Two Texas musicians swapped songs around a campfire in the wee hours before dawn. Fifty hardy souls stood in a circle in rapt attention, silently praising their good fortune to have stumbled across the scene. The lanky guitarist with the black cowboy hat struck chords that recalled an era when Texas music was more popular than Jesus or the Beatles.

Rusty Wier stretched his chin skyward and closed his eyes like a wolf serenading the moon. His magnetism remained strong despite three decades of tequila-drenched singalongs, such as this one in April 1999 at a Bosque County music festival.

Cactus Jack drinks coffee black

Tells me it's my lucky day

Five o'clock in the Texas morning

And I've come a long, long way

Wier's characteristic voice rose like campfire smoke, drifting and curling through the crowd, infusing warmth and a righteous feeling that comes from witnessing something fleeting and rare. The crowd erupted when the song ended, and Wier flashed his toothy smile.

The second musician took a turn, but he lacked Wier's charisma. He mumbled a pre-song introduction, then sang in a voice no better than those found behind a million shower curtains. The spell was broken, and a few folks strode off into the night.

Greenhorns might have wondered how this guy managed to muscle in on the spotlight. Texas music fans knew better. They recognized him as Larry Joe Taylor, a coastal-and-western music entertainer and founder of a festival that helped spark a Texas music revival, launched a few careers, and resurrected several others.

He makes an unlikely savior. Taylor is a former calf roper, grain elevator manager, and automobile engine salesman with a penchant for Hawaiian shirts and tennis shoes. Ten years ago, few people would have predicted that Taylor would become a successful recording artist and music power broker. He began his music career as a part-time singer-songwriter relying on original songs to set him apart. Club owners and bar patrons yawned.

Undaunted, Taylor created his own music festival, which would become a spiritual cornerstone of the Lone Star sound. His career has risen along with the musical movement. He plays about 100 shows a year and has reached a level of success that allowed him to quit his day job.

"Larry Joe's festival is the conscience of Texas music," said Charlie Robison, a singer-songwriter on the brink of national fame. "It brings things back to earth. This is what it's all about no matter how big it gets on country radio."

In the 1970s, most amateur guitar pickers with a Texas pedigree and an ounce of soul knew the opening chords to "Texas Trilogy," Steven Fromholz's vivid portrait of 1950s Bosque County. Guitarists could be sprawling on beanbag chairs in Austin frat houses, squatting beside West Texas campfires, sitting cross-legged under South Coast piers, or straddling ice chests on sun-bleached Fort Worth porches. The ritual was the same.

They'd stare at the guitar neck, pluck the fat E-string, hammer the third fret, strum A-minor, and sing lyrics that portray rural Texas with a simple elegance reminiscent of Larry McMurtry's best novels.

Six o'clock silence of a new day beginning

Is heard in the small Texas town

Like a signal from nowhere the people who live there

Are up and moving around

'Cause there's bacon to fry and there's biscuits to bake

On a stove that the Salvation Army won't take

And you open the window

And you turn on the fan

'Cause it's hotter than hell when the sun hits the land

Fromholz helped create what he now dubs the "great progressive country scare of the mid-1970s." Willie and Waylon and the boys developed an edgy but uplifting mixture of folk, country, and rock. Texas media dubbed it redneck rock, progressive country, or cosmic cowboy. Eventually it became Outlaw.

Another "scare" is building steam like the Kopperl train in the same Fromholz song. Robert Earl Keen, Charlie Robison, Pat Green, and others are tapping the melancholy yin and rambunctious yang of the Texas psyche to create a sound and style reminiscent of early Outlaw. Their rugged brand of country music, the kind heard on Texana and alt-country radio, is challenging the current female stranglehold on Nashville.

