fox may have made similar observations if he had attended just about any Texas family's reunion or backyard barbecue.

Dr. Fox also suggests that the story-telling and ear for dialogue that he encountered and catalogued, with its punchy, spritely phrasing is one of the reasons that working-class cultures respond to the stories, tropes and phrasing of classic country music. I would reverse that as well. Perhaps Texas songwriters such as old-timer George Jones or newcomer Hayes Carll can write a

danged good song because song-writing is, for them, a natural milieu. Musical speech is what they've heard and spoken all their lives.

The accents vary, of course, regionally across the state. I recently interviewed a Texas comedian, and one of the first questions I asked him was, "What part of East Texas are you from?" His lilting, honeyed accent is uncommon in other parts of the state, and he admitted that he was, indeed, from East Texas. In the Midland/Odessa area, I have noticed an almost growling sound on vowels that distinguishes the native accent from others. Facility with simile and metaphor, however, seems to be widespread throughout the state.

I first thought about the Texas penchant for simile and metaphor while watching a television interview with the actor Peter Coyote in the 1980s conducted when he was in Texas for the first time working on a film. This interview from the pre-internet days has proven to be impossible to find, but I can relate the gist of it here. Coyote was quite taken with the manner of speech he encountered and called Texans natural poets. He described walking up to a couple of fishermen on the banks of a Hill Country lake. When he asked them if the fish were biting, they responded with something to the effect of: "Not now, son, but this morning they were bitin' so hard, we had to hide behind trees just to bait our hooks."

Recently, I've begun to collect a few of these examples of expression. They are written here utilizing, once again, Aaron A. Fox's method for coding the emphasis.

A cowboy describing a fight he had seen:

That ol' boy came at 'im like a BALL-chewin' PITBULL.

A construction supervisor talking about a particularly slow worker:

He can work all *day* alright, but *he's* a TURtle. He's a DAMNED TURtle!

A chef talking about politics:

I like the president alRIGHT I guess, but *Obama* don't DANCE, and *Obama* don't rock 'n' ROLL.

That this last sentence mimics a line from a popular song says something in itself. The musical and poetical patterns, born of the story-telling traditions that lasted over the course of two centuries (and that began their slow fade only in the last few decades of the twentieth century as the entire country's manners of speech became more homogenized through radio, television, and continued sweeps of migration) are deeply rooted in Texas speech and, one may well presume, in Texas music. Like many practitioners of speech patterns anywhere else, Texans are capable of slipping naturally in and out of dialect depending upon factors like socioeconomic status or education or the company they are keeping at the moment (Look at the example of Rodney Crowell's writing above. He can definitely swing both ways). Some folks are facile, and some are not.

A friend of mine who has lived and successfully worked in politics in Washington D.C. for the last thirty years has never altered his Texas accent. He uses it to distinguish himself and maintain a sense of authenticity. Another friend, a television producer in Austin, took elocution lessons in order to shed her Panhandle twang, and she rarely dips back into it. However, most of us fall naturally into our accents and patterns when around others who practice the genre. Thus, the old speech patterns and means of expression linger as much in certain social situations as they do in isolated geographic pockets, and as any sociolinguist can attest, being socially facile language-wise is strongly tied to successful communication within the given groups one inhabits.

Then again, some Texans use Texas-speak outside of their normal social circles in order to emphasize, occasionally through shock-value. One of my ex-husband's college friends, an East Coast-raised Dartmouth grad with a law degree from Harvard, had dinner with us while in

Texas working on a high-profile oil industry lawsuit. He was shocked by an associate from Houston with a similar educational background to his own who had told him, “We got NOTHIN’ to worry about on THIS one. The governor and I are so *close* we piss through the same STRAW.” My husband’s college buddy asked me, as a native Texan, what I thought of this manner of speaking from the mouth of a well-educated attorney. I replied that I thought it saved time. “How so?” he asked. I said, “He only used a handful of words to express it, and you’ll never forget what he said.” That’s good story-telling. That’s effective communication that isn’t taught at Harvard Law.

Politicians in Texas, as elsewhere, relate to the “folks” by generally speaking the way they do. Former Governors Ann Richards and George W. Bush were both quite popular during their terms in spite of their obvious dissimilar political viewpoints. But it should be noted that both were able to relate to people across the state by emphasizing their Texan-ness through their manners of speech. Former Texas Governor and recent presidential candidate Rick Perry definitely speaks fluent Texan, exhibited for better or worse on the national stage, but his speech helps him to maintain an air of authenticity back home. It is difficult to imagine that a suave-sounding, accent-less governor will be elected in Texas any time soon.

Regarding Texas music, Texas-speak is significant for two very important reasons. First, a songwriter steeped in the soup of Texas-speak may inherently possess a way with words, an aptitude for emphasizing through tune, and an innate ability to craft the turns of phrase, simile, and metaphor that naturally lend them-selves to musical and poetical expression. Second, a substantial number of Texas consumers and audiences seem to expect a high level of art and craft as well as authenticity in the music they pay to hear. For this particular segment of Texans, a song like Nashville country singer Trace Adkins’ “Honky-Tonk Badonkadonk” won’t do. And a

country singer who speaks with an Australian accent may as well go home, even if he *is* singing a Rodney Crowell song.

You know what the secret is to making it rock? Lyrics touch the mind. Melody touches the heart. Rhythm touches the body, and harmony lifts the spirit. Most people are lucky if they can do three of those things, but the ones who can do all four – from the Beatles to the Allman Brothers – well those are the ones who rock!

– Eddie Beethoven, Lubbock singer/songwriter

Music rots when it gets too far from the dance. Poetry atrophies when it gets too far from music.

– Ezra Pound

The idea that music, lyrics, and performance are inextricable from one another in song-craft is one that I first learned when listening to the blues. That idea, expressed far more poetically by Eddie Beethoven, may be at the heart of how a good song affects us. We all hear music in a way that engages more portions of our brains than just about any other activity according to musicologist Daniel J. Levitin (14), and when good music is combined with authentic poetry, the experience can be transcendent. Whether we're speaking of a simple song about life on the road (Hayes Carll's "It's Hard Out Here" comes to mind) or a complex song freighted with social meaning (James McMurtry's "We Can't Make It Here Anymore" fits this bill), songs can be literature. And, if, as American poet Ezra Pound said, "Literature is news that stays news" (84), then certainly a number of the songs written in the Texas singer/songwriter tradition of the last several decades qualify as literature. Many of these songs cover old stories and subjects in new ways, some of them are wildly inventive and fresh, but all of them combine music and lyrics, and often performance, to tell stories that are relatable and, at their very best, evocative and enlightening.

Thus It Began

Undoubtedly, some of the singer-songwriters profiled for this project were attempting to make marketable, commercial products, but they were not making commercial product alone. The art of the song *is* important, usually foremost, in this particular vein of songwriting. As well, delivering the song in a sincere, uncontrived manner is crucial to these writers as they perform their work, and it is crucial to their audiences as well. These performers may want their audiences to have a good time, and their performances, both live and recorded, can be celebrations, but they are not hollowly so. For at this level of song-craft, music and words and performance are indivisible, and the resulting work can be a perfect little gem of truth and art.

From the interactive Texas musical traditions of the *corrida*, the blues, and jazz, and the interactive forums of the dance halls and honky-tonks to the continuous blending of musical conventions and the customs of Texas-speak and story-telling, to the counterculture convergence and the return of Texas' most famous prodigal son, Willie Nelson, all roads lead to a new awakening in Austin. Some of the songsters went to Nashville and stayed, now able to make music more in keeping with the Texas ethos. Some remained in Austin. Some scattered to more remote Texas towns to escape what became, for them, a too-chaotic setting as Austin figured out how to cash in on the party and began to bill itself as "The Live Music Capitol of the World." Still, others continue to rotate in and out. But the die was cast. There was an established national audience and market for a more artistic expression in song, and in Texas there was a concentration of talent to meet the demand. The singer/songwriters profiled here represent a remarkable diversity of influences and traditions and an adherence to a level of outstanding quality that is rare. The sheer quantity of excellent singer/song-writers that Texas produces is nothing short of astounding on the one hand while perfectly understandable on the other.

Part II: The Practitioners and Their Songs

Rather than asking Texas songwriters who their favorite songwriters are, it would be far more interesting to ask them each to name fifteen books that meant something to them.

– Butch Hancock, singer-songwriter from Lubbock

Scratch a given Texas singer-songwriter, and you'll find a host of inspirations below the surface—some personal, some musical, and, not entirely surprisingly given their love of the English language, many literary. Most, it turns out, are readers. The names Frost, Melville, and Poe come up, as do the names McMurtry, McCarthy, and even Philip K. Dick. They toss the word poetry around quite a bit, and you're likely to hear them refer to themselves as poets. In the interviews that I've conducted and read, I don't think I've ever heard any of the singer-songwriters refer to themselves with the high-falutin' term "artist." And, as they reach back into meta-memory to explain what they do and how they do it, you're more likely to hear the name Dylan (referring to both first name Bob or last name Thomas) than you are Hank Williams, although Williams surfaces, too. Important as the generalities discussed heretofore are, only more in-depth study of some of the individual works of the practitioners can illustrate fully that their work does, indeed, form a people's literature.

I have selected a representative field of the Texas singer/songwriters, fourteen in all, to consider in-depth. This is not a list of those who I think are definitely the very best of the practitioners, although some of the very best are included here. It is, instead, a representative cross sample of the important time periods, styles, genres, ethnic inspirations, geographic areas, levels of success and exposure, and genders (yes, some of them are women) that represent the depth and breadth of the Texas singer-songwriter explosion of the last four decades.

Townes Van Zandt, the only one who is no longer living, has continued to grow in popularity and critical acclaim since his death in 1997. Some, like Hayes Carll and Ryan Bingham, are experiencing a wave of financial success and fame relatively early in their careers. Many, like Carolyn Wonderland and Ruthie Foster have caused critical head-scratching and incredulity, given their monstrous talents, at their lack of conventional success. Chris McWilliams was chosen, for example, to represent the ultra-talented, but just-starting-out and, as yet, unknown. He is also representative of the trend toward self-production and self-distribution.

My choices of singer-songwriters are, admittedly, subjective and arbitrary. I could have chosen Tish Hinojosa to represent the Latin thread, but choosing Alejandro Escovedo instead allowed exploration of his body of work in rock, punk, and cowpunk as well as his Latin-flavored pieces. So, sincere apologies to Lucinda Williams, Marcia Ball, Lyle Lovett, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Willis Alan Ramsay, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Butch Hancock, Vince Bell, Delbert McClinton, Jimmy LaFave, and a couple of hundred others and their fans, here, in the order in which they are profiled (more or less chronologically in terms of when they began to write) is the complete list I chose for the purposes of this project.

Townes Van Zandt Steve Earle Carolyn Wonderland Hayes Carll

Guy Clark Joe Ely Ruthie Foster Chris McWilliams

Billy Joe Shaver Alejandro Escovedo James McMurtry

Rodney Crowell Dale Watson Ryan Bingham

For each singer/songwriter on the list, I've chosen a song or several songs representative of various aspects of their work. Again, the chosen songs may or may not represent a particular artist's very best lyrical or musical work, but the selections do encompass the diverse musical genres and subject matters, tropes and styles of the group overall.

Where Do They Come from Geographically?

Of this collection of singer/songwriters, two (Ryan Bingham and Dale Watson) were not actually born in Texas, and not all of them still reside in Texas, but all have spent formative years within the state and have drawn inspiration from the land, the life, the music, the people, and, in many cases, from each other. All have found ready audiences in Texas, and some have found audiences far beyond the state line and even outside of the U. S. Depending on where they were born and raised, they may have had early access to enormously different musical traditions: East Texas blues or Western swing, perhaps, or south Texas *conjunto*. Below is a map of their birthplaces.

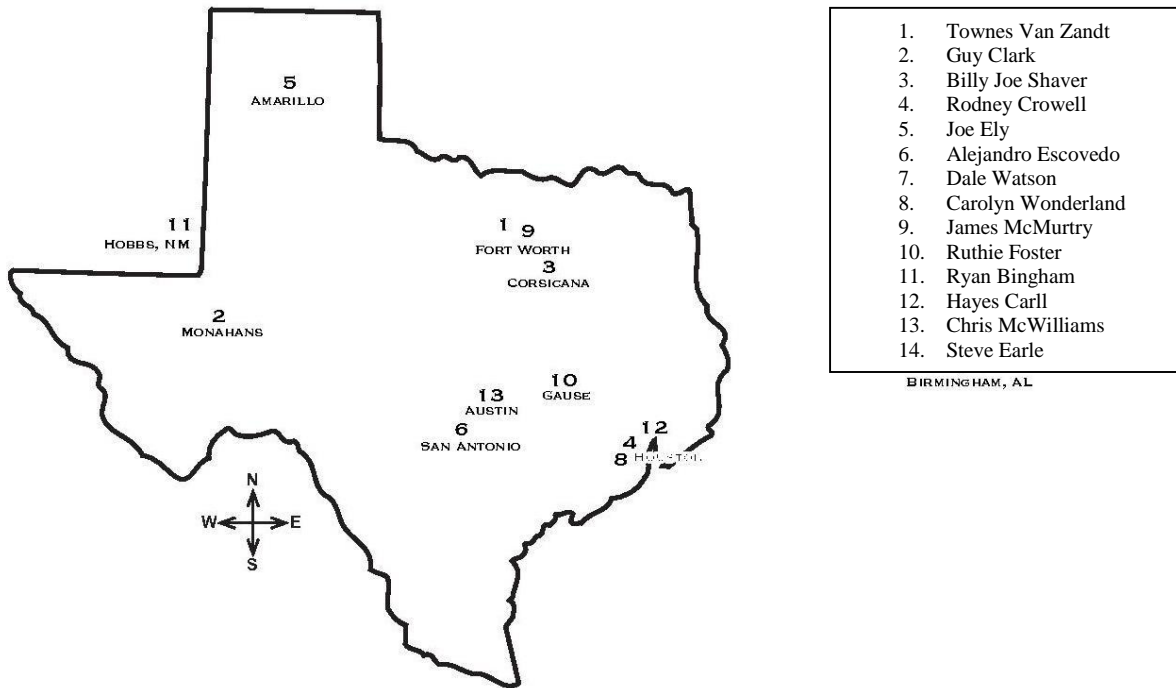


Figure 5: Map of Musicians' Birthplaces

Where Do They Come from Musically?

	Gospel	Blues	Jazz	Latin/ Conjunto	Western Swing	Honky Tonk	Folk	Country	Rock	Punk	Surf
Van Zandt		•	•				•	•			
Clark		•	•				•	•			
Shaver	•	•			•	•	•	•	•		
Crowell	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•		
Ely		•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Escovedo		•	•	•			•		•	•	•
Watson					•	•		•			
Wonder- land	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•
McMurtry		•	•				•	•	•		
Foster	•	•	•				•	•			
Bingham	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•		
Carll		•			•	•	•	•	•		
Mc- Williams	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Figure 6: Musical Influences Chart

The chart above is illustrative of the different genres in which this group of singer-songwriters write and perform. It is, of necessity, a somewhat false construct. How can one say, for example, that a given artist influenced by blues was not influenced by the gospel from which blues sprang? Or that an artist influenced by Western swing was not influenced by jazz? As to the assigned influences, I pulled the information from interviews with the artists, themselves, where I could, and from what I hear as influences in their music when such interviews were not available. For brevity's sake, I restricted the number of influences charted to eleven different genres. Cajun/Zydeco and classical music, for example, though relevant, don't appear, but the

chart gives some broad indication of the depth and breadth of musical conventions that the Texas singer/songwriters of the last four decades have utilized.

What Are They Writing and Singing About?

You can leave Brownsville, but you'll never get the music of Matamoros out of your soul. **--Kris Kristofferson, Texas singer-songwriter**

The Texas heart is as vast as the Texas sky, and from the plains and hills and rivers and mountains, Music is how we get there.

--Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Texas singer-songwriter

There's some sort of story-telling tradition in Texas, I think, always has been, coupled with music, and probably sort of an attitude that you can do anything that you want to do . . . There aren't any rules.

– Guy Clark, Texas singer-songwriter

As with the chart on musical influences, the chart representing themes and tropes utilized by the chosen artists is, of necessity, an oversimplification. The general themes, as with most poetic or literary works, are not earth-shatteringly new. These talented songwriters, however, employ fresh approaches of expression within the conventions they utilize. Several of these categories—triumph songs, road songs, songs about the land—are worth noting for their peculiar Texas twists.

	Triumph/ Redemption	Love	Heartbreak/ Loneliness	The Road/ The Biz	Dissent/ Social Com- mentary	Unworthi -ness	The Land	Portraits/ Stories/ Ballads
Van Zandt		If I Needed You	Rake		Marie			Pancho and Lefty
Clark	L. A. Freeway	Anyhow I Love You	Dublin Blues			Maybe I Can Paint Over That		Desperadoes Waiting for a Train
Shaver	I'm Gonna Live Forever	Hearts A- Bustin'	I Want Some More	Georgia on a Fast Train				
Crowell	Beautiful Despair				Fate's Right Hand			
Ely		Honky Tonk Mas- querade					All That You Need	Me and Billy the Kid
Escovedo		The Ladder					Ballad of the Sun and the Moon	Chelsea Hotel '78
Watson			You Don't Care	Nashville Rash				
Wonder- land			Feed Me to the Lions		Annie's Scarlet Letter			
McMurtr y				Choctaw Bingo	We Can't Make it Here Anymore		Levelland	Ruby and Carlos
Foster				Prayin' for Rain				
Bingham		Yester- day's Blues		The Weary Kind	Depression			
Carll			She Left Me for Jesus	The Letter	KMAG YOYO	Willing to Love Again		
Mc- Williams			All Alone One and All					Meth- Makin' Mama

Figure 7: Subject Matter Chart

Triumph and redemption are natural subject matters for a state full of people whose culture is built around second chances. The volatile but constant booms in land, oil, gas, fishing, farming, ranching, mining, and tech have generated back to back waves of emigration to and across Texas for the last two hundred years. In spite of evidence to the contrary, there is a sense among many Texans of all ethnicities and social levels that one can risk and rise and lose and risk again and still succeed. No matter how badly you wipe out, you can jump back in the saddle and ride off to victory again. It's only natural that a ragtag bunch of try-try-againers and their

second and third generation Texan progeny are possessed of a certain gratuitous optimism. According to his letters, when Davy Crockett quit the Tennessee legislature in disgust over politics, he declared to his colleagues, “You may all go to hell, and I will go to Texas!” Although the decision didn’t work out so well for Crockett, who died at the Battle of the Alamo, the spirit remains. It’s the same spirit that inspired songwriter Billy Joe Shaver to write that while he may be “an old lump of coal, ... I’m gonna be a diamond someday.”

The motherlode of road songs, which includes songs about the business of making music, runs deep and strong through the Texas singer-songwriter milieu. There are more miles of roads in Texas than any other state and more gigs out on the road, too. Long distances between roadhouses, dance halls, and honky tonks are common, and the particular kinds of music that the Texas singer-songwriters create lends itself to more touring time than studio time. The road and the darker sides of the business of making music unintended for the masses is seldom far from the minds of these troubadours. As we see in songs like Ryan Bingham’s haunting ballad “The Weary Kind” or Hayes Carll’s poignant “The Letter,” lamenting a life spent on the road, and thus the near impossibility of maintaining domestic relationships, is a common theme. So, too, is disdain for the business of cashing in. The independent-minded singer-songwriter naturally rails against the fetters of packaging a look and sound to the detriment of artistry, and such is the thesis, as we’ll see, of Ruthie Foster’s “Prayin’ for Rain.”

The vast and varied landscape that is Texas leaves its mark on the music as well, particularly in the works of the songwriters exposed to the deserts of far west Texas or the high plains of the Panhandle. As Panhandle poet Joe Ely says, “anybody that ever came from there knows that feeling: that big ol’ sky and that kind of lunatic desolation; what the wind does to you...” Apparently, what it does is inspire strong emotions and profound art. Pound for pound, the Texas

Panhandle generates more high-caliber songsmiths than any other part of the state. Perhaps it's the music of the wind, or perhaps as Ely says, "...there was so much emptiness out there to fill up that you had to reach out extra far to find the source where things came from." Similarly, the dryland farms of North Texas and their dependence on the erratic whims of nature are often woven into James McMurtry's ballads, and the searing highways of West Texas deserts are burned into the lyrics of one-time hitchhiker and rodeo hand Ryan Bingham's road songs. The land, after all, has its say.

The songs within the Dissent/Social Commentary column have something significant to reveal about the songwriters as artists. Some of these songwriters work solidly within or on the edges of traditional country music—a genre that typically eschews overtly political themes (Loretta Lynn's ground-breaking 1970s songs about "women's lib" and the pill notwithstanding). I bring attention to these specific artists and their songs for two important reasons. First, I think it is important to note that such commentary can have the effect of making the industry establishment squeamish and can crush the singer-songwriter's ability to land a deal, unless, of course, the artist has already established himself or herself as a proven money-maker. That a songwriter is willing to take on such subject matter is courageous. Second, willingness to comment on America's short-comings is not unpatriotic although it has often been seen that way by record company execs, Top 40 radio stations, and Top 40 audiences. Yet, songwriters like Carolyn Wonderland, Steve Earle, and James McMurtry deliberately refuse to pander—refuse to manufacture unquestioning, flag-salutin' music as commodity or spectacle. Instead, they offer thoughtful commentary on what they see around them, whether it sells or not. Songwriters like these while often political, are not merely so. Like Sandburg or Steinbeck, Guthrie or Seeger, they sometimes question America—in the best tradition of American literature.

