

TRAILBLAZERS

Taylor family, Melody Mountain Ranch shine in Erath

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There is a shining star hovering above Erath County. And its glow is never as bright as in late April when music-hungry masses hone in on its illumination like a beacon in the night.

That star is Melody Mountain Ranch and it is better described as a constellation, consisting of dozens - or hundreds - of stars of varying in size and intensity. Among the brightest is an asterism of three - Larry Joe, Sherry and Zack Taylor - who welcome shooting stars and the masses to the family's Erath County ranch each year.

Melody Mountain and its sprawling 380 acres play host to a handful of events throughout the year, but Larry Joe Taylor's Texas Music Festival and Chili Cook-off has put the ranch at the center of the Texas Music scene.

The Taylors brought the music festival to Erath County nine years ago, and looking back to the event's beginning - in Mingus on a two-acre piece of land - shines a light on the festival's growing success. The Texas Music Festival will officially mark its 23rd anniversary this year as the show takes the stage April 26-30.

Larry Joe said the first annual event drew a crowd of less than 100 music lovers. And while he has since given up on setting goals, he recalled a personal ambition for the third annual event - to draw a crowd of 1,000. While it took a year or two to reach that goal, little did the family know the crowd would multiply exponentially - to 42,000 attendees in 2010.

Thinking about it for a moment, Larry Joe said maybe he has held onto a couple of goals over the years - to cater to music lovers and provide a venue for shooting stars to fulfill the crowd's hunger for Texas tunes.

LJT

While he says he can't really recall his first time on stage, his first paid gig was easy for Larry Joe to remember. He was in high school and the act consisted of three guys who were paid \$2 each.

"I thought that was pretty good," he said with a laugh. "Minimum wage was what - about 70 cents at that time?"

His love of music actually dates back to as early as he can remember. Larry Joe said he has always had a love for music, especially the piano and guitar. He said his musical prowess seemed to come naturally, but still, he "fought getting into music full-time for a long time." But once he got his groove and gave into the tunes, he found himself fully immersed.

When asked about his song writing, Larry Joe said his album, "Coastal & Western" best speaks to his "big love" - the coast. The titles of the songs on the album say it all - "Meet Me in Corpus," "Island Time," "Shrimpin' and Skrimpin'," "My Kinda Day on Padre..."

"I have always been in love with the coast," he said, adding that he strives to write happy songs. "I like to write songs that make people smile." When asked the names of artists that inspired him, Larry Joe didn't have to think twice - Kris Kristofferson, Jerry Jeff Walker and Guy Clark.

Speaking of Guy Clark, Larry Joe said one of his most memorable festivals - "I think it was the ninth" - welcomed his idol. He said

he was backstage during Clark's sound check and stopped in awe and said to himself, "My hero is fixin' to take the stage."

At that same show, the late Doug Sahn of the Texas Tornados also appeared and sang for the crowd.

Both Larry Joe and Sherry agree that it was one of the greatest of their Texas Music Festival memories.

A family affair

Zack was born into a home filled with music and by age nine he was a member of his dad's band, playing drums. That was before the Texas Music Fest first took the stage in Mingus.

Larry Joe said when the festival got its start, he and Sherry had full-time jobs and Zack was just a kid. Since then, the whole thing has just gotten "bigger and bigger," like their boy becoming a man.

Larry Joe attributes that success to his wife and son, who he said "have more to do with the festival" than he does.

Zack, like his parents, attended Tarleton State University where he obtained a marketing degree, and according to Larry Joe, Zack's interest in taking the family venture to the next level could not have come at a better time.

Larry Joe said Zack was still taking marketing classes when the music fest was still staged in Meridian. He said Zack went to his parents with an idea that would - and did - help push the event "to the next level" - spon-

sorships.

Not a bad idea, but the patriarch knew such ventures would require an all-hands-on-deck approach.

Zack's ideas landed him in the LJT spotlight as the front man for event scheduling and preparation, and leading what has grown into a music fest staff of 250 - "500 if you count artists." And don't forget to add in the slew of contractors and vendors for the event.

When asked what it's like raising a family on the stage, Sherry said with a pause, "This is what we do, it is all we have ever known."

Shooting Stars

If you asked some of the hottest acts to top the Texas Music charts, they would likely credit Larry Joe and his music festival for their stardom.

Zack said in preparing for the 23rd annual event, which will welcome a 50-act lineup, he received over 600 press kits from musicians wanting their time in the spotlight. While Zack said he takes the time to listen to every sample, many don't make the cut.

But true artists who are looking for a break, won't miss the Texas Music Festival. If they don't get an invitation, they will buy a ticket to the event. They will come toting their guitars, pull up a piece of "Taylorville" and belt out their best at any given campsite.