Music trends generally go in cycles. Pretty boys in starched shirts and felt hats singing traditional country-and-western music in the 1980s (George Strait, Clint Black, and Alan Jackson) morphed into pleather-clad babes singing glossy pop country in the 1990s (Faith Hill, Shania Twain, and the Dixie Chicks). The stage is set for a conversion to music by regular Joes. The stars-in-waiting are mostly Texans with coarse voices and sloppy clothes throwing down hard-driving tales of bandits, booze, Mexico, misfits, wild living, tough loving, and fast leaving.

In a twist of poetic justice, this latest musical rumbling -- call it Outlaw II -- is establishing as its home base a grassy field about 60 miles south of Fort Worth in rural Bosque County. A music festival on the third weekend in April in the county seat of Meridian combines young bucks with original Outlaws for three days of music and camping.

Larry Joe Taylor's 13th Annual Texas Music Festival & Chili Cookoff on April 19-21 will feature Fromholz, Wier, Reckless Kelly, Jerry Jeff Walker, Roger Creager, and two dozen others. When the stage closes about midnight, musicians hang out with fans and amateur pickers around campfires. Guitars, harmonicas, and fiddles ring out, and people sing, talk, and laugh until the morning sun sends all but the heartiest of partiers scurrying for their tents.

A few hours of sleep and a couple of Bloody Marys later, the party begins again.

"I think it's the best festival I've ever played, and I've played a bunch of them," said Wier, an Austin veteran who recorded innovative country-rock albums in the 1970s, played at Willie Nelson's early picnics, and wrote "Don't It Make You Want to Dance," a saloon anthem later recorded by Walker and Bonnie Raitt. "The festival has helped me tremendously. When I first started at Larry Joe's festivals, I was destitute. I wasn't getting any jobs. He took me under his big ol' wing and added me to his shows. He's helped me get my name back out there."

Festival conductor Taylor appears void of music-biz slickness, and he's a study in contrasts. He can be shy, yet he's a successful self-promoter. He's saddled with a Texas-size work ethic instilled by a father with 27 years of employment at the state highway department, but Taylor is the first to seek R&R on the beach. His attire

includes jeans and untucked shirts, but the casual presentation can't mask a solemn intensity.

He perks up most when talking about the young entertainers he's seen rise from campfire singalongs to stage performances and recording contracts. "I'm real proud of the fact that I was able to recognize talent before a lot of people could," Taylor said. "It's nice to be able to help a guy along."

First, he had to help himself.

Taylor, like many Texas kids in the 1960s, grew up listening to a combination of country-and-western and rock 'n' roll music. He taught himself guitar using a Mel Bay chord book, but his guitar was strung for a righty, and Taylor is left-handed.

"I always tell everybody that's why I can't play very good," he said.

Taylor relied on writing and enjoyed adding off-the-wall lyrics to popular radio songs. "I concentrated on funny songs because my voice wasn't very good," he said.

Music was an amusing pastime. Taylor's true passion was rodeo. He majored in agribusiness at Tarleton State University and joined the rodeo team in 1970. "After the first week, I blew out my knee trying to learn how to bulldog, and that was the end of my rodeo career," he said. He spent the next couple of years skipping classes, drinking beer, and listening to country music, especially a new sound coming out of Austin.

Maturity beckoned after Taylor met a freshman from Midland. Sherry Woods was new to Tarleton State and attending a party when she heard Taylor playing guitar and singing "Is Anybody Going to San Antone?" They became friends. Taylor's personality of contrasts intrigued her, and a courtship began. "He's real laid back but also real passionate," she said. "That's what attracted me. It still does."

They married and dropped out of school. Taylor took a job at Continental Grain in Brownwood but was quickly transferred to Hutchinson, Kan., in 1974. Redneck rock was emerging back home but had not yet spread nationwide. Taylor couldn't find Austin music on Kansas radio stations, so he listened to his albums and fought homesickness.

The couple had a baby, Zack, in 1978. The next year, Taylor faced a transfer to Chicago. He couldn't bear another northward move. "I just quit, sold our house, loaded everything in a U-Haul, and came back to Stephenville," he said.