The Texas Trinity: Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark, and Billy Joe Shaver

The three were friends, cohorts, and carousing buddies who helped each other out during the hardest times in the early years. They managed to eke out a living in the same venues around Austin and Houston where they honed their stagecraft. They were thoroughly schooled in the Texas-speak that infuses their songs with poetry. They were influenced by the distinct but overlapping genres at the heart of Texas music. But they don't sound like each other. A Townes Van Zandt song doesn't sound like a Guy Clark song. A Townes or Guy song sounds nothing like a Billy Joe song. Each of these poets is an original, but they belong together in an exploration of the movement as a whole.

What Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark, and Billy Joe Shaver represent is the next wave and song-writing ethos to emerge from what Willie, Waylon, Jerry Jeff and others had wrought only a few years before. In the early 1970s, as has been discussed, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and Jerry Jeff Walker had bucked the Nashville music-making factory and proved that they could write, produce, and perform non-formulaic songs, record them their way, and still make big money. Van Zandt, Clark, and Shaver espoused creating great songs whether you made money or not. In turn, they inspired other Texas songwriters like Lucinda Williams, Lyle Lovett, Nancy Griffith, and Steve Earle, not only with their craft but also with their philosophy of creating the best song possible with little regard for marketing or spectacle.

Van Zandt, Clark, and Shaver were often in Austin at the time of the early 1970s explosion, but they were not necessarily *of* that scene, especially as it has been described in the numerous interpretations and misinterpretations of what happened there—particularly the “cosmic cowboy” aspects. They were neither “cosmic cowboys” nor “redneck rockers,” but all three were

extraordinarily gifted wordsmiths. None of the three experienced the great fame or financial success of a Nashville superstar or even a Texas superstar, but they have been consistently and almost universally critically acclaimed across the years, and rightfully so. Their songs are for the ages.

All three tried their hands in Nashville and found the experience frustrating and sometimes infuriating. Only Guy Clark remained there for long (he still lives there), having snagged an RCA songwriting contract early. After some lean years, he eventually garnered respect for his unusual songs while still maintaining his songwriting integrity. It helped that Jerry Jeff Walker had already scored a minor hit with Clark's song "L.A. Freeway." Van Zandt and Shaver, on the other hand, continued to scramble for a while longer before receiving their breaks, each in his unique and befitting way as we'll see. Van Zandt and Clark were also accomplished guitarists, both of them highly influenced by their time in Houston with Texas blues guitar legends Lightnin' Hopkins and Mance Lipscomb. Billy Joe Shaver, who had lost three fingers in a sawmill accident in his youth, was unable to rely on guitar prowess but ultimately found a guitar muse in his son, Eddy Shaver, many years later.

Their backgrounds, though thoroughly Texan, are dramatically different. There's really no such thing as an authentic blue-blooded family from Texas, but if there were, it might be the Van Zandts. Townes Van Zandt was the son of a wealthy and influential founding family of Texas and grew up in Ft. Worth. He was expected to become a lawyer or senator. Until he reached the third grade, Clark was raised mostly by his grandmother who ran a boarding house cum hotel in the oil patch town of Monahans in West Texas. His was a marginally middle class upbringing characterized by exposure to the colorful wildcatters who populated the town and the hotel. His mother worked away from home, and his father was away in the army. Shaver, too, was raised

by his grandmother. He grew up in poverty among the fertile cotton farms of Corsicana seventy miles southeast of Dallas and sometimes went barefoot and hungry. His father had beaten and abandoned his mother before he was born, and his mother abandoned Shaver and his sister shortly thereafter.

I've grouped them here not only because their songs have continued to influence subsequent generations of songwriters over the last forty years, but because they epitomize the the spirit of the the Texas singer-songwriter-as-poet tradition they helped, perhaps unknowingly, launch. To each of them, the song was the thing, and although all three eventually made a living from their songwriting, it was hardly the primary goal. To them, songwriting was a calling rather than an enterprise. Van Zandt, Clark, and Shaver are regarded as the Texas Trinity, the progenitors of the most important legacy of the era: the Texas singer-songwriter as people's poet and the formation of a literature through song.

The Dark Poet: Townes Van Zandt

Townes Van Zandt is the best songwriter in the whole world and I'll stand on Bob Dylan's coffee table in my cowboy boots and say that.

*– Steve Earle, Grammy-winning Texas singer/songwriter
(Hardy 3)*

I grew up with crazy drunk people who were poets, but he [Townes] was plugged into a different light socket.

*– Rodney Crowell, Grammy-winning Texas
singer/songwriter (Atkinson 36)*

There's only two kinds of music: the blues and zippety-doo-dah.

-- Townes Van Zandt

Townes preferred the blues. “Troubled” is the word most often applied to him by those who knew him, but they also describe him as witty, charming, funny, fun, and intelligent. Many, if not most, of his songs, however, tend toward dark themes. His biographer, Robert Earl Hardy, says of him, “For thirty years, he wrote beautiful, deeply inspired, brilliantly integrated lyrical and musical evocations of his inner life. He gave sometimes magical performances in his engaging, insouciant Texas folk-blues style for what must be described as a cult audience, even though a couple of his songs reached the commercial heights” (2).



Figure 8: Van Zandt with friend and neighbor, blacksmith Seymour Washington, Clarksville, Texas, 1975

Although I never saw Townes Van Zandt perform, I am a member of the cult who considers him to be one of the greatest songwriters that Texas and America have ever produced. His is not necessarily the music one listens to with friends. His is the music of moonlit solitude. Even for a devout fan like me, a little Van Zandt goes a long way, partly because his songs can be so very sad, and partly because they inspire almost too much thought and reflection. This stuff definitely ain't zippety-doo-dah.

Van Zandt's uncompromising attitude toward his music and his struggles with alcohol, heroin, and manic depressive illness added up to years of couch-surfing, playing dives, three difficult marriages, and the general mismanagement of his career. When Townes died on New Year's Day of 1997, he left behind a legacy of truly great music that serves as a poetic touchstone for the singer-songwriters who continue to be inspired by his work.

When I ask other fans what their favorite Townes Van Zandt song is, their answers run the entire range of his opus. I seldom hear the same song mentioned more than once or twice. Such varied responses are a measure not only of how deep the catalogue runs, but also of how profoundly personally people respond to a Townes song. Selecting only five songs to represent his work wasn't easy. How does one leave out "Mr. Gold and Mr. Mudd," the story of a card game brilliantly told from the perspective of the cards? How does one bypass lines like, "legs to walk and thoughts to fly/eyes to laugh and lips to cry/a restless tongue to classify/all born to grow and grown to die" from "Rex's Blues?" I forced myself stop thinking about it and settled on the five songs here that display a range of subject matters, styles, and emotions. Anyone's guess is as good as mine as to what constitutes Van Zandt's finest work. Personal response is inextricable from art, and these songs are art.

Robert Earl Hardy says of the song, "Marie," that it is "as harrowingly good as anything Van Zandt ever wrote" (213). It is the story, sung in first person and minor key, of a homeless man and his pregnant woman as their already dire lives further unravel. In its emotional rawness, though not in structure, "Marie" is evocative of some of the best and most wrenching blues songs of the 1930s, probably traceable to Van Zandt's tutelage with Lightnin' and Mance. What also makes this song so provocative and effective is that, with each verse, the listener feels hope dissipating just a beat ahead of the protagonist as he tries desperately to hold his life together and

protect Marie. Considered this way, such songs are akin to the dramatic monologue. We see through the narrator's brief, hopeful moments. We anticipate the failure just ahead of the narrator, and that may be even more painful to us than his rapidly-ensuing despair.

Marie
– from the album *No Deeper Blue* (1995)

I stood in line and left my name
Took about six hours or so
Well, the man just grinned like it was all a game
Said they'd let me know
I put in my time till the Pocono line
Shut down two years ago
I was staying at the mission till I met Marie
Now I can't stay there no more

Fella 'cross town said he's lookin' for a man
To move some old cars around
Maybe me and Marie could find a burned-out
Van and do a little settlin' down
Aw, but I'm just dreamin', I ain't got no ride
And the junkyard's a pretty good ways
That job's about a half week old besides
It'd be gone now anyway

Unemployment said I got no more checks
And they showed me to the hall
My brother died in Georgia some time ago
I got no one left to call
Summer wasn't bad below the bridge
A little short on food that's all
Now I gotta get Marie some kind of coat
We're headed down into fall

I used to play the mouth harp pretty good
Hustled up a little dough
But I got drunk and I woke up rolled
A couple of months ago
They got my harp and they got my dollar
Them low life so and so's
Harps cost money and I ain't got it
It's my own fault I suppose

The Pocono's down but the Chesapeake's runnin'
Two freights every day

If it was just me I'd be headed south
But Marie can't catch no train
She's got some pain and she thinks it's a baby,
Says we gotta wait and see
In my heart I know it's a little boy
Hope he don't end up like me

Well, the man's still grinnin' says he lost my file
I gotta stand in line again
I want to kill him but I just say no
I had enough of that line my friend
I head back to the bridge, it's getting kinda cold
I'm feelin' too low down to lie
I guess I'll just tell Marie the truth
Hope she don't break down and cry

Marie she didn't wake up this morning
She didn't even try
She just rolled over and went to heaven
My little boy safe inside
I laid them in the sun where somebody'd find them
Caught a Chesapeake on the fly
Marie will know I'm headed down south
So's to meet me by and by

Marie will know I'm headed down south
So's to meet me by and by

Considered by many to be Townes' most beautiful love song, "If I Needed You" was a number three hit for Emmy Lou Harris and Don Wilson as a duet in 1990. The lyrics and the melody are simple, and the key is, unusual for a Townes song, major. It is a plainspoken sentiment stripped bare of Townes' characteristic mystery, and it is lovely both lyrically and melodically. Townes abandons rhyme briefly in the second verse, and the effect of the surprise is an underscoring of the line "that would break my heart in two." The Loop and Lil, referenced in the third verse, were, by the way, Van Zandt's parakeets. Both Doc Watson and Don Wilson substantially altered the lines when they covered this song, purportedly feeling that the reference would be confusing to the listener. I agree with Hardy, who finds the song more effective with

the reference included. Even though the listener has no way of knowing that Loop and Lil are pet birds, in this instance they don't need to know the writer's personal references. Hardy feels that the listener is "brought closer to the song through a kind of conspiratorial personal inclusion" (166). Van Zandt's choice to include the parakeets feels poetic and quirky rather than commercial.

Van Zandt claimed that "If I Needed You" came to him, melody and lyrics, in a dream that was so vivid, he recalled it complete when he awoke. He happened to be staying with Guy Clark and his wife Susanna Clark at the time and performed it for them in the kitchen that morning. Others claim that some parts of the song, at least, were composed long before. Van Zandt may have been trying to burnish his own reputation as a songwriter from whom inspiration sprang whole as opposed to his friend Clark's craftsman-like discipline. In the end, it doesn't matter. The point is that Van Zandt was, as Rodney Crowell suggests, "plugged into a different light socket." His songs do seem to have come easily to him, and this one feels characteristically poignant yet effortless.

If I Needed You
– from the album *Live at the Old Quarter* (1977)

If I needed you,
Would you come to me?
Would you come to me
And ease my pain?
If you needed me,
I would come to you.
I'd swim the seas
For to ease your pain

In the night forlorn
The morning's born
And the morning shines
With the lights of love.
You will miss sunrise

If you close your eyes
That would break
My heart in two

The lady's with me now
Since I showed her how
To lay her lily
Hand in mine
Loop and Lil agree
She's a sight to see
And a treasure for
The poor to find

Van Zandt's best-known and best-selling song is "Pancho and Lefty," released on his album, *The Late, Great Townes Van Zandt*, in 1972 and later recorded as a duet by Merle Haggard and Willie Nelson in 1983. As an aside, the macabre title Van Zandt chose for the album that precedes his death by twenty-five years was a bit of a joke but probably also stems from his characteristic fatalism. Willie and Merle had a number one hit with "Pancho and Lefty." Willie's daughter Lana had played the song for him, suggesting that he record it, and "Willie liked it so much that he immediately learned it, then, late that night, woke Haggard up to come to the studio to record the song. The recording was done on the first take" (Hardy 190-191). Exactly when and how Townes wrote the song is up for debate, Townes having related several versions of its inception at various times over the years. He was insistent, however, that "Pancho and Lefty" was not about Pancho Villa, even though its setting is Mexico. Robert Earl Hardy speculates that the presence of the mother in the song "reinforces the closeness that Townes felt toward his mother," and insists that the narrator is Townes, himself, speaking to himself (125). The lines in the first verse would seem to bear this out, reflecting the complicated nature of the triangle between Townes, his mother, and his brother. The song, with its vaguely Spanish melodic elements, is a poetic fantasy tale of two characters on the frontier, perhaps alluding to the good

and bad character within Townes, himself—his two sides—the one that survives and the one that perishes.

Pancho and Lefty

– from the album *Legend* (1972)

Living on the road my friend

Is gonna keep you free and clean.
Now you wear your skin like iron.
Your breath's as hard as kerosene.
You weren't your mama's only boy
But her favorite one it seems.
She began to cry when you said goodbye
And sank into your dreams.

Pancho was a bandit boy
His horse as fast as polished steel.
He wore his gun outside his pants
For all the honest world to feel
Pancho met his match you know
On the deserts down in Mexico
Nobody heard his dying words
Ah, but that's the way it goes.

All the Federales say
They could have had him any day
They only let him slip away
Out of kindness, I suppose.

Lefty, he can't sing the blues
All night long like he used to.
The dust that Pancho bit down south
Ended up in Lefty's mouth.
The day they laid poor Pancho low
Lefty split for Ohio
Where he got the bread to go,
There ain't nobody knows.

The poets tell how Pancho fell,
And Lefty's living in cheap hotels.
The desert's quiet, Cleveland's cold,
And so the story ends we're told.
Pancho needs your prayers, it's true,
But save a few for Lefty, too.
He only did what he had to do,
And now he's growing old.

A few gray Federales say
They could have had him any day
They only let him slip away
Out of kindness, I suppose.

Duality is a common theme in Townes Van Zandt songs, not surprising for a man as torn as he was between light and dark, survival and annihilation, and family and the road. In what is my personal favorite of all Townes' songs, "Rake," that duality is expressed utilizing the symbols of sun and moon, and day and night. Like many who suffer from the demons of addiction and manic depression, the Rake thrives by night and withers in the light. The first two verses seem to celebrate the condition, but the twist in the third verse lets us know how judged the Rake feels and how certain he is that the situation cannot endure. In the final verse, the duality twists back upon itself, and the night and day meld. The effect is unearthly and disturbing, and the final two lines are haunting. "A more vivid rendering of the manic depressive state is hard to come by in modern verse," says Hardy (104).

Rake

– from the album *Delta Momma Blues*

I used to wake and run with the moon
I lived like a rake and a young man
I covered my lovers with flowers and wounds
My laughter the devil would frighten
The sun she would come and beat me back down
But every cruel day had its nightfall
I'd welcome the stars with wine and guitars
Full of fire and forgetful.

My body was sharp, the dark air clean
And outrage my joyful companion
Whisperin' women how sweet they did seem
Kneelin' for me to command them
And time was like water, but I was the sea
I'd have never noticed it passin'
Except for the turning of night into day

And the turnin' of day into cursin'
You look at me now, and don't think I don't know
What all your eyes are a sayin'
Does he want us to believe these ravings and lies
Are just tricks that his brain's been a playin'?
A lover of women he can't hardly stand
He trembles he's bent and he's broken
I've fallen it's true but I say unto you
Hold your tongues until after I've spoken

I was takin' my pride in the pleasures I'd known
I laughed and thought I'd be forgiven
But my laughter turned 'round eyes blazing and
Said my friend, we're holdin' a wedding
I buried my face but it spoke once again
The night to the day we're a bindin'
And now the dark air is like fire on my skin
And even the moonlight is blinding.

Townes Van Zandt's controversial life, his death at the age of fifty-two, his music catalogue, the questionable post mortem releases of his material, and who among his several families owns the rights to his oeuvre are still being debated. The critical estimation of his work as a poet and songwriter, however, grows with each passing year as his songs continue to be covered and reinterpreted by the artists they inspire and new critics and audiences discover his work.

A couple of years ago, as I sat talking with friends at a beat-up picnic table outside a West Texas roadhouse, I heard some familiar chords being played by the band onstage inside. The tempo was entirely too rapid for the song to be what I thought it was: Townes Van Zandt's "Lungs." The instrumentation was different, too—spangling and blue-grassy. As the music usurped my attention, my companions' voices faded into the evening. I left the table to lean in the doorway and listen. The song was, indeed, "Lungs." The youthful members of the band had pumped up the tempo and the energy and had added the mandolin and banjo that made the song sound as if it had sprung straight from a Kentucky coal-mining camp. It worked. Another generation inspired. An old song imbued with new life.

Lungs

-- from the album *Townes Van Zandt* (1970)

Won't you give your lungs to me?
Mine are collapsing
Plant my feet and bitterly
Breathe up the time that's passing.
Breath I'll take and breath I'll give
Pray the days not poison
Stand among the ones that live
In lonely indecision.

Fingers walk the darkness down
Mind is on the midnight
Gather up the gold you've found
You fool it's only moonlight.
And if you stop to take it home
Your hands will turn to butter
Better leave this dream alone
Try to find another.

Salvation sat and crossed herself
And called the devil partner
Wisdom burned upon a shelf
Who'll kill the raging cancer?
Seal the river at its mouth
Take the water prisoner
Fill the sky with screams and cries
Bathe in fiery answers.

Jesus was an only son
And love his only concept
But strangers cry in foreign tongues
And dirty up the doorstep
And I for one, and you for two
Ain't got the time for outside
Keep your injured looks to you
We'll tell the world that we tried.

Songwriter Pablo Menudo says, "It ain't good for you to listen to more than two or three Townes songs at a time." With the exception of a few songs like "If You Needed Me," Pablo's probably right, but there are times, when I'm in a certain lonesome mood, that no other songwriter will do.

I wrote that my favorite Van Zandt song was "Rake," and that was true when I wrote it, but

sometimes my favorite is “Lungs” or “Rex’s Blues” or “Nothin’” or “Snowin’ on Raton.” My actual favorite, as it probably is for many, is the last Townes song I listened to, the one that will be playing in my mind for quite a while.

The Master Craftsman: Guy Clark

I don’t think I discovered Guy Clark. I think I knew his music the same way I knew Willie Nelson’s music and the same way I knew English.

--Jack Ingram, Texas singer-songwriter

I was transported to warmer climes like Monahans, Texas in 1947, a place and time I never knew, but now thought I could see vividly, or a hot, gritty Dallas sidewalk in the company of a wine-soaked elevator man. Guy’s voice will take you somewhere else every time you hear it.

--James McMurtry, Texas singer-songwriter

No bullshit means no bullshit. Know what I mean?

-- Guy Clark, on how to write a good song



Figure 9: Guy and Susanna Clark, 1975

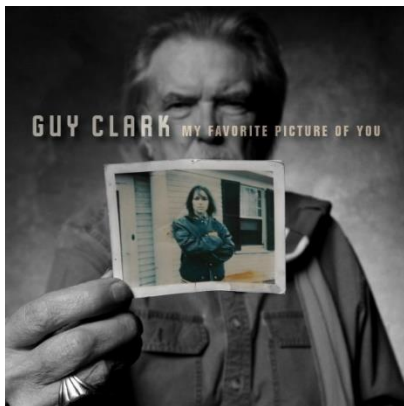
Guy Clark may have grown tired over the years of being called a craftsman, but he is that—a meticulous tunesmith and wordsmith as well as a luthier who builds and repairs guitars

in his basement studio. His well-known method of writing his songs on graph paper in pencil, using each square for a letter or space, seems evidence enough that he is an exacting, tactile man of precision. Guy believes that “A good song’s lyrics work on paper, independent of the music and melody that will eventually fuse them into song” (Koster 213). Of his music, Clark says, “To me, the melody is just a vehicle to get the words out” (Spong *Pitch*). Maybe so, but Clark is one of the most respected songwriters in the business, penning hits for the likes of Rodney Crowell, Emmy Lou Harris, Lyle Lovett, and Ricky Skaggs. Even the Nashville machine loves him because he offers their superstars a chance to stretch themselves by including a Guy Clark gem or two on their otherwise committee-created albums. Country superstar Kenny Chesney’s 2012 hit cover of Guy Clark’s “Hemingway’s Whiskey” is a case in point. According to Clark, he writes a few, sells a few, and then, when he has enough songs stacked up to make an album, he hits the studio. Thus, some of his songs are already hits before he ever records them in his own voice.

Since his good friend Townes Van Zandt’s death in 1997, Clark has become the elder statesman of the Texas singer-songwriter tradition, esteemed as no other by those he continues to inspire. Lyle Lovett says of him that “Guy’s first record helped tell me what a song *should*, what a song *could* be.” As an example, Lovett cites Clark’s “Texas 1947,” a song about a small town’s citizens gathering at the tracks to watch the fastest train ever zoom by. “Immediately,” says Lovett, “you’re in the middle of a scene with a 6-year-old boy in West Texas, and you know something is happening...and you’re waiting for that next line” (*All Things*).

Clark is chiefly a literary nonfiction writer in song. He excels at the finely-burnished memoir—an experience from his life depicted in precisely enough detail to thrust listeners smack into scene and just enough left out to let them fill what blanks they will. The memories can be

light and lively as in the case of two of his odes to food: “Texas Cookin’” with its punchy rhythm and lyrics in pure Texas-speak (“It’ll stop yo’ belly and backbone bumpin’”) and “Home Grown Tomatoes” with its spot-on tagline (“only two things that money can’t buy, and that’s true love and home grown tomatoes”). The memories can also be poetic and piercing as in his tribute to Susanna Clark, a songwriter and artist and his wife of forty years. Susanna died in 2012. His song “My Favorite Picture of You” is a posthumous tribute to her about a Polaroid of her taken many years ago in a moment when she was angry with her husband. Clark and Van Zandt were “obnoxiously drunk,” and Susanna got up, put her coat on and left. Outside the house, a friend snapped her picture. In the photo she stands with her arms crossed, mouth grim, glaring directly into the camera. Clark sees Susanna’s strong, defiant, self-reliant character in the portrait. He sings, “...you were so angry/It’s hard to believe we were lovers at all/There’s a fire in your eyes/You’ve got your heart on your sleeve/A curse on your lips but all I can see/Is beautiful/My favorite picture of you/Is the one where you wings are showing” (*My Favorite*).



