

## Americana Texas

Tom Geddie (Buddy Magazine, May 1999 Issue)

Along a curve of the Bosque River, a sudden cold streak turned early-morning dew into a layer of ice too thin to survive the first rays of the sun. The sun was a blessing because it warmed the chill and was a hell of a lot more welcome than the raucous caw of an alarm clock.

Nearby Meridian (population 1,452) is the county seat of this hilly farming and ranching land temporarily made famous by Steven Fromholz's bleak "Texas Trilogy" song cycle more than 20 years ago. More people die of old age here than are born here every year; there are still more marriages than divorces. Tawakoni, Tonkawa, and Waco natives roamed the area until the English and Norwegians arrived in the 1850s.

As the sun rose on the cold morning, souls began to stir again. Slowly. After a night of. Mostly gentle. Acoustic music. And shared experiences. With like-minded strangers. And with old friends. Who have common. Interests.

It was, while the sun continued to reach toward high noon, another bloody mary morning for several thousand campers at the 11th annual Larry Joe Taylor Texas Music Festival & Chili Cook-Off.

The three days and nights of music the third weekend of every April are a tribal gathering to celebrate the living mythology of the state's music: phoenixes risen from the ashes, including Billy Joe Shaver and Ray Wylie Hubbard; emerging stars including Pat Green, Reckless Kelly, and Charlie Robison; neophytes beginning to make names for themselves, including Ed Burleson, Bret Graham, Brent Mitchell, and Max Stalling; and scene veterans like Tommy Alverson, Clay Blaker, Rusty Wier, and Fromholz.

More than 25 headliners and supporting musicians mounted the low stage to share their stories in the often raw, edgy Texas tradition that blends so many influences. The musicians ranged in age from 16 to surely 60, although the ones at either end of that scale hesitated to acknowledge the reality.

Off the stage, in the recently mowed campgrounds, most of the several thousand acolytes were baby boomers who've made the near-inevitable compromises with the world of commerce, but who still care -- often deeply about the music. Slow-burning campfires add to the warmth. Dripping, barbecuing meat adds to the appetite.

Tents, like comfortable wombs to return to from time to time, are so light that campers must tie them to the ground. They pop up like spring flowers next to clumsy, modern mobile homes (the scourge of two-lane blacktops). Hours before the first act takes the stage each day, the acolytes thrive in a sea of Texas flags, making music and talking about music, trading tales and tunes.

Here and there, impromptu groups gather in small, communal circles to listen to (sometimes talented) amateurs play and sing Guy Clark songs or Townes Van Zandt songs. Or other favorites. Or even an original song from time to time. Guitars are everywhere. An old, beat-up upright bass named Blondie becomes a celebrity, but may not survive another sunrise without some serious repairs. Fiddles add joyous harmonies. Dogs may bark, but only occasionally.

Even the commercial sponsors -- the radio stations that earn our respect for playing this kind of music -- keep a welcome low profile.

Gentle folks ignore the occasional anachronist who flies the Confederate battle flag or dresses in camouflage. This music is inclusive, not exclusive, and we know that anachronisms eventually fade away.

If the blues are the ultimate musical existentialism (understandably so), this kind of Texas country music -- born

in the folk traditions from the old countries, nurtured by the frontier existence and honky-tonk ways -- is often nostalgic. But it is also, more often, despite its darkest examples, romantic music that lovingly caresses the quest, which means it is a music of hope.

Examples from three musicians who were there (two in spirit): Clark sings of "Homegrown Tomatoes" and "Watermelon Dreams" and "Like a Coat from the Cold;" Van Zandt, with his well-documented weaknesses and his tormented side, also gave us "To Live is to Fly," the "Shrimp Song," and countless versions of "Old Shep;" Hubbard (who now belongs in this songwriting elite) mixes nostalgia (the obligatory encore) with the quest, and his stories that are still funny no matter how many times we hear them.

We gotta love it. We gotta thank host Larry Joe Taylor and his wife, Sherry, who combine the artist's sensibility with enough business acumen to pull this Camelot thing off every year.

Days later, campfire smoke lingers on clothes like the songs and the experience linger in the memory.