He nabbed a sales position at an auto engine company. Sherry Taylor returned to Tarleton State, earned a degree, and became an administrative assistant. The years passed, and Taylor renewed his love of Texas music. He organized a few bands, which often included a young Zack Taylor on drums, and he wrote original music. But there were few chances to perform. Outlaw music was dead by the mid-1980s.

Taylor clung to the memories.

Gary P. Nunn was appearing in small Texas clubs, and Taylor wanted to hear the Outlaw who wrote and sang "London Homesick Blues," with its defining line about going home with the armadillo (the Austin City Limits theme song). Taylor asked a Strawn club-owner to hire Nunn for a night, and the owner agreed. Taylor worked the phone, located Nunn, and sealed the deal. "I was a big fan," Taylor said. "I remember 'Home With the Armadillo' on Viva Terlingua. I thought all those guys were gods. Still do."

The savvy Taylor also saw an opportunity for self-promotion. He recorded original songs on a demo tape that he gave to Nunn, who was hardly impressed. "At first, his songs were pretty raw and ragged," Nunn said, "but he had a couple that showed some promise. I thought he had potential. I encouraged him. The thought that I approved of him was inspirational to him."

Taylor and Nunn kept in touch, co-wrote a few songs, and camped together at the 1986 Terlingua chili championship. Taylor spent most of those Terlingua evenings playing guitar for a Dalhart clan camped nearby. They raved about his original songs. Taylor was exhilarated.

Weary of being shunned by club owners, Taylor created his own festival in 1989 in the small town of Mingus, west of Fort Worth. The Dalhart bunch was expected to make up the bulk of the audience. "I was trying to figure out a way to get them up here because they were really my only fans," Taylor said. "I didn't even have a band."

A festival slogan, emblazoned on t-shirts, was "No Chingas con Mingus." Translation: Don't Fuck With Mingus.

Taylor was tired of being ignored.

Taylor was driving along Erath and Bosque county roads on a recent weekday morning, drinking coffee from a Styrofoam cup, and revisiting early festival sites. His festival changed locations four times before settling in Meridian.

Taylor's truck rolled to a stop beside a two-acre Mingus pasture, the site of his first festival. A morning fog settled over the landscape, and tiny beads of water clung like papooses on the drooping blades of grass. A leaning outhouse, a crumbling picnic bench, and a metal pole-barn were the pasture's only bounty.

"It seems so small," Taylor said.

The festival didn't require much room back then. "There wasn't a whole lot going on in our type of music at that time," he said. Performers were no-name artists, except for one. Taylor attracted an early music idol, Ray Wylie Hubbard, who wrote "Up Against the Wall, Redneck Mother."

Hubbard's early success was derailed by alcohol. By the early 1980s, fans went to Hubbard's shows hoping to catch a glimmer of talent before he toppled off the stage or crashed into the drum set. He sobered up in the mid-1980s and began re-establishing his career. Hubbard's presence provided the unknown festival with a sliver of credibility.

Fewer than 100 people attended in 1989, but a kernel was planted. Last year's festival drew 7,000. Next weekend's event could draw more, with Jerry Jeff Walker making his festival debut and Texas music becoming the rage.

Taylor didn't know the festival would become so relevant. "We never had a vision it was going to be any bigger than it was," he said. "But I did say during the first one that our purpose was to turn on as many people as we could to this kind of music."

About 400 people attended the 1990 festival. Tarleton State students came in force, but many crawled through a sagging fence to skirt the $5 admission.

"Nobody made any money the second year either," Taylor said, "but it was real beneficial to me because it was the biggest crowd I had played in front of."