**Figure 10: Album cover of
*My Favorite Picture of You***

I could name Guy Clark's song "L.A. Freeway" in three notes, maybe two. The iconic opening guitar notes, the first one drawn out, the next four rapidly descending, presage a song and sentiment that can choke up any fish-out-of-water Texan. It was written in the days when Clark was just making up his mind that he definitely wanted to write songs for a living and that

L.A. was not the place to do it. A freshly-penned contract to write songs for Nashville's Sunbury Publishing allowed Guy and Susanna the opportunity to make a break from L.A., buy some land and a home outside of Nashville, and receive a regular paycheck while he honed his craft and figured out how he fit into the business (Sudbrink). "L.A. Freeway" is an exhilarating escape song but not without a few notes of regret and anxiety. For listeners, it brings out all those feelings that emerge with the need to get the hell outta Dodge. Skinny Dennis, but the way, was a bass player. It didn't take Dennis long to follow the Clarks to Nashville.

"L.A. Freeway"
-- from the album, *Old # 1* (1975)

Pack up all your dishes.
Make note of all good wishes.
Say goodbye to the landlord for me.
That son of a bitch has always bored me.
Throw out them LA papers
And that moldy box of vanilla wafers.
Adios to all this concrete.
Gonna get me some dirt road back street

If I can just get off of this LA freeway
Without getting killed or caught
I'd be down that road in a cloud of smoke
For some land that I ain't bought bought bought

Here's to you old skinny Dennis
Only one I think I will miss
I can hear that old bass singing
Sweet and low like a gift you're bringing
Play it for me just one more time now
Got to give it all we can now
I believe everything your saying
Just keep on, keep on playing

If I can just get off of this LA freeway
Without getting killed or caught
I'd be down that road in a cloud of smoke
For some land that I ain't bought bought bought

And you put the pink card in the mailbox
Leave the key in the old front door lock
They will find it likely as not
I'm sure there's something we have forgot
Oh Susanna, don't you cry, babe
Love's a gift that's surely handmade
We've got something to believe in
Don't you think it's time we're leaving

If I can just get off of this LA freeway
Without getting killed or caught
I'd be down that road in a cloud of smoke
For some land that I ain't bought bought bought.

Pack up all your dishes.
Make note of all good wishes.
Say goodbye to the landlord for me.
That son of a bitch has always bored me.

In the early days, the kitchen table at the Clarks' country house outside of Nashville served as a salon space for some of the very best Texas songwriters-to-be. Townes Van Zandt came for the wedding and then seems to have forgotten to leave for a year or so. Rodney Crowell and a teen-aged Steve Earle were frequent guests. Clark says that he thought a great way to write was to get together with some good songwriters so they could play their songs for each other, and the scene functioned something like a workshop. In the documentary, *Heartworn Highways*, there is footage of one of these gatherings on a cold Christmas Eve—the songwriters eating, drinking, taking turns sharing their newest songs. Clark still enjoys working with other songwriters and sometimes collaborates as he did in the heart-rending “Maybe I Can Paint Over That,” co-written with Shawn Camp and Verlon Thompson. In this one, as in “My Favorite Picture of You” and “L.A. Freeway,” he seems to be singing, once again, directly to Susanna.

Maybe I Can Paint Over That
-- from the album *Somedays the Song Writes You* (2009)

I've smeared my heart on my sleeve
I've tagged my name on the wall

It's prob'ly time for me to leave
Actin' big and talkin' small
I've tracked blood in on the floor
I put my fist through the wall
I've dragged trouble through the door
And I've spilled wine on it all

Maybe I can paint over that
It'll prob'ly bleed through
Maybe I can paint over that
But I can't hide it from you

I've got some ink beneath my skin
A good idea at the time
I won't be doing that again
Not with any arm of mine
And I have stumbled in my time
I left my footprints down the road
And the part of me that shines
Ain't the part of me that's showed

Maybe I can paint over that
It'll prob'ly bleed through
Maybe I can paint over that
But I can't hide it from you

I just like the song “Dublin Blues.” Perhaps it’s the imagery of sitting in the familiar old Texas Chili Parlor in Austin, an image evoking the sounds, smells, and sights that can certainly beckon an ex-pat Texan home. As the song skips around Europe, from Dublin to Rome to Florence to Paris, and then back to Nashville, we hear a tale of lost love told by a road-weary narrator. The narrator is, as he says, “just a poor boy.” Yet the work he has chosen, and which he dedicates himself to, has sent him travelling. The upside is that he has been able to see wondrous things. The presumed downside is that love is difficult under such circumstances, and, if he must be sitting in a bar at the moment, he’d rather be back in Texas. Note how the numerous locations cited play off one another to evoke the magic and splendor as well as the gritty, wearying side of a poet-musician’s life.

Dublin Blues

- from the album *Dublin Blues* (1995)

I wish I was in Austin
In the Chili Parlour Bar
Drinkin' Mad Dog Margaritas
And not carin' where you are
But here I sit in Dublin
Just rollin' cigarettes
Holdin' back and chokin' back
The shakes with every breath
Forgive me all my anger
Forgive me all my faults
There's no need to forgive me
For thinkin' what I thought
I loved you from the git go
I'll love you till I die
I loved you on the Spanish Steps
The day you said goodbye

I am just a poor boy
Work's my middle name
If money was a reason
I would not be the same
I'll stand up and be counted
I'll face up to the truth
I'll walk away from trouble
But I can't walk away from you

I have been to Fort Worth
I have been to Spain
I have been too proud
To come in out of the rain
I have seen the David
I've seen the Mona Lisa too
I have heard Doc Watson
Play Columbus Stockade Blues

Forgive me all my anger
Forgive me all my faults
There's no need to forgive me
For thinkin' what I thought
I loved you from the git go
I'll love you till I die
I loved you on the Spanish steps
The day you said goodbye

Guy Clark is not known for having the best voice in the business, but I'd rather hear him sing "Anyhow, I Love You" than anyone else, because (and this is where I disagree with Guy about extricating the poetry from the music and performance) he puts the passion and the just-right vocal twists into this song, and nobody else seems to be able to do it quite like him. A case in point: at the end of the line, sung to a skittish lover, "When you feel like runnin' for the back door," Guy draws out the pause and then speaks rather than sings the word, "don't," in a plaintive plea. That's the kind of craftsmanship that constitutes the magic melding of lyrics/music/performance and elevates the song to art.

Anyhow, I Love You
– from the album *Old #1* (1975)

I wish I had a dime for every bad time
But the bad times always seem to keep the change
You been all alone so you know what I'm sayin'
So when all you can recall is the pain

Just you wait until tomorrow when you wake up with me
At your side and find I haven't lied about nothin'
I wouldn't trade a tree for the way I feel about you
In the mornin', anyhow I love you

Everyday it gets just a little bit better
And half the gettin' there is knowin' where I been before
I'm sure you understand 'cause I ain't your first man
So when you feel like runnin' for the back door...don't

Just you wait until tomorrow when you wake up with me
At your side and find I haven't lied about nothin'
I wouldn't trade a tree for the way I feel about you
In the mornin', anyhow I love you

While nothing beats listening to Clark sing this song himself, there is yet one other pretty fantastic way to hear "Anyhow I Love You," and that's when a naked, golden-throated, guitar-strumming cowboy croons it to you from the far end of your bed early in the morning. Trust me.

Guy Clark has said of his song, “Desperados Waiting for a Train,” that, “It’s just as true as you could make it. It’s about a guy who was like my grandfather. And when I started writing songs, that was one of the songs I knew I was gonna write at some point.” The guy was Jack Prigg, a well driller who lived at Grandma Clark’s hotel back in Monahans. Grandma Clark was a pretty interesting character herself, a one-armed former bootlegger, and Jack Prigg was her boyfriend. The song captures the swelling childhood feeling of being in the presence of your hero as well as the subsequent creeping sadness of sensing that your hero may be only human after all, perfectly expressed in the description of “brown tobacco stains all down his chin” and in the line, “why’s he all dressed up like them old men?”

Desperados Waitin’ for a Train
– from the album *Old # 1* (1995)

I played the Red River Valley
He'd sit in the kitchen and cry
Run his fingers through seventy years of livin'
And wonder, "Lord, why has every well I've drilled gone dry?"
We were friends, me and this old man
We's like desperados waitin' for a train
Desperados waitin' for a train

He's a drifter, a driller of oil wells
He's an old school man of the world
He taught me how to drive his car when he was too drunk to
And he'd wink and give me money for the girls
And our lives was like, some old Western movie
Like desperados waitin' for a train
Like desperados waitin' for a train

From the time that I could walk he'd take me with him
To a bar called the Green Frog Cafe
There was old men with beer guts and dominos
Lying 'bout their lives while they played
I was just a kid, they all called me "Sidekick"
Just like desperados waitin' for a train
Like desperados waitin' for a train

One day I looked up and he's pushin' eighty
He's got brown tobacco stains all down his chin
Well to me he was a hero of this country
So why's he all dressed up like them old men
Drinkin' beer and playin' Moon and Forty-two
Jus' like desperados waitin' for a train
Like a desperado waitin' for a train

The day 'fore he died I went to see him
I was grown and he was almost gone.
So we just closed our eyes and dreamed us up a kitchen
And sang one more verse to that old song
(spoken) Come on, Jack, that son-of-a-bitch is comin'

We're desperados waitin' for a train
We's like desperados waitin' for a train

For the uninitiated, Moon and Forty-Two are domino games, and the mention of them lends an authenticity to the song that, for me, calls up the clicking sound of them being shuffled on a bar table and the low murmur of old men's voices. It's that just-right amount of detail that allows the listener to be part of the experience without, as Clark says, "delineating every stitch in your jeans" (*All Things*). There are obvious reasons why Bob Dylan claims Clark as one of his favorite songwriters and why Dallas singer-songwriter Michelle Shocked refers to him as "God" Clark. His advice to fledgling songwriters: "Write every day. Listen to and read good poetry. Read Dylan Thomas poems. That's what Townes and I used to do every time we would think we were pretty smart. We would put on a tape of Dylan Thomas reading his own work and it was like, 'Oh Mercy!'" (*Awaiting*).

Like Jack Prigg, Clark is now pushing eighty, and although he has slowed down, he hasn't stopped writing. He plans to keep at it, or as he says, "I haven't written my last song, for sure. Nor my best one" (*All Things*).

The Poet Who Lived It: Billy Joe Shaver

Some people write perfect songs, and Billy Joe Shaver's one of 'em. He writes perfect songs.

– Robert Earl Keen, Texas singer/songwriter (Shaver A Tribute)

Billy Joe Shaver is the greatest songwriter alive today.

--Willie Nelson

I'm listening to Billy Joe Shaver, and I'm reading James Joyce.

-- Bob Dylan, from his song "I Feel a Change Comin' On" (2009)

Simplicity don't need to be greased.

– Billy Joe Shaver

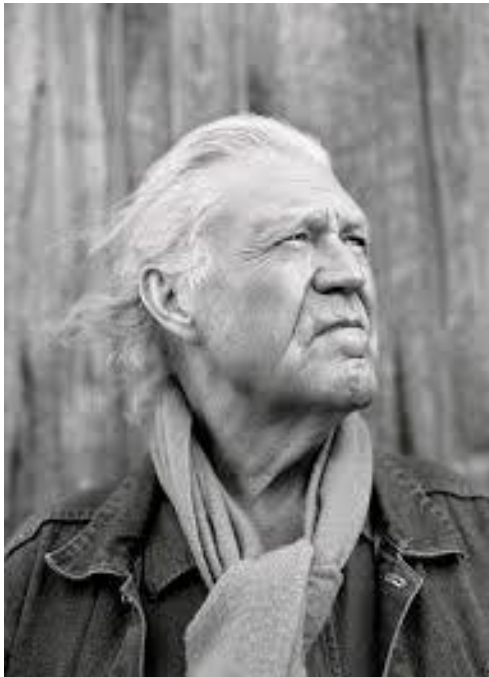


Figure 11: Billy Joe Shaver

One of the first things to note about Billy Joe Shaver is how many singer/songwriters from Texas and elsewhere cite him as one of their influences. The second thing to note about him is just how many, from a variety of genres, have covered his songs—about 200 singers and bands in all.

From Willie and Waylon to the Allman Brothers and Bobby Bare to Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan to Kris Kristofferson and Elvis Presley, a heck of a lot of songwriters and performers are fans of the Corsicana-born folk poet.

Shaver, on the other hand, only records and performs his own material, and when he does it, you know he lived it. Like Guy Clark, Shaver specializes in writing memoir in song. His sincerity of delivery and the facts of his life speak for themselves, and as wrote in his autobiography *Honky Tonk Hero*, “I’ve lost parts of three fingers, broke my back, suffered a heart attack and a quadruple bypass, had a steel plate put in my neck and 136 stitches in my head, fought drugs and booze, spent the money I had, and buried my wife, son, and mother in the span of one year.” But, as he also says, “I’m not proud of my misfortune – I’m proud of my survival” (viii).

Since he wrote his book, Shaver has also been acquitted of an attempted murder charge stemming from an incident at a bar near Waco where he shot a man (in self-defense after being threatened with a knife and shot at three times, according to Shaver and other witnesses) in the face. He even wrote a song, a duet with Willie Nelson, called “Wacko from Waco” about the incident. Listen to the songs that come from Billy Joe Shaver’s experiences, and you know that you’re hearing the unvarnished truth. Shaver’s first album, *Old Five and Dimers Like Me*, was produced in 1973 on a shoestring by his friend and admirer, Kris Kistofferson, who also paid for everything. Kristofferson’s own label, perhaps out of concern that the recording might compete with Kristofferson’s work, bought the album from him and failed to promote it (Parker). *Five and Dimers* mostly just sat there, beloved for many years by critics and a cult following of fans and songwriters, but never selling many copies. What put Shaver on the map was, of course, the release later that year of Waylon Jennings’ *Honky Tonk Heroes*. The story about how that album came to be is the stuff of Lone Star legend.



Figure 12: Shaver (left) backstage with Jennings, 1973

According to Shaver (and Waylon Jennings never denied the story) Jennings had promised him at Willie's 1972 Fourth of July Picnic in Dripping Springs, Texas, that he would record one of his songs. Shaver, hungry and desperate after the shenanigans with *Five and Dimers*, took Jennings at his word, so when times got tough enough, he tracked Jennings down at his studio and demanded to see the man. Jennings sent a lackey out to hand Shaver a folded up hundred dollar bill and tell him to take a hike. Shaver was "pissed," and thought, "He's from Texas, I'm from Texas. He's supposed to do what he says." So Shaver sent the lackey back to Jennings with the still-folded bill and the counter-message to "shove it up his ass and twist it" (Parker). Jennings came down with two biker bodyguards to talk to Shaver who explained his desperate situation, "It's do or die for me." When Shaver threatened to kick Jennings' "ass right here and now" in front of the bikers, he had Jennings' attention. "Hoss, you could've gotten yourself killed." Whether Jennings was more impressed with Shaver's chutzpah or his desperation, we'll never know, but he made a deal with Shaver. He told Shaver to sit down and play one of his songs. If Jennings liked it, he could play another. Shaver started with "Ain't No Gods in Mexico," and Jennings was apparently pleased. He nodded, then Shaver played another and another. About five songs in, Jennings "knew what he had to do"—record a whole album of

Shaver's songs (Parker). They were that good, and here was Jennings' chance to break away from the Nashville formula. *Honky Tonk Heroes* was born, and Billy Joe Shaver was on his way to becoming a legend.

The first time I heard Billy Joe Shaver's "I Want Some More," I was driving down a West Texas highway alone at night. I was stunned. I pulled over to the side of the road and stopped the car to listen to it several more times. Songs about heartbreak, the woman who left, and the wreckage left behind are straight out of the country music playbook, but this one is different. In illusorily simple language, this song just rips the heart and makes the listener *believe*—it is the embodiment of that authenticity that is essential in good lyrics and such a critical element in the Texas singer/songwriter tradition. The arrangement is stark. It begins with a quiet bass line, a reverberating guitar line, bass drum thudding on first and third beats topped by high hat counterbeats, and a subtle organ counter-melody weeping in the background. Billy Joe may not have the best voice in Texas music, but he has perhaps the most evocative. As he launches into the first line, "Every day I face the lonesome morning," you can hear the cry in his throat as his voice never quite breaks. The hovering guitar and organ mimic that cry. After the first chorus, a mournful guitar solo bursts forth, played by Billy Joe's son, Eddy Shaver. As the second chorus fades, so does Billy Joe's voice plaintively singing that he wants some more. The fadeout continues with the bass, then the organ, then the guitar, and we're left with only the punctuating percussion as it slowly lingers, wrenching the last emotional drop from the song. The marriage of restraint in the general instrumentation and the raw emotion in the lyrics, vocal line, and guitar solo is powerful. This is not "cryin' in your beer" music. It's cryin' all alone in the dark at two a.m. music. The recording of "I Want Some More" from Billy Joe Shaver's album *Tramp on Your Street* is a rare accomplishment—a damned near perfect song, perfectly done.

I Want Some More
– from the album *Tramp on Your Street* (1993)

Every day I face the lonesome morning
I try and get my feet back on the floor
I can't recall the reason why you left me
But I still hear the slamming of the door

Like a child whose mama left him cryin'
Like a miser who cannot hold his gold
I ain't been worth a nickel since you left me
I can't get enough of you, I want some more

I want some more of what it is you gave me
I wanna feel the way I felt before
I tried and tried but I just can't forget you
I can't get enough of you, I want some more

You came to me the same way that you left me
You played your game and evened up the score
It's best to leave the party when it's happening
Or stop the show and leave 'em wanting more

I want some more of what it is you gave me
I wanna feel the way I felt before
I tried and tried but I just can't forget you
I can't get enough of you, I want some more

Among his own influences, Billy Joe lists songwriters Kris Kristofferson, Willie Nelson, Rodney Crowell, Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Mickey Newbury, and Dickie Betts. But he also says, "I think the best songwriter is the one who makes you feel like you are in the best place in the world when you are listening to his or her songs. The one who makes you understand yourself a little better when your ears hear their words. At that moment, that songwriter is the best. That's the beauty of the song" (Shaver 72). Billy Joe can make you feel that way. He is a master at writing what I call triumph songs and what are generally called redemption songs—songs that tell of adversity overcome and hopefulness about the future. Billy Joe, whose life is a case study in overcoming adversity, has written so many of them (and so

many of them have been covered by other artists) that narrowing it down to one triumph song did not come easy for me. With some reluctance, I by-passed “Old Chunk of Coal” in favor of “Live Forever,” a song that he co-wrote with his son and band-mate, Eddy Shaver. The song, as recorded on *Tramp on Your Street*, is a vocal duet with Eddy, who died of a heroin overdose on December 31, 2000. With a steady foot-tapping and sparkling guitar background, “Live Forever” is short, and it is sweet, and it is a heart-lifting reminder that we do live on in the art we leave behind and the hearts of those who love us.

Live Forever
– from the album *Tramp on Your Street* (1993)

I’m gonna live forever
I’m gonna cross that river
I’m gonna catch tomorrow now
You’re gonna wanna hold me
Just like I’ve always told you
You’re gonna miss me when I’m gone

Nobody here will ever find me
But I will always be around
Just like the songs I leave behind me
I’m gonna live forever now

You Fathers and you Mothers
Be good to one another
Please try to raise your children right
Don’t let the darkness take ‘em
Don’t make ‘em feel forsaken
Just lead ‘em safely to the light

When this old world is blown asunder
And all the stars fall from the sky
Remember someone really loves you
We’ll live forever you and I

I’m gonna live forever
I’m gonna cross that river
I’m gonna catch tomorrow now

Describing the songwriting process, Billy Joe Shaver writes, “Most songwriters, it seems to me, write as a means to an end. The song is an attempt to create a single. Or it’s an attempt to get a cut on Tim McGraw’s latest record. To me, the song is poetry. That’s all it is. It’s the way I describe the world around me, make sense of it” (71).

All of Shaver’s songs are personal like that. Perhaps the most personal of all is the song he wrote for his wife Brenda about a wildflower that rarely blooms (and is supposedly sacred to Native Americans) in Central Texas and has the poetic name of hearts a-bustin’. Brenda, from whom Billy Joe was twice-divorced but to whom he was thrice-married, had a special connection to the flower which the couple had observed growing on a hillside near their Central Texas home. I first heard the song in a cover version recorded by Lubbock singer/songwriter Jimmie Dale Gilmore and found it quite touching in Gilmore’s wistful tenor. I now prefer the original recording by Billy Joe—a version that couldn’t be more personal and that he was unable to record until after Brenda’s death from cancer. It’s a country waltz (befitting the ongoing, complicated dance between man and woman) with shimmering, wavering steel guitar lines in the background. There was no chance that this song would ever have been recorded by Tim McGraw. It’s just *too* country for Nashville.

Hearts A-Bustin’
– from the album *The Earth Rolls On* (2001)

Hearts a-bustin’ grew down by the river
That flows by the old paper mill
In the springtime we stood there together
At the top of the old stone fort hill

Many’s a time I’ve been lonesome
Since you left I don’t know what to do
Like the flower that grows on the hillside
My heart’s a-bustin’ for you

Hearts a-bustin’ is a beautiful flower

That looks like its heart burst inside
I miss you so much, your sweet gentle touch
I'll love you 'til the day that I die

One day in the year when the time's right
The Indians float 'round the bend
I don't know when I'll go but somehow I know
Someday I'll be with you again

Hearts a-bustin' grew down by the river
That flows by the old paper mill
In the springtime we stood there together
At the top of the old stone fort hill

If, as Aaron A. Fox contends, the lyrics of country music can be poetry that you don't need a Ph.D. to access (23), and that such poetry has its roots in the "artful talk" (22) of beer joints and honky-tonks, then Billy Joe Shaver has written his dissertation in song. Obviously, he writes in fluent Texan-speak, and his brash honky-tonk song, "Georgia on a Fast Train," is no exception. The song is auto-biographical. Every turn of events he describes in the lines actually happened. His mama left him to live with his grandmother at an early age, his Grandma raised him on her pension, and he really did pick cotton, raise hell, and bail hay. But the song is so much more than a sentimental tribute to his upbringing, and it is anything but a lament. It is, instead, a proud accounting of what he survived and a triumphant swipe at the Nashville establishment that rejected him early in his career.