Sherry said such was the case back in the day, when the festival was staged at Tres Rios River Ranch in Glen Rose when a man they

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Larry Joe Taylor

had never heard of wowed the crowd as he made his way from campfire to campfire.

"He wasn't on the bill and we had never heard of him, but when everyone woke up the next morning, they were all talking about this guy named Pat Green," Sherry said.

And there were others, according to Larry Joe - Stoney LaRue, Reckless Kelly, Randy Rogers Band.

Festival evolution

The continued evolution of the LJT Texas Music Festival is inevitable.

Every year, the crew makes adjustments to what many already call the hottest festival in the Lone Star State.

Why do they do it? The answer is simple - it is about the musicians and fans. As music fans and musicians themselves, it is easy for the Taylor's to grasp what festi-

val-goers want and need in a four-day event.

To cater to the songwriters who grace the stage, the crew has given life to what many Texas talents call the best back stage at any festival.

And to provide the best to the fans, Zack said it is all about driving around to see that their needs are met. For example, if you have a music lover spending four days and nights in a tent, you don't want them to have to hike a half a mile to the nearest porta john, and "that guy in section eight, what about him, is he happy and getting his money's worth?"

"This whole thing is for the fans and the artists," Zack said. "It is all built around them."

Zack said, "stuff can always go wrong," but the key is taking the time to adjust and knowing how to roll with the punches.

"We have to remember this is all about fun," Sherry said. "Even buying a ticket should be a fun experience."

That consideration for the entertainers and their fans has led to several improvements for the 23rd annual event - new campsites, additional staff, updated show-ers, a streamlined check-in procedure, new luxury box seats, and the indoor City Limits sponsored private club stage will host six bands.

Larry Joe said it was Zack's idea of sponsorships that led to one heck of a music fest. Red Man Chewing Tobacco was on board for about four years in the early days, but the Texas Music Festival owes a lot to connections that made the event a success - like Texstar Ford and owner Doug Montgomery, the Stephenville Chamber of Commerce, Erath Iron and Metal and many more.

"There have been so many over the years," Sherry said.

An ongoing gig

In addition to Larry Joe's nearly year-



Music is a family affair for the Taylor clan. Pictured (l-r) are Zack, Larry Joe, Zack's wife, Martha, and stepdaughter, Kenna Beth Cashon, and Sherry Taylor.

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round radio tour, the Taylor family hosts five festivals annually.

"Coastin' and Cruisin'" is heralded as the "the biggest and best music cruise sailing out of Texas" which sailed into its 11th year in January. "Island Time" takes Larry Joe and other artists to his "favorite place in the Carribean"- Isla Mujeres - July 22-Aug. 1, for his annual birthday bash. Weeks after leaving the tropical paradise, the family heads to Red River, NM for "Hot Chili Days, Cool Mountain Nights" which will be held August 18-20. And there are two big events at Melody

Mountain - the Texas Musical Festival and Rhymes and Vines, which hosts a more intimate crowd as well as a home brew and wine-making competition in mid-September.

Larry Joe said his love for Terlingua and chili led to the CASI (Chili Appreciation Society International) Cook off, which is held in conjunction with the April festival.

When asked about her favorite, Sherry said without hesitation, "It would have to be our cruise."

"My very favorite is the cruise," Sherry said. "Once we are on the ship, the work is over and with five or six artists on board, the fun begins. It is not like work, but a vacation with good friends and a lot of fun."

Taylorville

In between Mingus and Melody Mountain, the festival took the stage in several locations across the Lone Star State, including Thurber, Possum Kingdom Lake, Glen Rose and Meridian.

When asked how the festival landed at Melody Mountain, Larry Joe said the family moved to Erath County in 1983. Sherry was from West Texas, Larry Joe from Brownwood and Zack was born in Kansas where Larry Joe worked for a grain company.

With each of the Taylors at one point attending Tarleton, they had a slew of friends that called Erath County home, making it feel "more like home" than anywhere they had been.

The sprawling 380 acres that make up Melody Mountain once seemed a little over-the-top to Larry Joe, who said he never thought more than a small piece of the ranch would be utilized, but Zack estimates about 200 acres see a piece of the action.

While looking toward Melody Mountain might lead one to believe that Larry Joe has already reached the high point of his career, he is not slowing down.

"I would like to think there is still a lot more to accomplish," he said.

The Taylor are blazing trails, and proving when it comes to shooting for the stars, the sky truly is the limit.



Larry Joe says one of his true loves is the Texas coast, and also says he has found a home away from home in Port Aransas. The city is home to Third Coast Music, where the songwriter lays down his sound, and another hot spot, according to Larry Joe, is "The Back Porch Bar." He said he always knows it's going to be a good night when performing - or simply relaxing - in Port Aransas because "everyone is on vacation."

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