Taylor moved the festival in 1991 to Thurber, which sits off Interstate 20 about an hour's drive west of Fort Worth and is marked by an old smokestack. The festival received heavy promotion from Roy "The Commander" Ashley, KNON-FM disc jockey and Super Roper Redneck Revue host from 1983 to 1996. "Roy was an incredible cheerleader for the thing," said Obie Obermark, a barbecue-rub entrepreneur and Texas music fan who attended the Thurber festival. "You listened to Roy's show back then, and you would think the festival was really the Second Coming. He made it sound so appealing that you were going to be hopelessly un-hip if

you weren't there. Larry Joe deserves the credit for making it so enjoyable once you got there."

About 500 people attended. The sun beamed unusually hot for April, and the stage was in a parking lot without shade. To stay cool, people guzzled beer and wrapped $10 festival t-shirts around their heads, making them resemble hillbilly Arabs.

Most everyone recalls Thurber fondly, except Taylor. "I don't have a lot of good memories of this one," he said, pulling into the parking lot beside the Smokehouse Restaurant, which wasn't there in 1991.

The stage -- a flatbed trailer on cinder blocks -- collapsed during Nunn's set. Afterward, musicians and fans gathered around a lone campfire to sing songs. Few noticed when someone dropped an unopened can of beans in the fire. "It exploded and threw beans over everybody's guitars," Taylor said.

The next morning, Taylor awoke to an ocean of beer cans and garbage. He and a few friends braved the heat and gathered the trash in a huge pile. "We were plumb out of gas," Taylor said. Before they could load the pile in a truck, a helicopter appeared overhead and landed in an adjacent field, creating a gust of wind that redistributed the trash across the parking lot.

For the first time, Taylor made money -- $313. But he'd had enough. No more festivals.

A booking agent friend, however, insisted that the festivals continue and volunteered to handle the details in 1992. Taylor had only to show up and play. "It's about six or seven weeks before the festival was supposed to happen, and he disappeared," Taylor said of the friend, whom he wouldn't name. "I think he went to Mexico. My name was on the festival, and I didn't want it to fall apart that bad, so we were back in the festival business."

Taylor's wife, Sherry, took control and provided order.

"Singer-songwriter types aren't really very good at organization," she said. "They can promote themselves and others really well and draw people together, but as far as details, most artists or anybody creative is not very good at that. Looking back, I realize that's how I got into it. I'm a detail-oriented person."

The Taylors moved the festival to One Mountain Place campground at Possum Kingdom, which provided trees and rolling hills. But the site change -- and the ease in sneaking into the campground -- prompted a dip in ticket sales. Only a few hundred people showed, and Taylor realized he would lose hundreds of dollars. Radio personality Mike Crow grabbed a microphone and urged the audience to support Texas music or lose it. Someone passed a bucket. The crowd responded. "It was like church," Taylor said. "We had such a good time. That was the turning point because the real music fans were coming out."

Taylor still lost $67, but vowed to have another festival in 1993. It was becoming a tradition.

Charlie Robison, an unknown acoustic performer from Bandera, debuted in 1994 and returned in 1995. By 1999, he was a major draw.

Another newcomer made an impression in 1995. "I woke up on a Saturday morning, and everybody was talking about this kid who was playing around the campfires all night -- Pat Green -- and we had never heard of him," Sherry Taylor said. Green graduated to the stage in 1996 and returned in 1998, 1999, and 2000.

Robison and Green won't appear this year.

"If everybody played there every year there would be no room for the new guys to come along," Robison said. "Larry Joe has to kick you out of the nest after a little while and let the new groups come along and show you how it's done. But we'll always go back there and play it."

Taylor refined his own sound through the 1990s, merging traditional country, redneck rock, and Jimmy Buffett

beach music. He coined the phrase "coastal-and-western," recorded c.d.'s independently, developed a fan base, and found club owners eager to book him.

"Larry Joe's a real gentle spirit and the only coastal-and-western singer I know," Fromholz said. "He has a lot of fun when he plays music. He's always got a great band."