As he, Townes Van Zandt, Rodney Crowell, Steve Earle and other Texas songwriters hung around the fringes of Nashville in the late sixties and early seventies trying to break in, the demoralizing wait-and-see, you're-not-commercial-enough, rewrite-it-this-way responses they received forced them to trek repeatedly back and forth to Texas, where at least they could find paying gigs. They were poor and disrespected, but they obviously believed in what they were doing.

Shaver received the ego boost of his career when Nashville superstar, Johnny Cash, himself, recorded “Georgia on a Fast Train” on his 1982 album, *The Adventures of Johnny Cash*. The song comes on like a honky-tonk freight train and drives relentlessly forward musically while the lyrics pelt the listener rapid-fire, and you know he means it when he says he’s “gonna get my share of mine.” “Georgia on a Fast Train” is Billy Joe exultantly declaring to the establishment that he is the real deal. Recognize.

I Been to Georgia on a Fast Train
– from the album *Old Five and Dimers Like Me* (1973)

On a rainy Wednesday morning, that’s the day that I was born
In that old sharecropper’s one room country shack
They say my mammy left me the same day that she had me
Said she hit the road and never once looked back

Now I just thought I’d mention that my grandma’s old age pension
Is the reason that I’m standin’ here today
I got all my country learnin’ milkin’ and a churnin’
Picking cotton, raisin’ hell, and bailing hay

I been to Georgia on a fast train honey
I wuddn’t born no yesterday
I got a good Christian raisin’ and a eighth grade education
Ain’t no need in y’all a treatin’ me this way

Now sweet Carolina, I don’t guess I’ll ever find another
Woman put together like you are
I love your wiggle in your walkin’ and your big city talkin’
And your brand new shiny Plymouth ragtop car

Well it’s hurry up and wait in this game of give and take
Seems like haste it makes for waste every time
I declare to my soul when you hear those ages roll
You better know I’m gonna get my share of mine

I been to Georgia on a fast train honey
I wuddn’t born no yesterday
I got a good Christian raisin’ and a eighth grade education
Ain’t no need in y’all a treatin’ me this way

The first two albums of songs that Shaver created, the once little-known *Old Five and Dimers Like Me* and the much bally-hooed *Honky Tonk Heroes*, are now considered classics and the very origins of the Outlaw Country subgenre. They are quintessential Shaver, and they display that trademark simplicity that “don’t need to be greased.” Shaver is humble about his skills as a songwriter, always referring to his lack of education as the reason his songs are written simply. Somewhere within himself, though, he knows how fine his songs are and how groundbreaking, too. Of the songs on *Honky Tonk Heroes* he says, “Chet Atkins was afraid it would hurt the business the way we were coming out, you know, saying "God" and "damn" and things like that in the songs. But it just couldn't be stopped. It was too good” (Doyle).

The Houston Kid: Rodney Crowell



Figure 13: Rodney Crowell, then and now.

In the previously mentioned 1976 documentary, *Heartworn Highways*, a twenty-six-year-old Rodney Crowell hangs out with songwriting buddies at Guy and Susanna Clarks’ house performing “Bluebird Wine”—the song that was later covered by Emmy Lou Harris on her first solo album *Pieces of the Sky*. Director James Szalapski and a small film crew had heard about

this ragtag bunch of Texans on the periphery of Nashville trying to make music and poetry in a new way. He found some financing and drove down to Nashville from New York to capture this band of buddies on film. He thought he might be onto something. Clearly, he was. As good as the song *Bluebird Wine* is, the buddies, who included a floppy-haired youth named Steve Earle, could not possibly have known that this good-looking kid named Rodney from southeast Texas would soon be the break-out star among them. Rodney Crowell got the first hot gig among them when he became Emmy Lou Harris' guitarist and resident songwriter.

Later, he moved back to Tennessee, married into Nashville royalty (Rosanne Cash, daughter of Johnny Cash), and became a solo recording star, his 1988 album *Diamonds and Dirt* spawning an unprecedented five number one hits on the country charts. I confess that I ignored grammy-winning Rodney Crowell for many years. To me, he was that Nashville sellout who cashed in, but as I plunged into the research for this project, his name kept cropping up as a favorite songwriter of many of my favorite songwriters. Clearly, the Houston Kid deserved another look. Then, on a trip to Austin, I came across his memoir, *Chinaberry Sidewalks*, in the music section of Half-Price Books and bought it on a whim. In spite of all the research I had yet to do, I found myself reading his engaging book straight through, which, of course, led to ordering his CDs and listening to song after song trying to grasp why he was so admired by so many songwriters whom I think are at the top of their field. It took me a while to warm up to him. Rodney Crowell has spent many years in Nashville studios, and the gleaming polish on the material is still difficult for me to hear past, but many of the songs, including the two I've chosen here, are interesting, different, and very original. In spite of the slick production values, they fit much more neatly into the Texas pantheon than on the Nashville charts.

Judging from the contents of Rodney Crowell's absorbing memoir, *Chinaberry Sidelwalks*, he seems amazed that a kid like himself from the mean streets of an East Houston blue-collar slum could have had the outsized life he has had. "Fate's Right Hand" appears to me to be another reflection, this time in sputtering imagery, on his improbable life and the improbable world around him. The scattershot images contained in the lyrics are far less haphazard than they seem at first listen. The initial verse is clearly about the streets Rodney Crowell grew up on, while the second verse addresses a subject that was quite topical at the time that he wrote the song: the investigation into President Bill Clinton's sex life. Verse three is a collage of the valueless vagaries of contemporary American life, and the fourth verse returns us to his Houston childhood. I'm from that part of the world, and I've read Crowell's book, too. Those images resonate. For another listener, it might be pleasant to sit back and just enjoy the sparkling wordplay.

Fate's Right Hand
– from the album *Fate's Right Hand* (2003)

Cool as a rule you don't learn in no school
You can't brown nose the teacher from a dunce hat stool
It's the hum and the rhythm of the birds and the bees
The momma's and the poppa's and the monkeys in the trees
It's the brothers and the sisters living life on the street
Play a hunch pull the punch and you'll likely get beat
By the junk food tattooed white dude true blued
Honky with an attitude coming unglued
Fate's right hand.....I don't understand at all

Billy loves women like a junky loves dope
Give him just enough rope and the monkey gonna choke
She's a Bill Blass combo maxed out mambo
D.K.N.Y. caught him in a lie
Ken Starr word man we're talking absurd
Spending forty million dollars just to give a man the bird
He's a king she's a queen so the rap won't stick
Get it on with a rubber and you won't get sick
Fate's right hand.....I don't understand at all

Redrum dot com dim sum smart bombs
Double cappuccino and a heart like a tom tom
Ozone long gone that's it I quit
Natural inclination says enough of this shit
Brat pack black jack heart attack crack
We need another news channel like a hole in the back
There's a 187 on the 405
And we all go to heaven on a hard disk drive
Fate's right hand.....I don't understand at all

Hard rain fish seine hurricane Jane
Don't forget about Carla when you're talkin' about poon tang
Slow song on the bone rec hall dance
Double date Debbie with a pole in my pants
First comes love like it always did
Or we wouldn't be talkin' bout The Houston kid
Po-dunk piss-chunk old dead skunk drunk
Trot/line Freddy's got his dogs in the trunk
Fate's right hand...I don't understand at all
Fate's right hand...man I don't understand at all

According to Rodney Crowell, his song, “Beautiful Despair” sprang from a conversation he had in Belfast with a drunken friend who lamented that he drank because he couldn’t write like Dylan. In that moment, two words sprang to his mind: beautiful despair. Influential journalist and author Ron Rosenbaum (a Rodney Crowell fan) writes of both the concept as well as the song, itself, “You know beautiful despair, don’t you? Is there anyone who doesn’t? You’ve felt it even if you haven’t named it. It’s not depression. It’s not mere melancholy . . . It’s something sentimental and spiritual.” I would call it a feeling of despair over something actually worthy of the feeling. I have no idea how to categorize Rodney Crowell’s song “Beautiful Despair.” It isn’t country or rock or blues. It isn’t folk or jazz. With its lovely, pulsing, descending progression and lilt upward in pitch at the end of each line, it is a redemption song from another galaxy. Unearthly is one word to describe it, or, perhaps we should simply stop at this word: beautiful.

Beautiful Despair
– from the album *The Outsider* (2005)

Beautiful despair is hearin' Dylan when you're drunk at three a. m.
Knowing that the chances are no matter what you'll never write like him
Oh, brother

Beautiful despair is why you lean into the world without restraint
Cause somewhere out before you lies the masterpiece you'd sell your soul to paint
Oh, brother
What do we laugh or cry?

Beautiful despair
Beautiful despair

Beautiful despair is slouching forward toward a past you might regret
All to suck the marrow out of every magic moment that you get

Beautiful despair is playing safe when you were once a rebel child
Knowing that tomorrow comes and all you've done is last another mile
Oh brother
Oh dear brother
Oh my brother
What shall we drink or dry?

With the publication of his memoir *Chinaberry Sidewalks* in 2011, the Houston Kid has branched into a more literary vein that suits him well. The book, an accounting of his Texas childhood and his parents' tumultuous and often drunken and violent relationship, does not cover his rise to superstardom in the country music business but focuses instead on the real roots of the music he has written over the years, his experiences in the working class neighborhoods in east Houston and his exposure to the music of Texas. His memoir was inspired, in part, by Texas author and poet, Mary Karr, whose own memoirs, *The Liar's Club* and *Cherry*, are about her childhood and adolescent years growing up in the same part of Southeast Texas as Crowell. He so admired Mary Karr's memoirs that he name-checked her in his song "Earthbound" from his 2003 album *Fate's Right Hand*. Later, he contacted her to talk to her about it. The two met in

New York, became fast friends, and then Rodney encouraged her to co-write songs with him.

The result is the 2012's *Kin: Songs by Mary Karr and Rodney Crowell*.

Of the area where the two grew up, Mary Karr says, "We both left that place like our hair was on fire and then neither of us wrote about anything else for the next thirty years." Of what Rodney Crowell plans to do for the rest of his career, he says that it will be devoted to leaving a musical legacy rather than making money (Morris). In my fantasy, I call him up and say, "Rodney, come back home to Texas for the next album and record it the downhome way. You remember." I doubt I'm the only one who would love to hear Rodney Crowell songs recorded in the stripped-down Texas way.

The Highway Minstrel: Joe Ely

John T. Davis calls Lubbock, Texas "an insular, isolated, deeply conservative, deeply religious town that produced (and continues to produce) an improbable number of artistic and intellectual mavericks" (xii). Greater minds than mine have attempted to explain why so much talent comes out of Lubbock, Texas, but I haven't heard anything that satisfactorily elucidates the mystique. I lived there for a while in the early seventies, and I was astonished at the time by the amount of superb music, some of it in my own literal backyard, that I was exposed to in those days, especially in a town so darned conservative that my long-haired boyfriend was continuously harassed by the locals. According to Lubbock boy Waylon Jennings, "Politics and religion ain't never gonna bring people together, but music could help" (Guralnick 204). For a young hippie girl living in Lubbock, it certainly did. Until I could get back to Austin, the music in Lubbock was a way for me to hold onto my sanity. The place is, as Ely says "a strange planet." Ely's friend and fellow Lubbockite, singer-songwriter Butch Hancock, has famously

said that life in Lubbock “taught me two things: One is that God loves you, and you’re gonna burn in hell. The other is that sex is the most awful, filthy thing on earth, and you should save it for someone you love.” Clearly it isn’t just the flatness of the landscape or the unremitting dust in the air or the wail of the wind that shapes the Lubbock singer-songwriter.

Let’s just leave it right here: for some cotton-pickin’ reason that nobody knows, Lubbock has spawned rock and roll pioneer Buddy Holly, country superstar Waylon Jennings, pop star and songwriter Mac Davis and a nest of the some of the best singer-songwriters on the planet. They are known as the Panhandle poets or the Lubbock mafia, and the group includes not only Joe Ely, but also his friends Terry Allen, Butch Hancock, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Eddie Beethoven, and David Halley, among others.

Born in Amarillo, raised in Lubbock, and schooled on the road, Joe Ely is ideal to represent this spectacularly rich lode of Texas singer/songwriter talent because, at his best, he is every bit as good a songwriter as any of them, but Ely is also a better performer than the rest of them combined. And, if I’m to stick to my guns that the song, the music, and the performance are all essential and inextricable components of the art, well, it just had to be Ely. Since he left Lubbock long ago and began to tour with the likes of Tom Petty, The Clash, Merle Haggard, Bruce Springsteen, Dwight Yoakum, and the Kinks, he has become a major performer and an influence on a generation or two of young singer-songwriters and performers.



Figure 14: (l to r) Joe Ely, Butch Hancock, and Jimmie Dale Gilmore—the Flatlanders

With his sometime band-mates in the Flatlanders (a whole ‘nother story, that), Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Butch Hancock, he has recorded four albums consisting mostly of their combined catalogue. He also earned a Grammy for his work with the super group, Los Super Seven, featuring himself, Freddy Fender, Rick Trevino, and the members of Los Lobos (Oglesby 112). On his own, Ely has recorded twenty-five solo albums since 1977. Rick Koster calls him the “consummate road dog” (110). Ely never stops touring, writing, performing, and traveling, and he has written a book about his life on the road, *Bonfire of Roadmaps*, an engaging mélange of imagery and poetry from his travels. His is a big, big life, but his roots in Texas still form the basis for most of his songwriting.

In the early seventies, Fat Dawg’s was a club across the street from the Texas Tech University campus where some of the best of the Lubbock singer/songwriters cut their teeth. I first saw Joe Ely there on the stage in the dark, smoky back room. At that time, Ely performed solo, digging deep into his catalogue of old Bob Wills and Hank Williams songs and rarely doing

his own material. He wore a tall, black Hoss Cartwright-type cowboy hat in those days, pulled low over his face and shadowing it from the spotlight. He was quiet and shy, stood still while performing, and rarely spoke between songs. A few years later, some friends and I drove out to Soap Creek Saloon in Austin to see him. We had heard he had an ass-kicking band now. What a band! What a night! Jesse Taylor was screaming on lead guitar, Lloyd Maines (father of Natalie of Dixie Chick fame) was sliding away on steel, John Markham was smacking the drums, Joe Sublett was wailing on sax, and a peripatetic Joe Ely was all over the stage as he broke into his spirited rocker, “Fingernails.” The question on everyone’s mind was, “What the hell’s going on with Joe? Did he snort the whole band’s stash?” I think, in retrospect, Joe Ely was Springsteen a year or two before Springsteen was.

“Honky Tonk Masquerade” is one of Joe’s songs from that era. The song is slower than “Fingernails” and, on its surface, full of bar-room swagger, but, on closer inspection, it’s a subtle, yet complex story of honky tonk socio-politics: a guy in a joint noticing a girl trying to pretend that she’s happy with her man and sensing a wordless connection between himself and the girl that he may or may not eventually act on. I was surprised on re-reading the lyrics that there were no images of glowing neon signs, no frost on the side of a beer, no twinkling belt buckles or a scuffed wooden floor. I swear I thought they were in there. Oh well, something about this song makes your mind fill in all those blanks. Poetic, no?

Honky Tonk Masquerade
– from the album *Honky Tonk Masquerade* (1978)

You sure look fine tonight, in the beer sign light.
Why did you seem surprised when I saw through your disguise?
All your friends were there, and no one had a care
They all just looked away in this Honky Tonk Masquerade.

You should have known I knew all along.

That I could see through you right or wrong
I didn't need a clue.
I didn't even have to ask,
You saw your own reflection in the glass.

I'd like to see you home, but I know you're not alone
You seem to fit right in, as you tell me where you've been
You say there's not that much to tell but I know you oh too well
Your eyes give you away in this Honky Tonk Masquerade.

You should have known I knew all along.
That I could see through you right or wrong.
I didn't need a clue.
I didn't even have to ask,
You saw your own reflection in the glass.

You sure look fine tonight, they're turning out the lights
Why did you hold my sleeve when I said I had to leave?
I hoped it never showed, but that's the way it goes
As the lights begin to fade on this Honky Tonk Masquerade.



Figure 15: Joe Ely

For some reason, I heard Ramblin' Jack Elliott's version of Ely's "Me and Billy the Kid" before I heard Joe's version. They're both good, but Jack's rendering is a folk song, while Joe's is a boot-thumpin' rocker. The song works well either way. It's a fantasy mini-western, complete with gunplay, a bad hombre, a love-torn senorita, a robbery, and sweet, sweet revenge.

As in “Honky Tonk Masquerade,” Ely displays his talent for rendering complex thoughts, motives, and imagery using simple language to create a story that plays out in the listener’s mind, a sort of free-wheeling cowboy flash fiction piece. His deft touch with a detail is masterful in that regard. Pay attention to the pocket watch.

Me and Billy the Kid
– from the album *Lord of the Highway* (1987)

Me and Billy the Kid never got along
I didn't like the way he cocked his hat
And he wore his gun all wrong.
We had the same girlfriend
And he never forgot it
She had a cute little Chihuahua
Until one day he up and shot it
He rode the hard country down the New Mexico line
He had a silver pocket watch that he never did wind.
He crippled the piano player
For playin' his favorite song
No, me and Billy the Kid never got along

Me and Billy the Kid never got along
I didn't like the way he parted his hair
And he wore his gun all wrong
He was bad to the bone
All hopped up on speed.
I would've left him alone
If it wasn't for that Senorita
He gave her silver and he paid her hotel bill
But it was me she loved and she said she always will.
I'd always go and see her
When Billy was gone
Yeah, me and Billy the Kid never got along

Me and Billy the Kid never got along
I didn't like the way he tied his shoes
And he wore his gun all wrong
One day I said to Billy
"I've got this foolproof scheme"
We'll rob Wells Fargo
"It's bustin' at the seams."
I admit that I framed him but I don't feel bad
Cause the way I was livin' was drivin' me mad

Billy reached for his gun
But his gun was on wrong
Yeah, me and Billy the Kid never got along

Me and Billy the Kid never got along
But I did like the way he swayed in the wind
While I played him his favorite song
Now my baby sings harmony with me
To "La Cucaracha"
She winds her silver pocket watch
And pets her new Chihuahua
I moved in to the Hotel and got a room with a shower
We lay and listen to that watch tick hour after hour
Outside I hear the wind
Blowin' oh so strong
Me and Billy the Kid never got along

The Panhandle is a tabletop-flat expanse of cotton fields with little relief from the horizon. You don't forget it. Joe sure didn't. His song, "All That You Need" is a story of that land and of the people who stubbornly work it. As a tale of the land and the whims of nature (and dry land farming is wholly dependent on those whims), the song is poignant. As a commentary on the socio-political aspects of living from the land, it is intense. As each verse unfolds, we see a family trying to hold on to the two things they value: their land and each other. As they lose their grip on both and end up scattered in town, each working odd jobs and trying to stay off welfare, the narrator-son ends up in jail. In the final verse, he returns to the land, in his dream of a better life, if not in reality. On the subject matter chart, I might just as easily have slotted this one into the social commentary column.

All That You Need
– from the album *Streets of Sin* (2003)

I been workin' on the farm
Just me and my brother Jack
Choppin' a sea of cotton
Till I thought I'd break my back
Everything changed when my daddy got hurt
Our lives were so connected

To that brown ole flatland dirt

When the government man from Austin
Come sniffin' around our land
Askin' a bunch of questions
That we did not understand
There's more to farming cotton
Than just tending to your seed
The ones who set the policy
Don't give a damn about our needs

Sow the seed in the ground below
Fall to your knees and pray real slow
That rain will come and kiss the seed
And bless you with all that you need

Mama says to Jackie
Would she bring the car around?
She's wearing her finest dress
That's how I know she's goin' to town
I wish I'd never seen that letter
That I found there in her room
They're selling the farm on the Courthouse step
This Saturday afternoon

Me and Jack moved into town
To a shack by the train depot
Jack got a job as a bouncer
At a bar on Paradise Row
Mama got a job in the cotton gin
Grading cotton by the bale
She cried when a trailer full of cotton come in
From the farm we had to sell

Sow the seed in the ground below
Fall to your knees and pray real slow
That rain will come and kiss the seed
And bless you with all that you need

Me, I ended up in jail
Sick of livin' on welfare
And the hardest thing ever happened to me
Is when Mama come to visit me there
Don't you worry your pretty little head
I said as I buttoned my shirt
When I get out of this Iron Hotel

I'm goin' back to that dry-land dirt

For some it's just a livin'
But for us it's our whole life
If it kills me I'm gonna rake that dirt
And make a livin' out of toil and strife
The ways of the cities makes no sense
Strapped to dependency
I'd rather be sweatin' 'neath a clear blue sky
Plantin' cotton with my family

Sow the seed in the ground below
Fall to your knees and pray real slow
That rain will come and kiss the seed
And bless you with all that you need

Of his gift for telling stories through verse, Joe says humbly, “Maybe I just read too many Cormac McCarthy books” (Hudson *Telling* 110). Like his long-time friend and sometime band-mate, Butch Hancock, Joe is a reader, and his favorite poet is Federico Garcia Lorca. As for how he hears the music and gets it to the stage and studio, he says, “I have all the instruments in the band, everything from accordion to steel to saxophone. I like to use the textures of different instruments to do the song like I feel it should be” (111). Usually using, in what is now Texas tradition, mostly his touring band members for recording as well as performing, Joe’s albums have become more refined, but never less authentic, over the years. The road has taught him well.

That long ago first road trip happened when he and friend and eventual co-writer, Eddie Beethoven, decided over a cup of coffee to tear outta Lubbock by means of thumb and rail just to see what they could see. He says he had to know “where these things came from that I was interested in; Things like how songs got written, and why Henry Miller wrote about New York City and about Paris.” Since then he has toured the world, always watching, thinking, learning, writing. But he still remembers the Panhandle, and he still feels the need for “that process of

tearing away from the mother ship and at the same time being attracted back there for some insane kind of reason.” Joe Ely may be a long way from the tiny stage in the Lubbock beer joint where I first heard him play, but it seems he still carries a little piece of it around inside him.

The Last of the Hardcore Troubadours: Steve Earle

I don't believe that songwriting has to be profound, but I do believe that it's truly a crime for you to go out of your way for it not to be.

--Steve Earle

ZZ Top played proms and shit where I grew up...so did the Thirteenth Floor Elevators.

--Steve Earle

As far as we know, there is no cure for being a Texan.

--Steve Earle

Due to his outspoken activism, controversial (in the music business) political stances, and his almost incomparable songwriting and outstanding musical and production skills, there is a great deal of scholarship on Steve Earle. Not bad for a Texas boy who ran away from home at sixteen, did time for drugs and weapons possession, married and divorced seven times, and struggled for years in the music business before becoming a genuine break-out country music star via his first album, *Guitar Town*, at the age of thirty-one. Steve Earle has had it all and lost it all at various times, but most importantly, he has always been willing to risk it all in a given moment.



Figure 16: Steve Earle in the Nashville Days

In 2002, on the heels of the Al Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, he wrote and recorded a song told from the perspective of John Walker Lindh, the young American who fought alongside the Taliban. Earle’s friend Elvis Costello told him he was “fucking crazy” for even thinking about writing that song (*Just*), but the crazier part may have been Earle’s willingness to go on television and radio networks to talk about the song, “John Walker’s Blues.” Steve Earle is a rarity who scares the establishment music industry and fascinates some academics: a smart, irreverent guy with rock solid principles and the artistic chops to back them up.

Earle explained his song and the principles behind it in a CNN interview by saying, “Fundamentalism, as practiced by the Taliban, is the enemy of real thought, and religion, too.” His foremost concern was that American culture “didn’t impress [Walker Lindh], so he went looking for something to believe in,” and that is something Americans should be thinking about. As the father of a son of similar age to John Walker Lindh, Earle couldn’t help but see him as a dissatisfied, impressionable boy—someone else’s son. The reaction from the corporate music industry, an industry with close ties to television and radio, was almost universal ridicule and

official banning of his music from many Top 40 radio networks and major music retailers like Walmart. For most performers, such banishment alone would have been a career-ender, but Earle has managed to endure. Scholar Anthony Murphy says of Earle that his “politically and culturally dissonant songs are reconstituted in the public sphere into vehicles of transformative intercultural communication within American culture, between the cultural strata imposed through distribution of power in contemporary America” (138). No shit. Steve Earle writes provocative songs, and his songs get people of all kinds thinking and talking or, in the case of Fox News celebrity anchors and Top 40 country radio announcers, sputtering and fuming.

Only slightly less controversial, especially with country music audiences, is Earle’s stance against the death penalty, about which he writes poignant songs with interesting twists of perspective. As a poet and performer, Earle is close to his finest work here, and his fine-tuned artistry takes the songs far beyond the realm of the merely provocative. “Ellis Unit 1,” written from the perspective of a former soldier, recently returned from the Middle East, who becomes a prison guard assigned to the infamous Texas unit where executions take place, is a case in point. There may never have been a clearer argument, in song or otherwise, that no one is untouched by capital punishment. Critic Michael Corcoran says of the song that was used in the soundtrack to the film *Dead Man Walking* that “Springsteen got the title track...but Earle buried him with this dark exploration of life in a prison town” (158). Scholar Roxanne Harde traces the narrator’s transition “from soldier to executioner” that “shows him to be just another pawn in a judicial system that is both political tactic and social function” (198).

“Ellis Unit 1”

--from the album *Dead Man Walking* (soundtrack) (1996)

I was fresh out of the service
It was back in '82

I raised some Cain when I come back to town
I left to be all I could be
Come home without a clue
Now, I married Dawn and had to settle down

So I hired on at the prison
Guess I always knew I would
Just like my dad and both my uncles done
And I worked on every cell block
Now, things're goin' good
But then they transferred me to Ellis Unit One

Swing low
Swing low
Swing low and carry me home

Well, my daddy used to talk about them long nights at the walls
And how they used to strap 'em in the chair
The kids down from the college and they'd bring their beer 'n all
'N when the lights went out, a cheer rose in the air

Well, folks just got too civilized
Sparky's gatherin' dust
'Cause no one wants to touch a smokin' gun
And since they got the injection
They don't mind as much, I guess
They just put 'em down at Ellis Unit One
Swing low
Swing low
Swing low and carry me home

Well, I've seen 'em fight like lions, boys
I've seen 'em go like lambs
And I've helped to drag 'em when they could not stand
And I've heard their mamas cryin' when they heard that big door slam
And I've seen the victim's family holdin' hands

Last night I dreamed that I woke up with straps across my chest
And something cold and black pullin' through my lungs
'N even Jesus couldn't save me though I know he did his best
But he don't live on Ellis Unit One

Swing low
Swing low
Swing low and carry me home

Ellis Unit 1 is located in the prison town of Huntsville, Texas, which also happens to be a college town. My uncle attended Sam Houston State College there in the 1960s, and I remember him talking about how some of the students would attend the execution-inspired beer busts outside the walls and wait for the lights to dim. “Sparky,” of course, is the nickname for the electric chair at Ellis Unit 1, retired in 1982 when Texas became the first state to execute via lethal injection. Earle became friends with a man on death row in Huntsville, a fellow named Jonathan Noble with whom he corresponded by letter for a number of years. Earle takes his death penalty activism seriously, and getting to know people on death row is a significant component of that activism. At Noble’s request, Earle attended Noble’s execution. In response to the experience, Earle wrote the following song.

Over Yonder

--from the album *Transcendental Blues* (2000)

The warden said he'd mail my letter
The chaplain's waitin' by the door
Tonight we'll cross the yard together
Then they can't hurt me anymore

I am going over yonder
Where no ghost can follow me
There's another place beyond here
Where I'll be free I believe

Give my radio to Johnson
Thibodeaux can have my fan
Send my Bible home to Mama
Call her every now and then

I suppose I got it comin'
I can't ever pay enough
All my rippin' and a runnin'
I hurt everyone I loved

The world'll turn around without me
The sun'll come up in the east

Shinin' down on all of them that hate me
I hope my goin' brings 'em peace

Cuz I am going over yonder
Where no ghost can follow me
There's another place beyond here
Where I'll be free I believe

Steve Earle often denies being a political songwriter by proclaiming, “I’ve written far more songs about girls than I ever did about politics.” That’s true. His mass of work is deep and eclectic but still true to his Texas roots. Steve Earle and I are only a few months apart in age, and, yeah, my high school prom committee damned near hired ZZ Top. His Texas music is my Texas music. When Earle ran away from home at sixteen, he ended up in Houston, bumming and busking and hanging out with Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark and Lightnin’ Hopkins and Mance Lipscomb at The Old Quarter on Old Market Square—a few doors from La Bastille where I was soaking up jazz and blues and even the Thirteenth Floor Elevators. It was hard to avoid the various musical genres and influences in this fertile atmosphere, but Earle went much further. He fanatically sought them out and soaked them up.

In spite of the fact that *Guitar Town*, his first album, rocketed to number one on the Country Music Chart—in spite of the subsequent success of his second and third albums, *Exit 0* and *Copperhead Road* on country charts—Earle never was solely a country artist. “I convinced myself that I could make country albums that were art *and* get on the charts,” he says of this early work (Blickenstaff). He did, and he earned critical acclaim, mostly by bringing his eclectic Texas musical influences into the mix and giving the country music of the early eighties a timely injection of honky tonk and blues. He continues to stretch artistically, as the rich roots of his Texas influences keep inspiring him to try new things, explore new veins.



Figure 17: Steve Earle today

In recent years, Earle has been writing prose, penning a short story collection, *Doghouse Roses* (2002), a novel, *I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive* (2012), various essays on social éeconcerns and musicology, and an introduction to the 2009 Penguin Classic edition of James Agee's *A Death in the Family*. He has also acted in two David Simon television series, *The Wire*, set in Boston, and *Tremé*, set in post-Katrina New Orleans. During the production of *Tremé*, Simon tapped Earle to write some songs that his character, Harley, a street musician, would have written. Among the contributions was "This City," an anthem to the resilience of New Orleans. Earle knew that he needed to record this one for his new album and called producer T Bone Burnett back in Texas to help him get it recorded as soon as possible. Burnett immediately brought in New Orleans composer and arranger Allen Toussaint to write the charts. The result is a song soaked in New Orleans brass and laden with grace.

This City

--from the album *I'll Never Get Out of The World Alive* (2011)

This city won't wash away
This city won't ever drown
Blood in the water and hell to pay
Sky tear open and pain rain down

Doesn't matter 'cause come what may
I ain't ever gonna leave this town
This city won't wash away
This city won't ever drown

Ain't the river or the wind to blame
Everybody around here knows
Nothin' holdin' back Ponchartrain
Except for a prayer and a promise's ghost

We just carry on diggin' our graves
In solid marble above the ground
Maybe our bones'll wash away
But this city won't ever drown

This city won't ever die
Just as long as her heart beats strong
Like a second line steppin' high
Raisin' hell as we roll along

Gentilly to the Vieux Carre
Lower Nine, Central City, Uptown
Singin' Jacamo fee-nah-nay
This city won't ever drown

Doesn't matter cause there ain't no way
I'm ever gonna leave this town
This city won't wash away
This city won't ever drown

Earle told a recent audience that, as part of his latest divorce, he was required to catalogue his entire body of work, and as a result, he had come to realize he'd written "a helluva lot of good songs." The revelation seemed to spark his own thoughts about the roots of his music. The divorce also inspired his first blues album, and as he also said from the stage, "If you're from Texas, and you set out to make a blues record, the bar is already set about as high as it can be." He points out there are only two kinds of shuffle ever invented, the one from Chicago and the one from Texas. That Texas shuffle he's speaking about is one of the cornerstones of honky tonk. In his newest album, *Terraplane*, you can hear that shuffle and many other blues influences from Earle's cognitive archive. Mance is in there, and Lightnin', too, along with a touch of the east Texas country drink joints and the Houston eastside clubs where his guitarist, the ultra-

talented Chris Matthews, cut his teeth. In the liner notes, Earle writes, “Hell, everyone’s sick of all my fucking happy songs, anyway.” But there was a strain of the Texas country blues that was happy, actually, and Earle’s playful song “Ain’t Nobody’s Daddy Now” is one of those. This is a jaunty acoustic celebration and a channeling of another time in the fine tradition of the Texas country blues—chockful of delicious simile and metaphor—a folk poem.

“Ain’t Nobody’s Daddy Now”
--from the album *Terraplane* (2015)

Standing on the corner
Bleaker 8th or 9th
Money in my pocket
And women on my mind

I'm free
Can't nobody tie me down
Nothing ever worries me
Ain't nobody's daddy now

Here I say the women
Are the very finest kind
Clacking on their high heels
Like an engine down the line

(Chorus)
I'm free
Can't nobody tie me down
Nothing ever worries me
I ain't nobody's daddy now

I usually have a woman
Who worry me to death
Hammers in my pocket
And a fool was on my neck

(Chorus)

Got a baby on the east side
Honey on the west
Got a woman uptown
But my downtown gal's the best

She's gone
And I'm free
Can't nobody tie me down
Nothing ever worries me
Ain't nobody's daddy now

Steve Earle was born in the faraway state of Virginia because his father, an air traffic controller, was stationed there at the time. His grandparents were so discomforted by the non-Texas arrival of the newest Earle that they sent a flask of back-home dirt from the family farm to his parents. Earle's mom and dad rubbed the bottoms of the newborn's feet with the soil, an improvised baptism into Texan-hood. He is right; there is no cure for us Texans. We are an obsessed lot, but Earle and many other thinking Texans like journalist Molly Ivins, former Governor Ann Richards, relentless activist Jim Hightower, and I, if I may be allowed to include myself in such rare company, have figured how to love our home state while still questioning its common assumptions and values. As has already been shown, Earle does the same regarding America. He often reminds his audiences that "it is never unpatriotic to question *anything* in a fucking democracy."

Earle's biographer, David McGee, calls "Johnny Come Lately" from the *Copperhead Road* album "an amazing song. It wraps up 30-plus years of American history in three and a half minutes." Another dramatic monologue, the song covers the American presence in Second World War England from the point of view of an airman running raids over Europe. In the last verse, the perspective shifts, and the voice is that of the airman's grandson returning from another war, another time. Although Earle was initially pegged as a country singer, and he calls himself a folksinger, I've mostly thought of him as an ass-kicking roots rocker. "Johnny Come Lately" is stellar evidence, and it comes with a bonus, a raucous Irish punk influence by way of the Pogues, who sat in as the backing band on the London recording session.

By all accounts, the session was over-the-top rowdy, both the Pogues and Steve Earle renowned for their drinking, drugging, and generally out of control behavior during those days. But all were serious musicians and dedicated to their art. They were determined to lay down a sound, a *feel*, that Earle had about the Irish thread in Texas folk music. So according to Phillip Chevron, guitarist and singer-songwriter for the Pogues, “the band was playing live” with notorious Pogue front-man Shane MacGowan “experimenting on electric banjo” and Spider Stacy on tin whistle (McGee 139). Once Earle felt they had it, the whole thing happened fast. One take. The result is brilliant in terms of both lyrics and sound. Brilliant.

Johnny Come Lately
--from the album *Copperhead Road* (1988)

I'm an American, boys, and I've come a long way
I was born and bred in the USA
So listen up close, I've got something to say
Boys, I'm buying this round
Well it took a little while but we're in this fight
And we ain't going home 'til we've done what's right
We're gonna drink Camden Town dry tonight
If I have to spend my last pound

When I first got to London it was pourin' down rain
Met a little girl in the field canteen
Painted her name on the nose of my plane
Six more missions I'm gone
Well I asked if I could stay and she said that I might
Then the warden came around yelling "shut out the lights"
Death rainin' out of the London night
We made love 'til dawn

But when Johnny Come Lately comes marching home
With a chest full of medals and a G.I. loan
They'll be waitin' at the station down in San Antone
When Johnny comes marching home

MY P-47 is a pretty good ship
And she took a round coming 'cross the Channel last trip
I was thinking 'bout my baby and letting her rip
Always got me through so far

Well they can ship me all over this great big world
But I'll never find nothing like my North End girl
taking her home with me one day, sir
Soon as we win this war

But when Johnny Come Lately comes marching home
With a chest full of medals and a G.I. loan
They'll be waitin' at the station down in San Antone
When Johnny comes marching home

Now my granddaddy sang me this song
Told me about London when the Blitz was on
How he married Grandma and brought her back home
A hero throughout his land
Now I'm standing on a runway in San Diego
A couple Purple Hearts and I move a little slow
There's nobody here, maybe nobody knows
About a place called Vietnam

Since Steve Earle is so insistent that he wrote a lot of songs about girls, I would be remiss in leaving out an example. “The Galway Girl,” another of Earle’s Irish-influenced songs, fits the bill. Upon first hearing this song, most people, including Irish folks, assume this is a traditional Irish folk song—unaware that it was written by a bloke from Texas not so long ago. An “Irish” band plays the song at a club in the movie *P.S. I Love You*. Earle wrote it during a period when he was living in Galway and sitting in on trad sessions. Although Earle won’t identify the lady in question, his Irish recording partner Sharon Shannon insists that the Galway girl is a real person whom she knows, that there was no affair, and it was, for Earle, a case of “unrequited love” (*Irish*).

The Galway Girl
--from the album *Transcendental Blues* (2000)

Well, I took a stroll on the old long walk
Of a day -I-ay-I-ay
I met a little girl and we stopped to talk
Of a fine soft day -I-ay-I-ay
And I ask you, friend, what's a fella to do
'Cause her hair was black and her eyes were blue

And I knew right then I'd be takin' a whirl
'Round the Salthill Prom with a Galway girl

We were halfway there when the rain came down
Of a day -I-ay-I-ay
And she asked me up to her flat downtown
Of a fine soft day -I-ay-I-ay
And I ask you, friend, what's a fella to do
'Cause her hair was black and her eyes were blue
So I took her hand and I gave her a twirl
And I lost my heart to a Galway girl

When I woke up I was all alone
With a broken heart and a ticket home
And I ask you now, tell me what would you do
If her hair was black and her eyes were blue
I've traveled around I've been all over this world
Boys, I ain't never seen nothin' like a Galway girl

The locations within the lyrics are all actual places in Galway, and this mini-memoir appears to be accurate in terms of the actual events as they occurred. “The Galway Girl” remains popular in Ireland where it has been covered by a number of traditional musicians—an outsized case of the boomerang effect of a good song in which Irish rhythms and melodic influences crossed the Atlantic and made their way to Texas and back home again.

I would call Steve Earle an anomaly in the music business, and he is that, but such is a common tale in the world of the Texas singer-songwriter. While Earle has never re-achieved the phenomenal sales of *Guitar Town* and *Copperhead Road* from the eighties, he always knew that he wasn't cut out for the committee-driven music of Nashville anyway. He showed 'em a thing or two back in the day, as had Willie and Waylon before him, but he is foremost, as he says, a folk singer. With that job come certain responsibilities to his fans, his roots, and his conscience. He says his next record will be a country one, “what the record after *Guitar Town* might have been” if he hadn't sailed in a different direction. “The next record,” he says, “will sound closer to Waylon's *Honky Tonk Heroes* than it will anything else.”

A Little Bitta Latin and a Whole Lotta Rock ‘n’ Roll: Alejandro Escovedo

Alejandro Escovedo’s parents were born in Mexico, but he was born in San Antonio. His is a very musical family who have made many contributions to American music. His uncle, Pete Escovedo, has lead the Latin band Azteca and played percussion in Carlos Santana’s band off and on over the years. His niece Sheila E has played percussion for Prince, George Duke, Gloria Estefan, Beyonce, and Kanye West and was a solo artist with a bonafide major hit album, *The Glamorous Life*, in 1984. But Alejandro Escovedo avows that he was a rock and roller from adolescence. Before he launched his solo career, he did stints with the Nuns, Rank and File, and The True Believers. Since then, Alejandro has based himself in Austin and released a dozen albums that range in spirit from hard-edged rock and punk to soulful ballads and explorations of his Latin roots and family themes.



Figure 18: Alejandro Escovedo

As for the song “Chelsea Hotel ’78,” it is straight from his own life experiences. He was living in the Chelsea Hotel in Manhattan in 1978 in the room next door to British punker Sid Vicious, of the Sex Pistols, and his American girlfriend, Nancy Spungen. Escovedo was there on the night that Nancy died of a stab wound under mysterious circumstances. “Chelsea Hotel ‘78”

is an ode to the exhilaration as well as the tragedy of a particular moment in rock history, and it took him thirty years after the fact to write the song. It is, at once, a celebration and a mourning of punk sensibilities—post-modern ambiguity about a life and a lifestyle. In performance, the crowd often joins Escovedo in singing the lines: It makes no sense/and it makes perfect sense. In true punk fashion, this world makes no sense in the first place, and, therefore, doing nonsensical things is an apt response. The crowd also joins in on the fadeout lines: So we all moved out/and we all moved on.

Chelsea Hotel '78
– from the album *Real Animal* (2008)

I lived in the Chelsea once on 7th and 23rd
We came to live inside the myth of everything we heard;
The poets on their barstools, they just loved it when it rained,
They comb their hair in the mirror and grow addicted to the pain.

And it makes no sense
And it makes perfect sense;
And it makes no sense
And it makes perfect sense.

I saw Neon Leon, Spider and the boys
Just before the cops arrived and took off with the noise;
It was nothing special, just another bar,
The Max's Kansas City life makes everyone a star.

And it makes no sense
And it makes perfect sense;
And it makes no sense
And it makes perfect sense.

Nancy called us to her room, said "Come and help with Sid."
We went down and looked around, the dealer let us in;
We thought he was hysterical, but not that he was a joke;
Don't know if he did what he said he did, nobody really knows.

I stood out on the sidewalk when they busted through the door
And watched that Tito's jacket caught and had him by his arm,
You know the show of that thing nobody knows for sure
Because they found Nancy in her black underwear dead on the bathroom floor.

And it makes no sense
And it makes perfect sense;
And it makes no sense
And it makes perfect sense.

I lived in the Chelsea once on 7th and 23rd
We came to live inside the myth of everything we heard
The poets on their barstools, they just loved it when it rained
They comb their hair in the mirror and grow addicted to the pain.

And it makes no sense
And it makes perfect sense;
And it makes no sense
And it makes perfect sense.

So we all moved out
And we all moved on;
So we all moved out
And we all moved on
And on and on

When Alejandro Escovedo releases a new album or launches a new tour, you never know what you'll hear. He constantly evolves, explores new formats and traditions, and consistently surprises. It's difficult to believe that the same man who wrote "Chelsea Hotel '78" also wrote "The Ballad of the Sun and the Moon." A return to Escovedo's Latin roots and a tribute to his Mexican heritage, "The Ballad of the Sun and the Moon" is a tone poem in the classical sense of the term. There is mystery in the lyrics that speaks to the myriad battles fought on Mexican soil (now Texas soil) rather than to any specific battle. The fighting goes on as the sun and the moon rise and the mountains, the land, echo those battles across time and space. Alejandro sometimes utilizes strings in his compositions as he does here to beautiful effect. The song is a mini-symphony of imagery and music and displays his remarkable range of styles and talent. We mourn for the lost sister and the senselessness of battle. As the verses intone that the battles come

and go, but the earth remains, this remarkable little song explores some of the same territory as does Carl Sandburg in his poem “Grass.” “The Ballad of the Sun and the Moon” is equally stirring and condemning, but it is, perhaps, even more accessible and universal.