While Taylor focused on his music career, his wife tended to festival details. Sherry Taylor devised wristbands to deter gatecrashers. She started a newsletter to drum up publicity. Meanwhile, Larry Joe courted public radio and the few commercial radio stations offering Texas music formats. The stations in turn promoted the festival and played his music. Taylor's lyrics and melodies were improving. One of his favorite original songs is "Third Coast," from his album First Row, Third Coast.

But I said if I ain't sinking

Well I must be swimming

If I ain't dead

I must be living

And living is the thing that scares me the most

And if I ain't sleeping

Well I better be fishing

If I ain't anchored

I will be drifting

But all in all I'm doing pretty good

Since I hit my third coast

With interest growing in his music and the festivals, the Taylors raised admission to $10 in 1994 and netted $2,000. "I thought, 'You know, there could be some money in this,' " Taylor said. "Musicians by then were calling me."

Taylor was having a blast. Still, the music business can be thorny. Nunn published Taylor's early songs and recorded some on his own albums. Their publishing agreement was a handshake deal and eventually led to a rift. "We had a little ... I don't know ... something happened," Nunn admitted, "but it's nothing I would want to gossip about or be public knowledge."

A songwriter owns 100 percent of a song when it's written. Unknown songwriters often align themselves with publishers and relinquish a portion of future royalties in hopes that the publisher will place songs with prominent artists. Nunn, a music publisher as well as a performer, keeps his eyes peeled for new material. "You're looking for songwriters and songs and trying to build up a catalogue and exploit copyrights and get them in the marketplace and generate income," Nunn said. Some observers, such as Roy Ashley, say Nunn has a reputation for taking advantage of artists.

Taylor downplays the falling out. Nunn chalks it up to Taylor's career growth. "He reached a point where he didn't think his relationship with me was necessary," Nunn said. "He just kind of declared his independence and went out on his own." Nunn's last festival performance was 1993.

A thousand people attended in 1994, filling the Possum Kingdom site. In 1995, the Taylors jumped to the

spacious Tres Rios campground in Glen Rose and attracted sponsors, which meant better staging, sound, and lights. The music budget grew to $20,000. "That took the pressure off," Taylor said. "We were always sweating it out. Now it was a no-risk thing."

By then, Robert Earl Keen was a hero to rowdy college kids with money and brain cells to burn. Still, Taylor didn't invite him to the festival. Taylor's festival crowds were a mixture of young and old but leaned toward the old. Taylor worried that Keen's crowd might provide too much youthful exuberance. "He was getting too big for us at that time," Taylor said. "He would have been disruptive at that point." But Keen's popularity spread to other Texas artists, many of them regulars at Taylor's festivals. Attendance kept growing, the crowd became younger, the festival was lengthened to three days, and the number of bands increased to about 25.

"Robert Earl Keen kind of lit the fuse," Nunn said. "He was carrying on like Jerry Jeff did 20 years ago. He got the kids lit up about this thing, and they started discovering the Pat Greens and Cory Morrows." College-age kids flocked to the festival to see Green and Robison and wound up becoming fans of Outlaw pioneers, including Wier, Guy Clark, Billy Joe Shaver, and Doug Sahm, who showed up unannounced in 1997.

The Kerrville Folk Festival reigned as the state's top acoustic music festival, but many Outlaw fans didn't feel welcome there. Kerrville's renowned peace and harmony felt pretentious and restrictive. Word spread about Taylor's honky-tonk festival and its greater freedom to raise hell. Good ol' boys and gals felt at home. Pickup trucks let their Confederate flags fly. Bikers arrived. Shirtless college guys in short pants and boots, and slender young women with tattoos and cowboy hats turned the area in front of the stage into a countrified mosh pit at times.

Despite the quality of music on stage, some people never bothered to watch the performances. They hung out in their camps, cooked chili, and played their own music.