Ballad of the Sun and the Moon
– from the album *Thirteen Years* (1994)

Day started out like any other day
The sun rising, there was always the sun
The mountains and the echoes of the voices
Where’d they go, they fall
Sons of the sun
That’s the ballad of the sun and the moon

Can you hear the cannon and the fighting
Can you feel the soldiers when they’re marching
They came they took my sister away
They came and they took her away
Sons of the sun
That’s the ballad of the sun and the moon

Night started out like any other night
The moon rising, there was always the moon
The mountains and the echoes of the voices
Where’d they go, they fall
Sons of the sun
That’s the ballad of the sun and the moon
That’s the ballad of the sun and the moon

“The Ladder” was inspired by a street performer in Santa Monica, California where Escovedo lived for a while. In this song we see images of California, Mexico, and Texas intertwined with images of the street performer climbing a ladder that seems to stand on its own. According to Escovedo, he and his wife used to watch this performer on their walks along the oceanfront as the ladder-climber would reach the top and unfold two cobras gracefully coiling around each other in the air above. The instrumentation for this slow, dreamlike song is *puro Mexico*: accordion, guitar, viola, and a barely audible *bajo sexto* thump on first and third beats—simple.

Mexican songs don't often translate well for the American ear from Spanish to English, and the reasons are mostly cultural. In a Mexican song, one can get away with a drama, emotionalism, and sentimentality that Americans usually shrink from. Somehow, in "The Ladder," with its slow, drawn-out pacing that allows the listener to dwell on each word and image, Escovedo manages to infuse this lovely song with a Mexican sensibility that works for the American ear. For an English-only speaker, listening to this song is probably the closest thing I know to fully experiencing the Mexican *canción*.

"The Ladder"

--from the album *Boxing Mirror* (2006)

I'd climb a ladder just to see you
I have no eyes but I can feel
Two snakes entwine so I can be you
This ladder climbs from me to you

La Bufadora will explode soon
In liquid splendor sculptured trees
Amongst the oaks the shapes are shifting
A shift to meld you into me

Let's sleep away the pain we suffer
The medicine is in our dreams
Fly away like Caracaras
This ladder climbs from me to you

La Bufadora is a marine geyser in Baja California, Mexico, and caracaras are a type of falcon that English-speaking Texans call Mexican Eagles. The only places where they venture in the U.S. are the southern parts of California, Arizona, Florida, and Texas, where Escovedo probably first saw it as a child as did I. They are large, graceful and striking black and white birds who

look as if they are dressed for a formal, impossible not to notice, especially as they fly flashing dark and light. Caracaras are monogamous. They fly in pairs.

I own every album Alejandro Escovedo has recorded, each one a perfect mingling of musical styles, each song rendered in the idiom and music that best expresses its message. I vowed to a friend once that I intended to play Escovedo's music for everyone I knew until they all began to appreciate his talent. Apparently, playing his music numerous times at home had an effect on my oldest son, Miguel. He became a fan, and we bonded over this music. Some of my happiest memories of Miguel are the two of us on long road trips or in the kitchen cooking while a hundred Alejandro Escovedo songs play one after the other, the mood zinging from punk to Latin to swing to blues to jazz to rock to folk. Depending on the tune, we may dance or rock out or just nod in time. Sometimes, we stop what we're doing just to listen—to take in the beauty.

Keepin' It Real Country: Dale Watson

Dale Watson keeps it closer to the roots than any country artist I can name. He engages in very little genre-hopping and is so incensed by what he thinks is the demise of country music at the hands of those who see it only as a commodity that he wrote a song about it called "The Nashville Rash." Before he settled in Austin a number of years ago where he, like so many before him, found the venues, appreciative audiences, and like-minded musicians he was seeking, he did some time in California picking up strains of the Bakersfield sound. He also, like so many before him, tried his hand in Nashville as a tunesmith-for-hire but soon grew tired of the scene. As Rick Koster says, Dale has a "no-horseshit reverence for C & W history and a penchant for writing genuine tunes" (78).



Figure 19: Dale Watson

Although based in Austin, he lives on the road most of the time because he loves to play music, and the interaction between musician and audience is everything to him. In a reverse of the norm for the business and like many of the Texas singer/songwriters, Watson seems to record in order to support his road habit as opposed to touring to support music sales. He can read a crowd and work it like a medicine show salesman, but he's not a huckster. He's a believer. His devotion to pure country music and the joy of live performance is a matter of unshakable faith. Perhaps that's why his recordings sometimes lack the fire and the flavor of his personal appearances, but not by much.

In 2006, I was booking a charity gig for the Sierra Club in Austin. My advisor, Clifford Antone, the famed owner of Antone's blues club, urged me to book Watson. I went out to Ginny's Little Longhorn Saloon on the north side of town that weekend to see just why Clifford, a devotee of the blues, would be so taken with a pure country singer/songwriter. It didn't take long to figure out. The band was tight, the music was original and refreshingly authentic, and the crowd was fired up—dancing to some great country songs delivered in Watson's gorgeous, smooth baritone. A few days later, I chatted with Watson's manager on the phone to set up the

gig and negotiate a greatly-reduced fee for the charity. In passing, I mentioned that I really liked Dale Watson's band, the Lone Stars, and I particularly liked his drummer. "Which one?" the manager asked. "He goes through several of them a year—just wears 'em out. His drummers can't keep up with his schedule."

Watson's passion for the endangered species known as authentic country music is inspiring. He declares a "mandatory Merle Haggard moment" at least once per set, and the band breaks into "Big City" or "Workin' Man Blues" or "That's the Way Love Goes." One night during the middle set of a performance at The Railroad Blues club in Alpine, Texas, he noticed that a lot of older folks had shown up. He trashed the set list and asked for requests "as old as y'all can think of." Watson and his Lone Stars knew 'em all: Lefty Frizell's "Always Late," Johnny Bush's "Green Snakes on the Ceiling," and, of course, Merle Haggard's "Silver Wings." But Watson isn't a cover guy, and, given his massive catalogue, he doesn't need to be. He was giving the older members of the crowd a treat and the younger members an education—just as he does his listeners in "Nashville Rash."

"Nashville Rash"

--from the album *Live in London, England* (2002)

Help me Merle, I'm breakin' out in a Nashville rash
Its a-lookin' like I'm fallin' in the cracks
I'm too country now for country, just like Johnny Cash
Help me Merle, Im breakin out in a Nashville rash

Shoulda known it when they closed the Opry down
Things are bound to change in that town
You can't grow when you rip the roots out of the ground
Looks like that Nashville rash is getting round

Ain't it funny how things can really change
Rock and roll back in the 70s are country hits today
Breaks my heart to see my heroes fadin' away
The victims of Nashville rash, its Nashville's way

Help me Merle, I'm breakin' out in a Nashville rash
Its a-looking like I'm fallin' in the cracks
I'm too country now for country, just like Johnny Cash
And Buck Owens and Faron Young and Johnny Bush
And Johnny Paycheck and Charley Pride and Loretta Lynn, Mmmmmmm
Help me Merle, I'm breakin' out in a Nashville rash

Aw good god it's gonna be the death of us

Watson deserves credit for sticking to his vision and for writing one of the most perfect little gems of a country song I've ever heard: "She Don't Care." I played this song once for a friend who is a gifted singer/songwriter from Lubbock, and he, too, was blown away. The song, with its architecture of verse/verse/chorus/verse/verse/chorus with the break at the end, rather than in the middle, is beautifully and uniquely structured from a technical perspective, and it has lines that resonate poetically as well. A silent telephone really can "make a deafening noise." And while you could listen to this song by yourself when you're feeling lonely and lovelorn, it was made for dancing as well—slow, close, and definitely romantic two-step dancing.

She Don't Care
– from the album *Dreamland* (2004)

You don't call
What I'd give if I could hear your voice
But a phone that doesn't ring makes a deafening noise
You don't call

You don't write
If you did I'd read between the lines
Maybe find out what's inside your mind
But you don't write

How long can this go on
How long 'til hope is gone
And can a love this strong
Feel so right and be so wrong

And so I think

Why am I sittin' here on the brink
Of just crying tears enough to sink
And so I think

How long can this go on
How long 'til hope is gone
And can a love this strong
Feel so right and be so wrong

You don't care
If you did, Honey, you'd be right here
It's time I learned sometimes that love ain't fair
And you don't care

You don't call
You don't write
And so I think
You don't care

By the way, I booked Dale Watson as the final act of the seven-act charity event in Austin because I knew that, no matter what else happened that evening, he could get the crowd going for a big finish. He and the Lone Stars were scheduled to careen in off the road about thirty minutes before they were to play. About an hour before their scheduled arrival, my assistant handed me the phone. It was Dale Watson. *Oh, hell*, I thought. *This could only be trouble.*

“Ma’am,” he said, “My fiddle player is sick.”

I didn't say a word as I waited a couple of seconds, stomach twisting into knots, for him to tell me that he was cancelling the gig.

“So, ma’am, I just don't see how I can charge you anything at all. It just don't sound the same without the fiddle player.”

I finally got him to agree to, at least, let me pay the band, and just as expected, the crowd hit the dance floor the moment Dale Watson and his Lone Stars took the stage. Later, I talked to him backstage about how much I love his song, “She Don't Care.” Since then I've requested it from him about a dozen times. He always says yes, and he always calls me, “Darlin'”

Down Deep in the Soul: Ruthie Foster



Figure 20: Ruthie Foster

Ruthie Foster was born in the tiny East Texas town of Gause (population about 500), a segregated community where there was a church on every corner and where Ruthie received a thorough grounding in gospel. Since then, she has branched into blues, jazz, and folk. Ruthie Foster is primarily a performer of song, as befits the extraordinary instrument of her voice—a voice that, through its power and majesty, makes you unintentionally stand up straighter and lift your chin. But Ruthie doesn't just belt out a song. Her performance can be as subtle and nuanced as it is commanding—a measure of her exquisite vocal taste. Two of my favorites of her recordings of other people's songs happen to be from the 1930s: Son House's "People Grinning in Your Face," which Ruthie performs with all the original blues flavor but with some gospel added for spice, and Woodie Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land," which she recasts in shades of the blues. Ruthie Foster could have made a career out of simply recording other people's songs, but she has continued to write her own material and is continuing to grow as a songwriter. Her emphasis is, understandably, more on music than lyrics, but she has written some evocative pieces nonetheless. "Prayin' for Rain" is one of those.

Prayin' for Rain
– from the album *Stages* (2004)

It's just another day where I'm sittin' around waitin' for rain
And there ain't no cure inside for the end of the pain
Well I'm standin' in a line holdin' my time
And it looks the end of the road's coming up again

Try to treat folks right all along my way
Well, some days it just don't matter what you do, what you say
These are times when you've got to shove the line
If you refuse to choose you could lose a lot more than your mind

It's just another day where I'm sittin' around waitin' for rain
And there ain't no cure inside for the end of the pain
Well I'm standin' in a line holdin' my time
And it looks the end of the road's coming up again

I laid my cards on the table of life
It's something I don't do a lot but I did it in spite
Of the dreams of freedom, man they'll talk you into crazy things
If you sell your soul, they'll give you gold records and a brand new name

It's another day I'm sittin' around waitin' for rain
How I wish that it would rain
Well I'm standin' in a line holdin' my time
And it looks the end of the road's coming up again
Said it looks the end of the road's coming up again

If I never ask for anything again, God give me love
This old tired world ain't getting enough
People say we've got a plan on how we've gotta see this land
But when trouble comes knockin' they come out sockin'
With guns in their hand

It's another day I'm sittin' around waitin' for rain
How I wish that it would rain
Well I'm standin' in a line holdin' my time
And it looks the end of the road's coming up again
Said it looks the end of the road's coming up again
And I can tell I'm at the end of the road by the way you've been

The first few times I listened to Ruthie's "Praying for Rain," I was probably driving and not paying much attention. As background music, it seemed a rather generic lament about tough times or some such, but eventually I listened more closely and came to realize that it was actually a very personal song, specific to Ruthie's ups and downs in the music business. The rain imagery

refers to the success (and, yes, possibly even money) that has eluded Ruthie over the years. Still, she has remained steadfast in her insistence on quality material and her refusal to alter her image in order to sell records through sex appeal, and that tenacity has, no doubt, cost her in terms of money and fame. Laying one's "cards on the table of life" and not letting them "talk you into crazy things" must sometimes feel like the less-than-smart route, but that's what people's poets and people's performers like Ruthie Foster do.

The Well-Rounded Wonder: Carolyn Wonderland



Figure 21: Carolyn Wonderland

Carolyn Wonderland rocks. She also wails and moans and scats and screams, shreds a mean guitar (acoustic, electric, lap steel, *and* slide), plays trumpet and keyboards, and writes songs that'll tear your heart out or make you pound the table to the beat. She is a musician's musician, a writer's writer, and a singer's singer. And you have to see her live, because, while I enjoy her albums tremendously, they don't quite capture what she does on stage. It's that old interactive thing again. Plus, other musicians love her so much you never know who will show up at her gigs for the pleasure of performing with her. When the blues clubs close down late at

night on the east side of Austin, some of the old horn players migrate to wherever she's gigging. Singer-songwriters might wander by to play a couple of their songs while Carolyn backs them up on guitar or trumpet. In the oughts, she had a regular Monday night gig at Ruta Maya on South Congress Street in Austin that was famous for these free-wheeling improvisations.

Carolyn's mother was a guitarist and singer, and, living in Houston as a kid, Carolyn was exposed to an amazing variety of music and musicians. In her songs, one can hear blues, jazz, soul, gospel, country, rock, and surf influences. Her voice is often compared to Janis Joplin's, but she decided, as a young musician, not to play that up, focusing instead on doing her own material (Hudson 239). As she says, if you're a girl growing up in Texas, you "pretty much learn that you sings Janis songs in private" because you can't possibly top her. Wonderland finally relented by recording one of Joplin's lesser known songs, "What Good Can Drinkin' Do?," on her 2011 album *Peace Meal*—an ironic, but somehow fitting, choice given Joplin's proclivities and Wonderland's established sobriety. Her 2003 album, *Alcohol and Salvation*, is an homage to and an acknowledgement of her struggles and triumphs.

Wonderland, whose real last name is Bradford (she adopted Wonderland minutes before a performance when she was in high school, and it stuck), leads an eventful life, and even if not many have heard of her, she's okay with that. In 2011, she married former Saturday Night Live comedian and commentator A. Whitney Brown. Officiating at the ceremony was former Monkee and Texas singer-songwriter-producer, Michael Nesmith. Ray Benson, leader of Asleep at the Wheel and Wonderland's sometimes producer, says that Bob Dylan called him up after hearing Wonderland and said, "Hey, have you heard Carolyn Wonderland? She's something else! She should be nationwide!" (Wonderland SXSW) When he finally met Wonderland in person, Dylan

told her he couldn't believe she wasn't famous. Her reply? "I can't believe you've heard of me" (Hudson 240).

Dylan had looked her up partly because he's a fan and partly due to his interest in her song "Annie's Scarlet Letter." The song is social commentary told in the tradition of persona—a Robert Browning-type dramatic monologue about a young woman imprisoned for selling marijuana. The narrator's scarlet letter, a metaphor for her marijuana leaf tattoo, has become, in Carolyn's imagery, Annie's "badge" of tenacity and strength, a symbol of the injustice and wrong-headedness of locking up a young mother for years for what many people believe is a rather minor crime.

Annie's Scarlet Letter
– from the album *Alcohol and Salvation* (2003)

My name is Annie
I'm about your daughter's age
I was happy with my living
Earning minimum wage
Last year I had a baby
Love him with all I got
But the bills they became too much
So I moved a little pot

Now I'm an expatriate
In my home town
And I can't even vote to change the laws
That put me down
I only pray you fare better
I wear my marijuana leaf like a badge
It's my scarlet letter

Time goes slow here
From behind these bars
But I'm not so far away
That I can't hear the cars
Driving down the freeway
Wishing one of them would give

Me that short ride downtown
Where my little boy lives

I don't want you
To feel sorry for me
And I ain't on bended knee
For your sympathy
I knew it wasn't legal
But was it really so wrong
To justify lockin' me up here
For so damned long

Now I'm an expatriate
In my home town
And I can't even vote to change the laws
That put me down
I only pray you fare better
I wear my marijuana leaf like a badge
It's my scarlet letter

Carolyn's blues/jazz song "Feed Me to the Lions" displays her singing, her jazzy piano-playing, and her remarkable gift for songwriting, all in one quick, poignant dose. This portrait of loneliness and despair is apparently difficult even for her, though she hints that it may be her favorite of the songs she has written. She says that it "is a song that I couldn't play live for years. It was just too close to home" (Hudson 238). Is this a young girl escaping an abusive home? A battered wife running from her tormentor? The lines are suggestive rather than definitive, and we are left to imagine all but her agony. We see the narrator's pluckiness and dark humor in spite of her anguish in lines like "there's no one to talk to in the checkout line/Nobody to share in the fun." Carolyn recorded the song simply – just her voice and her piano – and it is stunning in its poetry and pain.

Feed Me to the Lions
– from the album *Alcohol and Salvation*

Ain't no use in me cryin' no more she says
My own tears just make me sicker
So she took twenty dollars and she left for the store

To find faith in the form of cheap liquor
I have only been drunk before you she would joke
Since I was twenty one
But there's no one to talk to in the checkout line
Nobody to share in the fun

She says Lord I don't wanna give up
I just need a reason for tryin'
So hide me away in the jungle now Lord
Before they feed me to the lions
Before they feed me to the lions

And on the drive home she was thinkin'
How he'd finally crossed the line
She walked in and packed up one suitcase quickly
Before she changed her mind
She left him no note, no no nothin'
Placed the bottle between her knees
And at a red light she unscrewed the Thunderbird
To have it ready in case of need

She says Lord I don't wanna give up
I just need a reason for tryin'
So hide me away in the jungle now Lord
Before they feed me to the lions
Before they feed me to the lions

One night on the town, Lord, is just tease enough
The open road is callin'
She buys one more drink with the change in her purse
Gets the rest from the man who calls her darlin'
And thinkin' about him it ain't hard to do
The hard part is keepin' from cryin'
With friends all around she retreats to the car
To sleep off intensions of flyin'

She says Lord I don't wanna give up
I just need a reason for tryin'
So hide me away in the jungle now Lord
Before they feed me to the lions

Among the musicians and songwriters Carolyn lists as influences are her mother, the Grateful Dead, Texas groover Doug Sahm, Townes Van Zandt, ZZ Top, Screamin' Kenny, and Billy Joe Shaver (Hudson 239). Based in Austin for a number of years now, she (who once lived in her

van for two years to support her touring habit) sits on several boards of directors for issues that range from supporting young musicians to supporting returning veterans to sheltering the homeless. During a break from her gig at Ruta Maya one night, I asked her if she would consider performing at a charity function for an environmental organization I was working with at the time. She interrupted me in mid-sentence to say, “Yup. I’m in.” I went on to explain how important the work we were doing was, in the hope that she would reduce her fee, and she interrupted me again, “I said I’m in.” Her fee? Nothing.

Serious, Soulful, and Sardonic: James McMurtry

That’s right. James McMurtry is the son of that other McMurtry, Larry, the one who wrote *Lonesome Dove*, *Terms of Endearment*, *The Last Picture Show*, and many other novels. James was raised by his famous dad in Houston, and, before becoming a performer and songwriter, he worked in restaurants and as a house painter. He also stayed in touch with his working-class relatives in North Texas where Larry was born and raised. I mention all this because James McMurtry has a social conscience that comes through in his song-writing, and his ability to relate to working-class people, despite being raised by a famous and well-to-do father, is apparent in his work. He definitely has his eye on the little guy, and he explores political themes, but that’s not all he writes. He sometimes chaffs at being called a political songwriter, saying, “I don’t mind people listening to my political stuff, but it’s a fraction of what I do” (McMurtry). James is not a fan of Nashville country music which he dismisses by saying, “I can’t tell one country song from another anymore. Since the eighties, it seems like every hit was

pretty much written by the same five guys, or different teams of five guys, and then all the records are recorded by another team of five guys. And then they find the pretty artist that can sell it” (McMurtry).



Figure 22: James McMurtry

Rick Koster calls McMurtry’s songwriting a linking of “short story narrative with folk balladry,” and says that, “his brushfire-dry tunes are three-minute bursts of Flannery O’Connor by way of Bob Dylan” (217). Literary, he is. And, in his song “Choctaw Bingo” we get a slice of Americana that reads like flash fiction. The landmarks mentioned in the song are all real places along an east Oklahoma stretch of interstate, and these roadside images blaze by as a story about a redneck family reunion and the less than conventional family, itself, emerges in blasts of imagism. Hang on for the ride.