Although some festival fans partied nonstop, the Taylors downplay the carousing. "We try to keep ourselves apart from a big-time party, big-time drunkfest," Sherry Taylor said. "That's not what we want to promote in any form or fashion. When you get a big crowd together, you want everybody safe and happy, and you don't want people driving. That's why we've always had a place you could camp."

Tempers sometimes flared, but arguments were brief. A couple of men fought in front of the stage last year, but they were quickly separated. It was the first fist fight anybody could recall. People adhered to a self-governed existence of live and let live. A bearded old man with braided hair strolled around in a flowered sundress a few years ago and called himself Nellie Wilson. He hardly turned a head. After the 1997 festival, a Tres Rios representative complained about "the largest collection of white trash I've ever seen," Larry Joe Taylor recalled.

"It may be true, but those are our friends," Taylor said. It was time to move.

A sprawling Meridian campground became home in 1998. The change in location didn't affect attendance. For many people, the festival had become Texas' preeminent music event. "The festival is very, very, very important," said longtime Fort Worth radio personality "Midnight Cowboy" Bill Mack. "It's focusing on our music, which is something that's been needed a long time."

Now, Robison and Green are on the verge of becoming bona fide country stars. Billboard columnist Phyllis Stark called Robison the new "male country poster child." His Life of the Party album cracked Billboard's country chart in 2000, and his follow-up, Step Right Up, hit record stores this month. Columbia Nashville is giving him a major marketing push, and his videos are regulars on Country Music Television. Green, who never played guitar until he attended Texas Tech University in the early 1990s, recorded a live album at Billy Bob's Texas in 1999, appeared at Willie Nelson's Farm Aid in 2000, and has sold more than 100,000 c.d.'s on independent labels.

If those two make it, others will follow. A raucous music scene fueled by Texans will sweep the nation as it did

in the 1970s. Maybe this time it won't fall apart in a haze of exploitation, unfulfilled promise, substance abuse, and money woes.

A native Texan who toed Nashville's line in the 1960s is most credited with the 1970s Outlaw scare. Willie Nelson cranked out country songs for established Nashville entertainers such as Patsy Cline and Faron Young and recorded his own albums on Liberty and RCA. But Nashville's grip was tighter than a Fritz Von Erich iron claw. Albums were stamped with corporate RCA's predetermined sound. Granted, the sound was generally pleasing, but Nelson and others didn't want to be told how to make music.

In 1971, Nelson scorned Music City and headed to Austin, carrying little except a Martin guitar and a sack of Mexican weed. Despite being 40 and rooted in country music, he quickly became Austin's favorite hippie. He shunned haircuts, cut the sleeves off his t-shirts, and incorporated more rock and blues in his performances.

Austin's population was about 250,000 in 1970, smaller than today's Arlington. But Austin's college students and an aging hippie community fueled demand for live music. The 1960s era of peace and love had faded into the shadow of Vietnam and civil unrest, but the newly pioneered social freedoms infiltrated even conservative Texas. Country boys grew long hair and passed joints as easily as whiskey bottles.

The Texas Legislature in 1971 allowed clubs to sell liquor by the glass, forcing customers to buy drinks rather than pour from their own brown-bagged bottles. Business-minded people recognized the profit potential and opened clubs, creating dozens of new venues for musicians. By the time Nelson arrived, Austin was rocking. The local favorites were Wier and Jerry Jeff Walker, a New York native and wandering songman who wrote "Mr. Bojangles" and finally settled in the Texas Hill Country. "There were nights in Austin in the mid-1970s where you could hear 30 bands on a night," Fromholz recalled in a recent phone interview.

Nelson recorded two of his best albums, Shotgun Willie in 1973 and Phases and Stages in 1974. He used his road band in the studio, and his new albums sold better than his previous Nashville efforts.

Nelson became a messiah, beaming like a rascal prophet under stage lights at Austin's Castle Creek and Armadillo World Headquarters. His July Fourth picnics were Woodstock and the Grand Ole Opry rolled into one big Austin torpedo. Rock magazines such as Rolling Stone took notice.