Choctaw Bingo
– from the album *Saint Mary of the Woods* (2002)

Strap them kids in
Give 'em a little bit of vodka
In a Cherry Coke
We're goin' to Oklahoma
To the family reunion
For the first time in years
It's up at Uncle Slaton's
Cuz he's gettin' on in years
You know he no longer travels

But he's still pretty spry
Not much on talking
He's just too mean to die
And they'll be
Comin' down from Kansas
And from West Arkansas
It'll be one great big old party
Like you never saw

Uncle Slaton's got his Texan pride
Back in the thickets with his Asian bride
He's got a Airstream trailer and a Holstein cow
Still makes whiskey cuz he still knows how
He plays that Choctaw bingo every Friday night
You know he had to leave Texas
But he won't say why
He owns a quarter section up by Lake Eufaula
Caught a great big ole bluecat on a driftin' jugline
Sells his hardwood timber to the chippin' mill
Cooks that chrystal meth becuz his shine don't sell
He cooks that crystal meth becuz his shine don't sell
You know he likes that money
He don't mind the smell

My cousin Roscoe, Slaton's oldest boy
From his second marriage up in Illinois
He wuz raised in East St Louis
By his mamma's people
Where they do things different
Thought he'd just come on down
He was goin' to Dallas, Texas in a semi-truck
Called from that big McDonalds
You know that one that's built up on that
Great big old bridge across the
Will Rogers turnpike
Took the Big Cabin exit
Stopped and bought a carton of cigarettes
At that Indian smoke shop with the
Big neon smoke rings
In the Cherokee nation
Hit Muskogee late that night
Somebody ran the stoplight
At the Shawnee Bypass
Roscoe tried to miss him but he didn't quite

Bob and Mae come up from

Some little town way down by Lake Texoma
Where he coaches football
They were two-A champions now for
Two years running
But he says they won't be this year
No, they won't be this year
And he stopped off in Tuska
At the Pop's knife and gun place
Bought a SKS rifle and a couple full cases
Of that steel core ammo with the Berdan primers
From some east bloc nation
That no longer needs 'em
And a desert eagle
That's one great big old pistol
I mean fifty caliber
Made by bad-ass Hebrews
And some surplus tracers for that old B.A.R.
Of Slaton's
As soon as it gets dark
Were gonna have us a time
Were gonna have us a time
Have us a time

Ruthanne and Lynn come down from Baxter Springs
That's one hell-raisin' town way up in
Southeastern Kansas
Got a biker bar next to the
Lingerie store
That's got the Rolling Stones lips up there in
Bright pink neon
And they're right downtown where
Everyone can see 'em
And they burn all night
You know they burn all night
You know they burn all night

Ruthanne and Lynn they wear them
Cut-off britches and them
Skinny little halters
And they're second cousins to me
Man I don't care I wanna get between 'em
With a great big old hard on
Like a old bois d'arc fence post
You could hang a pipe rail gate from
Do some sister twisters

Til the cows come home
And we'll be having us a time
Uh huh

Uncle Slaton's got his Texan pride
Back in the thickets with his Asian bride
He's cut that corner pasture into acre lots
He sells them owner-financed
Strictly to them that's got no
Kind of credit
Cause he knows they're slackers
And they'll miss that payment
And he takes it back
He plays that Choctaw bingo
Every Friday night
He drinks his Johnny Walker
At that Club 69
We're gonna strap them kids in
Give 'em a little bit of Benadryl
In a Cherry Coke
We're going to Oklahoma
We're gonna have us a time
We're gonna have us a time

James' 2005 breakout political song, "We Can't Make It Here Anymore" won him accolades and airplay and changed his career by bringing him to the attention of a wider audience. It's the kind of song that cuts through the hype and gets people's attention on both sides of the political divide because the images are so recognizable and relatable. Dividing his performances, as he does, between sets with his backing band and solo sets, he has performed this song in both formats. It is a picture of America that questions, with wit, compassion, and no small amount of sarcasm, the frustrations of the working class. The images of rotting, empty pallets by the docks, vets who are homeless because "the V. A. budget's just stretched so thin," and the double entendre lament of the title and repeated lines, "We Can't Make it Here Anymore," (simultaneously meaning that we're having trouble surviving and that manufacturing jobs have been out-sourced) contribute to the resounding character of this protest poem.

We Can't Make It Here Anymore (2005)
– from the album *Childish Things*

There's a Vietnam Vet with a cardboard sign
Sitting there by the left turn line
The flag on his wheelchair flapping in the breeze
One leg missing and both hands free

No one's paying much mind to him
The V.A. budget's just stretched so thin
And now there's more coming back from the Mideast war
We can't make it here anymore

And that big ol' building was the textile mill
That fed our kids and it paid our bills
But they turned us out and they closed the doors
'Cause we can't make it here anymore

You see those pallets piled up on the loading dock
They're just gonna sit there 'til they rot
'Cause there's nothing to ship, nothing to pack
Just busted concrete and rusted tracks

Empty storefronts around the square
There's a needle in the gutter and glass everywhere
You don't come down here unless you're looking to score
We can't make it here anymore

The bar's still open but man it's slow
The tip jar's light and the register's low
The bartender don't have much to say
The regular crowd gets thinner each day

Some have maxed out all their credit cards
Some are working two jobs and living in cars
Minimum wage won't pay for a roof, won't pay for a drink
If you gotta have proof just try it yourself Mr. C.E.O.
See how far 5.15 an hour will go
Take a part time job at one your stores
I bet you can't make it here anymore

And there's a high school girl with a bourgeois dream
Just like the pictures in the magazine
She found on the floor of the laundromat
A woman with kids can forget all that
If she comes up pregnant what'll she do

Forget the career and forget about school
Can she live on faith, live on hope
High on Jesus or hooked on dope
When it's way too late to just say no
You can't make it here anymore

Now I'm stocking shirts in the Wal-Mart store
Just like the ones we made before
'Cept this one came from Singapore
I guess we can't make it here anymore
Should I hate a people for the shade of their skin
Or the shape of their eyes or the shape I'm in
Should I hate 'em for having our jobs today
No, I hate the men sent the jobs away

I can see them all now, they haunt my dreams
All lily white and squeaky clean
They've never known want, they'll never know need
Their shit don't stink and their kids won't bleed
Their kids won't bleed in their damn little war
And we can't make it here anymore

Will I work for food, will I die for oil
Will kill for power and to us the spoils
The billionaires get to pay less tax
The working poor get to fall through the cracks
So let 'em eat jellybeans let 'em eat cake
Let 'em eat shit, whatever it takes
They can join the Air Force or join the Corps
If they can't make it here anymore

So that's how it is, that's what we got
If the president wants to admit it or not
You can read it in the paper, read it on the wall
Hear it on the wind if you're listening at all
Get out of that limo, look us in the eye
Call us on the cell phone tell us all why

In Dayton Ohio or Portland Maine
Or a cotton gin out on the great high plains
That's done closed down along with the school
And the hospital and the swimming pool
Dust devils dance in the noonday heat
There's rats in the alley and trash in the street
Gang graffiti on a boxcar door
We can't make it here anymore

Unlike, say, Guy Clark or Billy Joe Shaver, McMurtry shies away from the personal, the memoir. His song-craft is fiction. “Ruby and Carlos” is a short story, told in poetic form, complete with characters, plot, symbols, and conflict – a romance between an older woman and a younger man that begins with their parting, as Ruby refuses to accompany Carlos to Tennessee in pursuit of his dream of working in the music business. In the tradition of good fiction, we are given enough detail to know what is happening, but the questions that arise in our minds are critical components of the poetic experience. What does Ruby really mean in her put-down of the destination (“Down below the Mason-Dumbass Line the food gets worse”) but not the dream? Is she letting Carlos go because of a sense that their age difference will end the relationship anyway? Is she concerned that Carlos’ dream will fail? Is she letting her young man go out of some misguided sense of altruism? In the tradition of good short fiction, but utilizing poetic aesthetics, McMurtry draws us into an interesting, sad tale and leaves us to judge, as Ruby herself must do, whether or not she made the right decision. The setting feels cold and autumnal, the colors are grays and browns, and the symbol of the colt who eventually throws her serves as metaphor for what might have happened if Ruby had gone with Carlos or, perhaps worse, asked him to stay. The photo of Carlos on the icebox door lets us know that something happened to Carlos after the Gulf War, emphasized in the line that tells us that he is looking “from way on back inside his head.” Underscoring the mood is the spare accompaniment of McMurtry on acoustic guitar, a simple standup bass line and the strains of a single violin.

Ruby and Carlos
– from the album *Just Us Kids*

Ruby said "You're gettin' us in a world of hurt.
Down below the Mason-Dumbass line the food gets worse.
I can't go back to Tennessee

That NASCAR country's not for me.
Go on, if you think you must."

Carlos packed his drums up in the dark of night
Ruby's standing just outside the front porch light
Chain-smoking Camel straights
The sky off to the east got gray
And he rolled off in a cloud of dust.

And the gray colt knickered at the gate
She said "You're right it's getting late.
You and me got work to do
We can't be burning daylight too."
She took down the long lead rope
And stayed off that slippery slope

The aspen trees were turning gold up top
The talk was buzzin 'round the beauty shop
"Wasn't he barely half her age?
Well that's just how they do now days.
We should all have been so lucky."

By spring she'd had the run of the free born men
Ruby turned 50 in a sheep camp tent
Her body still could rock all night
But her heart was closed and locked up tight
Potato fields all muddy and brown
The gossip long since quieted down

And after one more Coggins test
Pouring coffee for the county vet
Pictures on the ice box door
Of Carlos in the first Gulf War
Black-eyed brown and youthful face
Smiling back from a Saudi base

And then Carlos on the big bay mare
Heavier now and longer hair
Looking past the saddle shed
From way on back inside his head

And the old vet said, "One day, Rube,
That colt will break an egg in you.
Now and then one comes along
You just can't ride." And he went on home

And the storm door didn't catch
It blew back hard as she struck a match
But she cupped it just in time
And she sent that ash tray flyin'

And holding back the flood
Just don't do no good
You can't unclench your teeth
To howl the way you should
So you curl your lips around
The taste, the tears, and the hollow sound
That no one owns but you
No one owns but you.

Carlos took the road gig and he saw it through
He rode the tour bus while the singer flew
Managed out of music row
Carlos never saw the studio
Session guys had that all sewn up.

He looks out the window and it starts to sleet
Laying on a friend's couch on Nevada Street
Lately he's been staying high
Sick all winter and they don't know why
They don't know why or they just won't say
They don't talk much down at the V.A.

And Ruby's in his thoughts sometimes
What thoughts can get out past the wine
He feels her fingers on his brow
And right then he misses how
She looked in that gray morning light
She never shaved like they all do now
He sees it all behind his eyes

And his hands go searching but they come up dry

And half way in that wakin' dream
Carlos lets the land line ring
He never guessed it was Ruby calling
The pin in her hip from the gray colt falling
Figure eight in a lazy lope
Stumbled on that slippery slope

And holding back the flood
Just don't do no good
You can't unclench your teeth
To howl the way you should
So you curl your lips around
The taste, the tears, and the hollow sound
That no one owns but you
No one owns but you.

In James' song "Levelland" we see three generations of a north Texas family and their different responses to farm life in different eras. This is an ironic and unsentimental song about the land and the times, and how they shape the people. It weaves from the grandfather's difficult dry-land farming life that leaves the old man addle-brained in a nursing home to the father's modern irrigation methods that suck "the water table dry/His rolling sprinklers circle back/Bleeding it to the bone." In the closing verses we see the metaphors for a changing way of life, including the jets flying from coast to coast overhead and the central air conditioning and satellite television that keep the family indoors at night so they no longer look at the stars. For himself, the narrator expresses only his desire to leave Levelland. In several dozen brief lines, James tells an American story of the generational arc: from dirt poor and hopeful to more prosperous but valueless to total disenchantment.

Levelland
– from the album *Where'd You Hide the Body* (1995)

Flatter than a table top
Makes you wonder why they stopped here
Wagon must have lost a wheel
Or they lacked ambition one

In the great migration west
Separated from the rest
Though they might have tried their best
They never caught the sun

So they sunk some roots down in this dirt
To keep from blowin' off the earth
Built a town right here
When the dust had all but cleared

They called it Levelland
The pride of man
Levelland

Grandad grew the dry land wheat
Stood on his own two feet
His mind got incomplete
And they put him in a home

Daddy's cotton grows so high
Sucks the water table dry
His rolling sprinklers circle back
Bleeding it to the bone

And I won't be here when it comes the day
It all dries up and blows away
I'd hang around just to see
But they never had much use for me

In Levelland
They don't understand me
In Levelland

Well I watch those ships trails comin' out that big blue sky
Coast to coasters, watch 'em go
And I don't blame 'em one damn bit
If they never look down on this
Ain't much down here they'd want to know

Just Levelland
You could wash your hands

In nothin' but Levelland

Mama used to roll her hair
Back before the central air
We'd sit outside and watch the stars at night
She'd tell me to make a wish
I'd wish we both could fly
I don't think she's seen the sky
Since we got the satellite dish

I can hear the marching band
Doing the best they can to play
Smoke on the Water
And Joy to the World

I paid up all my debts
Got some change left over yet
I'm getting on a whisper jet
Going to fly as far as I can get

From Levelland
Done the best I can
In Levelland

James varies the second line of the three-line, intermittently-repeated chorus to great effect. By following that line alone, we can feel the song move from hopefulness to resignation, and that is not an uncommon arc for a family working the High Plains landscape. Levelland, by the way, is the name of an actual town just west of Lubbock, much the same setting as Joe Ely's dry-land anthem, "All that You Need." The High Plains west of the Caprock, an escarpment that cuts more or less diagonally across the northern part of the state, is the edge of the vast prairie that extends north to Central Canada. This stark, horizontal region of Texas has produced an astonishing number of singer/songwriters, and, obviously, inspired many others.

Road Scholar: Ryan Bingham

Born in Hobbs, New Mexico, and raised in various small towns in West Texas, Ryan Bingham left home as a teenager to work the rodeo circuit, sleeping in the backs of pickup trucks and, eventually, becoming a bull rider. It was a rough life for a tough kid, but he had a guitar with him and would amuse himself by learning to play it and learning to write songs (Bingham *Rolling Stone*).



Figure 23: Ryan Bingham

His voice, no doubt affected by his years outdoors, sounds like a whiskey-soaked rasp, but it is always in tune, and it only adds to the atmosphere of his stark and lonely songs. He is capable of rocking (as in the blue-grass-influenced “Bread and Water,” a road song), but his forte is the striking and beautiful ballad, of which “Yesterday’s Blues” is one of his most lovely. A twist on the expected trope of the merely praiseful, “Yesterday’s Blues” is a tribute to a lover who allows the narrator his freedom while seeing into him and past his pain. In the touching lines where the narrator “searched through his dreams to find you” or is “lost in the maze of the veins in my heart” or praises his lover for having “a heart that can see right through/The bitterness of my yesterday’s blues,” we sense the redemptive power of unreserved love.

Yesterday’s Blues
– from the album *Junky Star* (2010)

Well, I shook the hand of a weeping sparrow
And heard the most beautiful tune
Laid myself down upon a field of flowers

And searched through my dreams to find you
And lost all of yesterday's blues

And I walked in circles confused and scattered
And stumbled around as a fool
Lost in the maze of veins in my heart
'Til I woke up unconscious with you
And let go of yesterday's blues

'Cause you have a way that lets me breathe
And you have a way that sets me free
And you have a heart that can see right through
The bitterness of my yesterday's blues

Down in a city of shelters and shambles
I thought I had nothing to lose
I took for granted the wise words of strangers
And gambled until I was through
And lost all of yesterday's blues

'Cause you have a way that sets me free
And you have a way that lets me breathe
And you have a heart that can see right through
The bitterness of my yesterday's blues

Well, I shook the hand of the deepest sorrow
And waved a goodbye just to lose
Laid myself down below the endless towers
And searched through my dreams to find you
And lost all of yesterday's blues

Ryan Bingham speaks often in interviews about his concern for “the condition the country is in and the condition the people are in” and his particular empathy for the homeless (Bingham *NPR*). His song “Depression” speaks to those concerns through a narrator hanging on to the edge of his dignity and finding hope through love. The theme is nothing new. Poets have expressed as much numerous times across the years. But Bingham’s song has a working class empathy and an American wrinkle. The song is tinged with a bitterness of what the songwriter sees on the road and what he lived in West Texas as a youth: a man who would rather die than ask for a handout,

all the while maintaining his faith that he doesn't have to resort to those extremes because "all I need is you."

Depression
– from the album *Junky Star*

If I held my breath in the morning
Would I wake up for a lifetime
Lose my job in this depression
Well I don't care cause I got your love

In this depression
All I need is you
In this depression
What is there to lose

If I held your hand in this town
They would lock me up for possession
But now there strung out on heroin
And we've gone out to California

In this depression
Breaks my heart in two
In this depression
All I need is you

I could make some friends down at the courthouse
Get bailed out and go on welfare
I'd rather lay down in a pine box
Than to sell my heart to a fucking wasteland

In this depression
It's just me and you
In this depression
What are we to do
In this depression
Breaks my heart in two
In this depression
All I need is you

If I held my breath in the morning
Would I wake up in a new land
Follow you forever
Dance all night in this depression

In this depression
In this depression
In this depression
In this depression

“Junky Star” is another ballad about homelessness, this time set in California, where the narrator has ended up among “the junkies and the stars.” It is an unflinching look at what Ryan sees as the indignities of the working class losing hope in an America that seems to have lost its heart. This protagonist reacts by shooting the man who has come to take his farm and running west in the dead man’s car. Ryan says he sees this song, more or less, as “the opening chapter of a Cormac McCarthy novel” (Bingham *NPR*). I see that, too.

Junky Star
– from the album *Junky Star* (2010)

The man come to shake my hand, and rob me of my farm.
I shot 'im dead and I hung my head, and drove off in his car.
So on the run with a smokin' gun, lookin' for the coast.
Of all the things I've had and lost, your love I miss the most.
And hell will have to pay, I went a little bit too far I'd say.
Half drunk I stumble on the whiskey from the bar.
Sleepin' on the Santa Monica pier with the junkies and the stars.
For when I woke a Spanish cross, was reachin' for my hand.
Then the stranger took the place, the words I couldn't understand.

And there's nothin' but the ground, it's the only place I found.
Where I can lay my head in town.
Down on the boulevard, the sidewalk shuffles change.
Cracked out from the night before, hallucinatin' in the rain.
So borrowed me a quarter for a call to the other side.
I told God that the whole damn world was waitin' in line to die.
But not me, this time.
I left the trouble far behind.
And he tied his arm off one more time.

The man come to shake my hand, and rob me of my farm.

Ryan's career took a major upswing several years ago when film director Scott Cooper called him to ask if he would be interested in writing a few songs for Cooper's upcoming movie, *Crazy Heart*, the story of a down and out, alcoholic Texas singer/songwriter trying desperately to make a final stand in both love and art. Cooper sent him the script, and Bingham wrote most of his song "The Weary Kind" within a matter of days. Cooper then put him in touch with the film's musical director, T-Bone Burnett, who received co-writing status on the song, which won an Oscar as Best Song for 2010. This is another road song, this time the story of a musician, a narrator in dialogue with himself, and the pain and heartache of a life lived alone—a befitting, if painful, tribute to those who are dedicated to the road and the music and unable to live peacefully among civilians.

The Weary Kind
- from the album *Junky Star* (2010)

Your heart's on the loose
You rolled them sevens with nothing to lose
And this ain't no place for the weary kind

You called all your shots
Shooting eight ball at the corner truck stop
Somehow this don't feel like home anymore

And this ain't no place for the weary kind
And this ain't no place to lose your mind
And this ain't no place to fall behind
Pick up your crazy heart and give it one more try

Your body aches
Playing your guitar and sweatin' out the hate
The days and the nights all feel the same

Whiskey has been a thorn in your side
And it doesn't forget
The highway that calls for your heart inside

And this ain't no place for the weary kind
And this ain't no place to lose your mind
And this ain't no place to fall behind
Pick up your crazy heart and give it one more try

Your lovers won't kiss
It's too damned far from your fingertips
You are the man that ruined her world

Your heart's on the loose
You rolled them sevens with nothing to lose
And this ain't no place for the weary kind.

With its spare instrumentation, punctuated by bass drum and cymbal late in the song, as the depth of the heartache set in with the listener as well as the narrator, “The Weary Kind” is one of the most starkly beautiful songs to emerge from the new traditionalists in recent years. Ryan Bingham included it in his 2010 album *Junky Star*, his third album. Since then he has recorded two more, both critically praised, *Tomorrowland* (2012) and *Fear and Saturday Night* (2015). In spite of the accolades and their heady adjunct, fame, he shows little sign of succumbing to the darker sides of the business. He sings from his roots. In many ways he's still that homeless kid that some of my rodeo circuit friends used to know, the one who tied their bull ropes by day and serenaded them with his poems by night.

There's Wit in Them There Words: Hayes Carll

If the Nashville songwriting formula is taking a catchy hook and then stretching it to its wobbly limits in order to create a song, then Hayes Carll is anathema to that formula. His work is characterized by songs so pithy and packed with wit, that they take second, third, and fourth listens just to get all the jokes. It's not that he can't be tender and poignant as well, as he is in “Hide Me Babe,” one of his songs that appeared in the film, *Country Strong*, which starred Gwyneth Paltrow. But Hayes has some stuff that's outright funny, too, such as the clever send-up

of ignorance and lost love, “She Left Me for Jesus,” in which the narrator laments that, “She says I should find Him/And I’ll know peace at last/But if I ever find Jesus/I’m kickin’ his ass.”



Figure 24: Hayes Carll

Carll knew that, in writing such a song, he risked being misunderstood (much as some liberals didn’t always *get* that Randy Newman songs like “Good Ole Boys” were actually skewering racism rather than embracing it), but says that while he was briefly concerned about the controversy, he got over it. He realized that, “This is funny, it’s not blasphemous. It’s making fun of the guy who is a borderline, racist, intolerant redneck. If people don’t get that, then I’m not going to lose sleep over it” (McCord). The song is delivered in a raucous honky-tonk style, befitting the redneck narrator’s milieu, with a verse/chorus/verse/chorus/verse/chorus structure and a final, impertinent break at the end.