RCA realized it had lost a good thing in Nelson and scrambled to keep Waylon Jennings from bolting. He wrested control of his music and turned up bass and drums on his records, incorporating a rock 'n' roll beat long shunned by Nashville producers. He followed Nelson to Austin, then took it further, performing at the hip Max's Kansas City in New York and opening for the Grateful Dead in San Francisco in 1973.

The one-two punch from Nelson and Jennings was followed by Walker's roundhouse right. The 1973 album Viva Terlingua, with "Up Against the Wall, Redneck Mother" and "London Homesick Blues," characterized the music scene and its fans. At the time, Larry Joe Taylor was a beer-guzzling college kid, drawn to progressive country by Nelson's magic.

"Then I heard Jerry Jeff, and he just blew me away," Taylor said. "I was hooked."

Mainstream America was slower to catch on, and for a short time the Outlaw virus was mostly confined to Texas. That changed in 1975. Nelson's landmark album Red Headed Stranger, recorded in Garland, told the story of a mysterious Western preacher's downfall and contained "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain," Nelson's first single to top the country charts. Surprisingly, the song crossed over to No. 21 on Billboard's pop chart.

The dam broke, and Michael Murphey, B.W. Stevenson, David Allan Coe, Kris Kristofferson, and the rest poured through, creating a catalogue of songs yet to be surpassed. "It was a bunch of folk singers who got together with a bunch of rock 'n' roll players in Austin with similar interests," Fromholz said. Other than music, the similar interests were women, whiskey, marijuana, and fun.

Kristofferson had earlier written "Me and Bobby McGee," with its line, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." The sentiment summed up the Outlaw life.

"It was kind of a whole counterculture and counter-Nashville establishment," Ray Wylie Hubbard told Fort Worth Weekly in March. "The music was powerful and experimental. There was a lot of freedom in the lifestyle, too. If there was a substance, I abused it. The whole Outlaw movement was about freedom."

National recognition arrived.

Meanwhile, Taylor was stuck working at a Kansas grain company, missing Texas. "At that time, I didn't even own a guitar," he said. He listened to his Nelson and Walker albums and wished he weren't missing the action back home.

RCA cashed in on the burgeoning Outlaw craze by releasing Wanted: The Outlaws, a dismal compilation of mostly previously released songs by Nelson, Jennings, Tompall Glaser, and Jessi Colter. The music didn't represent the Austin sound, but the masses didn't know the difference and lapped up a million copies.

Nelson released several remarkable albums in the 1970s, climaxing with the 1978 masterpiece Stardust, which sold three million copies. But he seemed to be in a race with himself to produce material, releasing 13 albums from 1976 to 1980. Quality dipped as the quantity rose. No matter. He was the Big Kahuna by then, making movies in Hollywood, touring worldwide, and playing at the White House. Eventually, he would lose a ranch and millions of dollars to the Internal Revenue Service to pay back taxes.

Jennings recorded a series of groundbreaking albums and scored numerous hits, including "This Time," "Honky Tonk Heroes," and "Luckenbach, Texas." But he traded a longtime pill habit for a cocaine crutch and lost his edge. Walker's drinking led to unreliable albums and unpredictable live shows. Artists complained that record companies stole their money and altered their sound.

The Outlaw movement lumbered on and became diluted. Crossover hits became a tag for songs that were kinda country, kinda pop, and mostly crap. Before long, Nashville traditionalist Faron Young was sporting an earring on Hee-Haw, rock 'n' roll reject Kenny Rogers made a hit out of the maudlin "You Picked a Fine Time to Leave Me, Lucille," and Glen Campbell's "Rhinestone Cowboy," a song that caused Outlaw fans to puke in their straw hats, topped the pop and country charts.

John Travolta delivered the deathblow. The 1980 movie Urban Cowboy created demand for spacious dance halls with electronic bulls and faceless bands. Intimate clubs that created the original Austin vibe were forgotten in favor of warehouses such as Gilley's in Pasadena and Billy Bob's Texas in Fort Worth. "It became a meat market, a slick movement," recalled Steve Coffman, longtime Texas radio disc jockey who offered progressive country to Fort Worth listeners on 92.5 KAFM from 1975 to 1978.

Austin artists wondered where all the money went and cast suspicious eyes at record label accountants. "We've all been done by the major labels," Fromholz said. "We were all young. We didn't know shit from shinola." The artists made money by touring, and their lives became a never-ending party. Pot gave way to cocaine. Jennings summed up the spiraling scene with "Don't You Think This Outlaw Bit's Done Got Out of Hand?"

"We like 'ta ruined our lives," Wier said in a recent phone interview from Austin. "It was the time and place, and everybody was doing it."

The Outlaw movement was strung up and left for the buzzards. Nashville fat cats reclaimed control and churned out "hat acts" -- artists defined by cookie-cutter cowboy hats, starched shirts, and creased jeans. Some artists, such as Strait, were steeped in tradition. Some, such as Garth Brooks, blended pop, rock, and country. They were talented, no doubt, but the music had again become a slick Nashville product.

Texas artists in the mid-1980s, most notably Lyle Lovett and Nanci Griffith, offered an alternative to the slick Nashville sound, but Outlaw was long gone. Then Keen hit his stride, and Taylor's festival became hip. Outlaw II is bubbling and threatening to overflow into the national consciousness.

Taylor wants to be a part of the scene, and he promotes it by cutting barriers between the artists and fans.

"I like having guys that go around to the campfires and pick," he said. "If you're sitting at a campfire and Rusty Wier comes by and sits down and plays a song, you're gonna be back next year."

Taylor prefers a semi-wholesome approach, getting everyone together for three days of fun without going overboard.

The artists, to be certain, are not Boy Scouts. Most are wild, passionate, and proud. But the era is different. Drugs and alcohol remain, but the young artists are more wary. There are exceptions. Billy Joe Shaver's son and music partner, Eddy Shaver, died of a heroin overdose in December in Waco. But most of the new breed believe in health maintenance. Outlaw I veterans have settled down and rediscovered muses. Together, the generations are bringing back a raw and vital sound bred from Texas stock.

"We were lucky in a way," Robison said. "They broke down musical walls, and they kind of showed you it is easy to screw up your life at the same time. I don't think there is any shortage of beer at the campfires, and the Jack Daniels flows, but it's not like it used to be."

The artists became more market-savvy, creating internet web sites to list touring schedules and to sell c.d.'s, t-shirts, caps, and coozies. They became wiser and cut out the corporate middlemen, recording on independent labels to maintain control of their music and to get a higher percentage of profits. The power shifted from record labels to radio programmers.

Fromholz believes the second progressive country movement will be easier than the first. "It's not near as scary as the last one was," he said. "This new thing is living its own life, and nobody knows where it's going to lead. But we've all just kept on playing. With Willie in his 60s and us in our 50s and Robert Earl in his 40s and Pat Green in his 30s and Cory Morrow in his 20s, it's like a torch being passed down. We've all learned from each other how to do it."

The person who learned the most might be Taylor.

He willed himself into the music scene, relying on determination and survival skills more than natural talent. His name tops a music festival that embodies Texas music and Outlaw II, although he turned over most of the details to his wife years ago.

Taylor enjoys his festival promoter tag, but he considers himself a performer above all. He doesn't rank himself among the best, but he is proud of his accomplishments and comfortable with his place in the Texas music scene.

"I don't wear a hat, I don't weigh 150 pounds, and I'm not 27 years old," he said. "Rusty [Wier] taught me it doesn't matter if you're opening or closing the show. What matters is that you're on the show."