She Left Me for Jesus
– from the album *Trouble in Mind*

We’ve been datin’ since high school, we never once left this town
We use to go out on the weekends, and we’d drink ‘til we drowned
But now she’s acting funny, and I don’t understand
I think that she’s found her some other man

She left me for Jesus and that just ain’t fair

She says that He's perfect, how could I compare
She says I should find Him and I'll know peace at last
If I ever find Jesus, I'm kickin' His ass

She showed me a picture, all I could do was stare
At that freak in his sandals with his long pretty hair
They must think that I'm stupid or I don't have a clue
I'll bet he's a commie or even worse yet a Jew

She left me for Jesus and that just ain't fair
She says that He's perfect, how could I compare
She says I should find Him and I'll know peace at last
If I ever find Jesus, I'm kickin' His ass

She's given up whiskey and taken up wine
While she prays for His troubles, she's forgot about mine
I'm a gonna get even, I can't handle the shame
Why last time we made love, she even called out His name

She left me for Jesus and that just ain't fair
She says that He's perfect, how could I compare
She says I should find Him and I'll know peace at last
If I ever find Jesus, I'm kickin' His ass

It coulda been Carlos or even Billy or Ted
But if I ever find Jesus
He's gonna wish he was dead
Aaaaaaaa-men

The back story on Hayes Carll's KMAG YOYO (a military acronym for Kiss My Ass Guys, You're On Your Own) is pretty interesting, and it's a study on just how mystifying the creative process can be. Hayes says that he only had these two vivid pictures in his mind and had no idea why they might, or even if they might, fit together: a scared young soldier in the desert with a gun and a space trip on acid. Somehow, the two merged, and as he began to write, he realized that the space trip on acid was the hallucination of the wounded soldier. He claims he never set out to write a protest song, but that's exactly what he understood it was when he finished—a protest song, in relentless imagism, a la Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues." But as Hayes Carll also says, "If you're gonna rip someone off, why not rip off the best" (McCord)?

KMAG YOYO

- from the album *KMAG YOYO and Other American Stories* (2011)

Well, daddy joined the Air Force
Said it was a good source
Danger, love, and money, but it only led to divorce
Ended up in Abilene
Working at a Dairy Queen
Put me in the Army on the day that I turned seventeen
Here I am standin' in the desert with a gun
Thought of going AWOL but I'm too afraid to run
So I got myself a new plan
Stealin' from the Taliban
Make a little money turning poppies into heroin
Sergeant didn't like it so they put me in a hole
I said, "It's easy shootin' when they don't know where to go."
Threw me on a lily pad
Sent me home to NORAD
I knew I'd be in trouble but I didn't think it'd be this bad.
Stranger wearin' all black
Met me on the tarmac
Told him I was sorry but I ain't ever going back
He said, you ain't in trouble son
Learn to fight without a gun
Got a new assignment now, you're working for the Pentagon
Gonna take a trip, wouldn't tell me what it's for
Gotta serve your country, gonna help us win the war
MIT, PhD.'s, night & day, they're testing me
Ain't what I was thinking but I'm being all that I can be
I ain't no genius but I knew it wasn't right
Eating uppers in the morning and LSD at night
Send me off to deep space
Help 'em win the arms race
Ola me, oh mighty, but this shit has got a funny taste.
I think I hear the countdown
Hundred feet above the ground
Told me when I'm leavin' but a'nothing 'bout a'coming down
Sittin' on a bad dream
Thousand pounds of gasoline
Ain't leavin' nothing but some rubble and my slipstream
Mama always said, I should be aimin' for the moon
Never would've guessed that I'd be passin' by soon
How the hell'd I get here?
Blastin' through the atmosphere
Drop the rocket boosters and I'm shiftin' into high gear.
Bowie on the system and a bottle on my knee

Armstrong ain't got nothing on me
Hey ho, here we go
KMAG YOYO, gotta come up where the sun don't go.
I think I see a bright light
Something 'bout it ain't right
I laid down in a space ship
Woke up in a fire-fight
Someone wanna get me
Trippin' from the morphine
Came down in a bad scene
God, don't let me die here, I ain't even nineteen
I won't ever ask you, Lord, for anything again
I'll swear it on the Bible, Torah or Koran
Lyin' in a rhino track
'Bout to have a heart attack
IED got to me, someone call the Medevac
I need some fixin' after where it is I've been
Never wanna go and try and shoot a gun again
Slippin' out the back door
Gonna join the Peace Corps
Tell me, I'm a hero now, so
Someone else can fight this war

“Willing to Love Again” is a curveball take on an old trope: the “goodhearted woman in love with a good-timin’ man” (or, from the Tammy Wynette perspective, a woman standing by her unworthy man). In Hayes Carll’s vision, the narrator, rather than flippantly patting his woman on the back, in third person, for her fidelity and patience, seems genuinely in awe of her and speaks directly to her. This take is far more tender, a narrator lamenting his unworthiness rather than celebrating his bad behavior, and with lines like “I spend my life on this broken crutch/And you believe I can fly,” it is far more poetic than the standard variations on this theme.

Willing to Love Again

– from the album *KMAG YOYO and Other American Stories* (2011)

I drink too much, I smoke too much
I laugh at all my own jokes too much
I'm hard to tell and soft to touch
And easy at sayin' goodbye
I broke your heart a thousand times

With wasted nights and ramblin' rhymes
I thought I'd leave you far behind
But time just wouldn't let go.

I walk the streets, I kick the cans
Tore down walls with my two hands
And still across my floor you stand
Willing to love again.

Out of all the dreams in this whole world,
How'd you get so unlucky girl?
To find a shell that had no pearl
And a man who couldn't find home.
I feel too much, I protect too much
And most times I probably expect too much
I spend my life on this broken crutch
And you believe I can fly.

I walk the streets, I kick the cans
Tore down walls with my two hands
And still across my floor you stand
Willing to love again.
And still across my floor you stand
Willing to love again.

Hayes Carll writes so gosh-darned many great songs about the road and the music business that narrowing it down to a single example is difficult. "It's Hard Out Here," with its lines, "Everybody's talking 'bout the shape I'm in/They say, boy you ain't a poet, just a drunk with a pen," was tempting. So, too, was "I Got a Gig," Hayes' homage to Bob's Sports Bar in Crystal Beach, Texas, where he earned his stripes as resident poet for a crowd of bikers, shrimpers, and assorted druggies and ne'er-do-wells. I eventually chose "The Letter" because, rather than being either the usual boisterous salute or the mournful regret, this song is delivered, both musically and poetically, in a straightforward, quiet style. It is also a very personal song. We don't know who Birdy is, but we know that this narrator has a personal connection and someone who obviously cares about him back home – again, the universal message best expressed within the specific. The song begins, unusually, with the chorus, and there is a

lingering pause just before the final verse, which Carll delivers in a touching, breathy a capella, lending the song an even more private and personal sense.

The Letter

- from the album *KMAG YOYO and Other American Stories* (2011)

I meet some wild people out here
Those who are pretendin' and others more sincere
A few that outright scare me and ones that I hold dear
I meet some wild people out here

You won't believe the things I have done
Racin' downn the highway like a bullet from a gun
This life is like to kill me but it sure has been fun
You won't believe the things I have done

Birdy says I outta go home
I swear I tried to reach you but the cop took my phone
Them Tulsa women's nicer when they leave me alone
Birdy says, I outta go home

I don't know how I got this way
Burnin' through my nights and wastin' my days
So many people talking, I forgot what to say
I don't know how I ended this way

I meet some wild people out here, wild people
Those who are pretendin' and others more sincere
A few that outright scare me and ones that I hold dear
I meet some wild people out here
I meet some wild people out here

I hope that you sleep well tonight
Know that I am dreamin' of you, hope you're alright
I'm gonna be there come dawn's early light
I hope that you sleep well tonight

Hayes Carll is the most refreshingly irreverent talent on the Texas singer/songwriter horizon.

Raised in the Houston suburb of The Woodlands, college-educated in Arkansas, and honky-tonk schooled in Galveston County, he paid his dues early and hasn't forgotten them. He produced his first three albums before landing a package deal, complete with producer and a distribution

network, for his fourth album, *KMAG YOYO and Other American Stories*. Such a deal has often been the artistic downfall for young musicians, a succumbing to fame and commercialism and a dilution of their original artistic vision. When asked at a press conference, just prior to the release of *KMAG YOYO and Other American Stories*, if having the backing of a major label, Lost Highways, home to Willie Nelson, Lyle Lovett, and Van Morrison, was intimidating, he quipped, “No, I don’t think they’re intimidated by it” (Carll SXSW).

That was then. After a nearly five year hiatus, during which he experienced a divorce, found a new producer, and moved back to his old label, Hayes Carll has finally recorded a fifth album to be released in April 2016, *Lovers and Leavers*. Already available on itunes, the album’s first single, “The Love That We Need,” laments “we got the life that we wanted/not the love that we need.” Carll has always acknowledged the darker aspects of choosing the troubadour life, but this cut seems to herald a quieter, more serious, more introspective batch of songs than we are accustomed to from him. “I’m a singer-songwriter.” he says. This album “comes closer to reflecting that than any other record I’ve made” (Lane). He is aware that this may not be the record his fans hanker for, declaring that there are “very few hoots and almost no hollers” (Hight).

I tracked down some thirty-second samples from the yet-to-be-released album cuts on allmusic.com and came across “Sake of the Song” which contained this lyrical pearl: “If you’re nobody’s business/or front page news/if you’re folk, rock, country, or Delta blues/tell your truth however you choose/and do it all for the sake of the song.” The spirit of Townes and Guy and Billy Joe, it appears, is still surging through this one.

Unknown but Up and Coming: Chris McWilliams

Knowing Chris McWilliams, a personal friend, as I do, I am certain that he would take issue with my calling him “up and coming.” He is pretty hardcore when it comes to making his music his way and prefers to live in the West Texas town of Alpine so that he can focus on his work without the distractions of the industry and club scenes that he feels plague Austin these days. Chris is a mega-talented composer, musician, and singer/songwriter, tenaciously planted within the trend, now technically possible, of producing his own music, which he does in a converted shed/studio behind his home. He writes all the music and lyrics for his recordings, performs all the vocals (lead, harmony, *and* backup), and he plays all the instruments: guitar, keyboards, trumpet, bass, and percussion. Schooled, as he is, in everything from classical to punk, his music spans a tremendous range of traditions, and he dips into that deep bag of tricks to express himself exactly and authentically. As a wordsmith, he is up there with the best of them.



Figure 25: Chris McWilliams

His tendency toward reclusiveness is tempered by his work with the Doodlin’ Hogwallops, a band he formed with local singer/songwriter Neil Trammell (who frequently swaps guitar and bass roles with Chris) and harmonica player, Todd Ellrod. The Doodlin’ Hogwallops’ set list is loaded with Texas music classics as well as joint compositions and

Trammell's impressive catalogue along with a McWilliams song occasionally thrown in. But most of Chris's own compositions are reserved for his growing list of Internet fans, who access his music via the Web. Among his fans (and I am obviously one), Chris is known for his prowess on guitar. He's a guitar monster in a state that cranks out guitar prodigies by the semi-load and is equally masterful and comfortable on both acoustic and electric. Playing in the band keeps his performance chops up to snuff, but it's the music he makes in the shed that really sings. I also like his unusual choices in subject matter. Chris's song "Meth Makin' Mama," about a woman trapped in a cycle of survival and pain, is an outstanding example of his handling of a subject that is all around us these days, but that few have the guts to touch. The last line of the final verse, "your spirit fire is a toothless smile," is starkly simple and piercingly powerful as a metaphor for despair in a woman who has lost all hope.

Meth Makin' Mama

- from the album *Dreams in West Texas Wind* (2012)

You do a few lines of speed when the kids go down
To dream somehow of a better way

You dream about leavin' this town
'Cause if you stick around, you'll burn it down.
There'll be hell to pay.

Meth makin' mama it's a shame
Meth makin' mama it's a shame

You can't look in the mirror without cryin'
So you quit tryin' and hide your face.

Meth makin' mama it's a shame
Meth makin' mama it's a shame

On your wedding day he could not make bail
So he stayed in jail. You had two black eyes.
You never really thought you had a choice
To trust that voice deep inside.
You're feelin' so damned old and doggone tired
And your spirit fire is a toothless smile.

Meth makin' mama it's a shame.
Meth makin' mama it's a shame.

Unlike “Meth Makin’ Mama,” Chris’s “All Alone, One and All” puts a new slant on an old trope, the love triangle. It is a waltz that lilts gently downward within each verse, as it spills forth a tale of a man torn between the woman he loves and who left him and the woman who took him in and loves him. As the narrator contrasts the two women (“One’s always screamin’ and grievin’ while one’s always dreamin’/I’m a comin’ and goin’ on my way”), the performer punctuates the lyrics, increasing the volume and emphasis. The song builds to a climax here before reverting to a quieter tone to repeat the lines, “I walked between them but not out of meanness/Weakness for my own poor heartbeat.” The narrator’s guilt about both situations and all three lovers is revealed simply, sweetly, and powerfully.

One and All, All Alone
– from the album *Songs, Guns, and Gin* (2009)

One lived on one side, the other on another
Of the same small town street
And I walk between them, but not out of meanness
Weakness for my own heartbeat
But mostly, I just walk home
All alone

One was the master of her own disaster
Hardly even quiet when she slept
One I had known, the other, I’d just met
But how could I leave the one I’d
Loved so long
All alone

Because one had just left me while the other received me
And puttied up my deep puncture wounds
And as they were healin’ I knew I had this feelin’
For somethin’ I wanted to do
To keep her out of bein’
All alone

One's always screamin' and grievin' while one's always dreamin'
I'm a comin' and goin' on my way
And I don't need remindin' which one's on my mind
In the passing of the hours of the day
Still it looks we're one and all
All alone

One lived on one side and the other on another
Of the same small town street
And I walked between them, but not out of meanness
Weakness for my own heartbeat
But mostly, I just walk home
All alone

Chris has produced eight self-published albums altogether and shows no signs of slowing down. Six of those eight were recorded in backyard shed/studio and include “special guest appearances by the wind and the train.”

Conclusion: The Tradition Rolls On

People need art and poetry in their lives, and, increasingly over the last fifty years, traditional poetry has been locked away in textbooks, literary journals, and academia. Writers without credentials can't catapult themselves over the hurdles thrown up by publishers, and they can't be taken seriously by establishment critics. When was the last time any of us heard of a terrific novel written by a cab driver? It does my heart good to know that there are poets and writers in at least one area, the singer-songwriter tradition, who can immerse themselves in the art of the lyricism and bring their real experiences as real people to our attention—that their body of work is accessible for the price of a CD or a download and for the act of merely listening or attending a performance. The work of the gifted and hard-working singer-songwriters is where literature, particularly poetry, is most alive and well in America, and Texas is that work's epicenter. And while it's true, as music critic Frank Goodman says, “More has been written

about songwriters from Texas than from any other place on earth,” it’s also true that the writing about their lyrical legacy has been, at best, a series of passing glances. It is a subject seriously worthy of serious study. In the meantime, I’m glad to know that it’s still out there, that some of its very best practitioners are still going strong, and that the baton is still being passed to grateful new generations.

As a subject of study, Texas music is vast, deep, and rich, and an assessment of its history, both long-term and recent, reveals the following:

1. The immigrant state provides a profusion of musical conventions and genres from which the Texas singer/songwriters can draw inspiration, and the constant mixing of cultures results in a hybrid vigor between those genres that keeps the music fresh and ever-evolving.
2. The cultural traditions of live, participatory music in Texas, originally based largely within the customs of the Mexican *corrido* and the European immigrant dance halls, have kept the music interactive and accessible for generations of musicians and composers as well as their audiences.
3. The venues that the live music traditions bred have allowed song-writing and performance to evolve into a worthwhile, respected, and, often, viable career option within the state.
4. Live performance by the songwriter is important and differs greatly from the manufacturing of song as it is has been practiced in Nashville (and elsewhere) where songs are usually written by faceless composers, pitched to industry hacks, and doled out to pretty performers for the sole purpose of making money. In the art form of the Texas singer-songwriters, lyrics, music, and performance are, on

the other hand, simply indivisible, and while making a living is possible and important, making a fortune is not.

5. The natural poetry of Texas-speak and the story-telling traditions of the culture have inspired great lyrical compositions while simultaneously satisfying the demands of audiences and consumers who desire a more intelligent and authentic musical experience and one that is relatable and reflects their lives and values. The resulting literature, usually written in the people's vernacular, is accessible.
6. The changes wrought in the early 1970s in Austin sparked a revolution in how this new music was recorded and marketed, reflecting the demand for greater authenticity: a more poetic, artistic and less packaged experience, whether live or recorded—a new tradition that took hold and is still flourishing in spite of music industry establishment trends.
7. The corpus of lyrical compositions of this group of singer-songwriters inspires and celebrates the lives of working people rather than merely pandering to them, and it elevates the pop song to poetic status. It is a literature for the working, thinking people, and it resonates.

Delve into this music, and you will find the people: the proud Mexican immigrants, the ranch hands, the housewives, the blue collar workers, the artists, the unemployed, and the working musicians themselves. It truly is poetry that, as Fox has explained, doesn't require a Ph. D. to understand. It is accessible both in terms of how it can be acquired, through a download, the purchase of a recording, or a turn around the dance floor at a local honky-tonk, and it is equally accessible in terms of comprehension. It needs no explication.

From the doleful expressions of Townes Van Zandt that seem to have sprung from the Aeolian harp of the Romantics, to the skillful, precise lyrics of Guy Clark, to the eloquent simplicity of a Billy Joe Shaver ballad, to the intricate, conscientiousness of a James McMurtry song or the soulful laments of Ruthie Foster, these lyrics sing of real people's lives in a way that many modern literary forms cannot, or, rather, do not. As Rosenbaum says, "... if you detach yourself from conventional hierarchies of genre, some of the best American writing of any kind is being done in that form [songwriting]." I wholeheartedly agree.

Currently, there's a cynical maxim among cut-and-paste Nashville songwriters that says there are only four subjects a profitable country song can cover:

1. I sure would like to be fucking you.
2. I sure am enjoying fucking you.
3. I sure wish I was still fucking you.
4. Fuck you.

It's funny, but it's also sad.

When songs first became a commodity in America over a hundred years ago, a person who could write a song could make a buck. Then came song publishing, sound recording, movies, and radio, and all that growth of the American corporate music industry meant that while someone who could write a song could still make a buck, the buck had to be shared with the publishing and recording companies, the radio networks, and the movie studios. The American music industry eventually encompassed all manner of roots music and became the largest music industry in the world. The industry tail, predictably, began wagging the songwriting dog early on. In the contemporary market, however, the industry has unprecedented control over what music Americans listen to every day. According to David Suisman, aesthetic values were

bulldozed by commercial values “in whose interest it was to avoid challenges of the prevailing order; and whose growing dominance made alternative models of cultural production increasingly scarce” (275). That’s not just about Nashville. That’s about the whole damned business from pop to hip-hop and L.A. to New York.

Corporate songwriters don’t exactly work out their stuff alone. It is, as Guy Clark, James McMurtry, and others have complained, a committee process, one that “resembles the unappealing aesthetics of industrial food production... where legions of songwriters peck away in cubicle farms from 9 to 5 under florescent track lights, trying to manufacture a hit with very formulaic approaches” (*Big Names*). The byword for the corporate-chosen “artists,” often fair of face and figure, but limited in talent, is “change a word, get a third,” meaning that the recording artist, by merely offering a suggestion or two, can get song-writing credit and a thirty-plus percentage of the take on publishing songs they had very little to do with writing. Given collapsing CD sales, the “artists” now make a sizeable chunk of their money through publishing. In their economic study of the American music industry, Alan Kreuger and Marie Connolly found that, under the current system, concerts furnish “an even larger source of income for performers than record sales or publishing royalties” (4). They also discovered that an increasingly smaller fraction of performers “earn a substantial portion of the [overall] revenues” (34). Maybe road dogs like Dale Watson and Joe Ely had it right all along.

Well then, God bless the songwriters who remain steadfastly independent of all that industry crap. It can’t be easy. They’re lucky there is still an audience for thoughtful music not piped in as force-fed earworms and stamped out like audible McNuggets. Long may the independent singer-songwriter wave.

With new technologies that enable singer-songwriters to self-publish and self-market their own material, we will, no doubt, see a surfeit of unpolished, lesser-quality work surface, but we will also see the emergence of talented, as-yet-unsung poets like Chris McWilliams. How technology will continue to change the business of music-making is currently a subject of much debate among music industry insiders and aficionados, but what is certain is that change will come. And, no doubt, there will be some Texans at the forefront of the innovations to appear, a fact that makes me want to scavenge the Internet in search of the talented singer/songwriter/poets whom the industry has not yet exploited.



Figure 26: Leon Bridges Black Joe Lewis Jake Paleschic

My latest discoveries? Ft. Worth’s Leon Bridges is breaking big at the moment with his soulful throwback tunes, especially “Coming Home,” which reached a Top 10 position on Spotify. I’m keeping an eye on him because I think, if the business doesn’t ruin him first, he has a good shot at honing his craft and eventually writing songs of lyrical significance. With his first two albums, Austin’s Black Joe Lewis proved that he’s a rocker and a screamer in the tradition of Joe Tex, but with his newest album, *Electric Slave*, he has also proven that he is a lyricist who can deliver a social commentary wallop in songs like “The Hipster,” a searing and witty sendup of gentrification. And then there’s Ft. Worth’s Jake Paleschic who has already penned a stunner of a take on the songwriter’s obligation to the song from inception to performance. “When It’s Played” is from his independently-produced debut album *Again, At Last*. An excerpt:

You will not choose the form it takes
Only its hours and its days
And when it rises from the sand
It is brought forth by no mistake

So let it move about, let it howl and shout
Without hindering or stepping in its way
And like as not, you will know it by the sound
Of the silence in the room when it is played

I can't wait to see what happens next for these talented young singer-songwriters. In the meantime, scouts from L. A., New York, and Nashville will continue to prowl the venues of Austin, seeking talent that can be turned into cash, and Austin will continue to be a mecca for musicians scrambling to cash in. Still, I'm grateful there remains a certain segment of young musicians who draw inspiration from the music, lyrics, and principles of the Texas singer-songwriter tradition and who, like their forefathers and foremothers, will continue to innovate.

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