

Just call him 'the Don Ho of Port Aransas'

By John Goodspeed

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Port Aransas, music mecca? Maybe that's an overstatement, but more and more musicians are finding their place in the sun here, and not in the kind of smoky honky-tonks they're used to elsewhere.

"Corona and lime and suntan lotion and mosquito spray - it smells really good all together," said Larry Joe Taylor, who launched a beachhead in the early 1990s with his innovative "Coastal & Western" album that helped set off the current wave of Texas Music artists.

While he plays tunes such as "Queen of the Redneck Riviera" and "My Kinda Day on Padre" up and down the coast, Taylor says the island is his favorite port of call, for many of the same reasons as any tourist — or musician: sun, sand, sea, sailing and fishing.

"Just about any weekend there's going to be some pretty good Texas Music," said Taylor, who lives near Stephenville in Central Texas. "The main reason is we all like to go. It's like a bonus when you're sitting there on the edge of the ocean, looking at these huge boats and everything, and thinking, 'Man, I'm getting paid for this.' I can't stay away. I have to go down about once a month."

It's also hooking such well-respected singer-songwriters as Ray Wylie Hubbard, Steven Fromholz, Rusty Weir and Bruce Robison, who wrote No. 1 hits with the Dixie Chicks' "Traveling Soldier" and Tim McGraw's "Angry All the Time." Others include Tommy Alverson, Roberta Morales, Tracie Lynn, Mike Blakely y Los Yahoos, Shake Russell, Davin James, Brian Burns, the Chris Holzhaus Blues Band and Terri Hendrix and Lloyd Maines, the Grammy-winning producer/musician father of Dixie Chick Natalie Maines.

The turning point came a few years ago when FM radio stations KBSO 94.7 in Corpus Christi and KTXN 98.7 in Victoria turned their formats to the Texas Music blend of country, rock, folk, blues and just about anything else that sounds right to the free-wheeling mix of mostly independent artists.

"There's been a real awakening about this type of music," said Susan Lagedrost, owner of one of the island's top venues, the Back Porch, on the harbor next to Woody's Boat Basin. "The music scene has been on a steady rise for the last two to three years. We were trying to get in the loop (the circuit musicians travel on regional tours) for years and years, and we're in it for sure now."

Other venues on the island also are offering live music, including the Salty Dog, Neptune's Retreat, Lovett's Bar, Third Coast Theater and Shorty's. The latter will celebrate its 57th anniversary April 12 with a show by Taylor and his band. "We call it the oldest and friendliest on the island," said bar owner Rose Smithey.

Taylor plays Shorty's twice a year - for the anniversary and for the Pig Party on Oct. 17 and 18 this year. "The employees had been saving money for a party in a piggy bank so we called it a pig party and roasted a pig," Smithey said. "Well, we roast pork - not a whole pig. We tried that once, and it broke the rotisserie." Her grandson's band, J.W. George & the Texibition, has been playing country music on Friday and Saturday nights for the last year.

Taylor also opens the musical season in early March at the Back Porch and plays regularly at one of the newest venues, Third Coast Theater, which he built with Jim Urban and opened last summer. The small building, which holds about 120 people, is perfect for acoustic sets and singer/songwriters, Urban said. With no liquor license and no smoking, it's more of an intimate theater setting.

"The artists like to come down and treat it as a little vacation, and that way we can entice some who normally wouldn't come this far," Urban said, adding they have shows about once a month and plan to add more as the theater's following grows. The building also doubles as a studio, where Taylor is recording his next album. Called "Summer Days," he plans to release it with a concert on the first day of summer at the Back Porch.

But recording projects also run on island time, so it might not be ready by then. Taylor has a fallback plan for the release concert - during his sixth annual Island Time Festival, a three-or four-day traveling show featuring a number of artists on the Fourth of July weekend. "We started it as another excuse to go to the beach," Taylor said. "But for musicians, the Fourth of July is a pretty big time to make money, so we have to make money somehow - even if we have to go to the beach to do it."

Last year, the package deal costing about \$40 included a beach party complete with hamburgers, horseshoes and a reggae band from Dominique; a show at Pioneer RV Park with Cross Canadian Ragweed, Rusty Weir, Steven Fromholz and Django Walker; an acoustic concert at the Third Coast Theater; and brunch at the Sea Shell Village, where the artists played on the patio - and the "front-row seats" were in the swimming pool.

"It's a laid-back thing," Taylor said.

That's one of the charms of music on the island, the Back Porch's Lagedrost said. "Visitors respond to pretty much everything in Port Aransas differently because we are so laid back," she said. "They can get drunk, fall down and make a fool of themselves and nobody's going to point a finger at them. And there's no dress code - everybody's in shorts and flip flops. I think there may actually be a city ordinance against wearing ties."

Having so many friends in Port Aransas, residents and fans alike, help make the experience a relaxed affair, said Taylor, who is perhaps the island's biggest celebrity. "Steve Fromholz and I were down there writing songs for my new record a couple of months ago, and after a week he said, 'You know, Larry Joe, I wish I were as famous anywhere as you are here.'

"My reply was that I'm just the Don Ho of Port Aransas."

Taylor came up the nickname when, after the release of "Coastal & Western," people kept calling him the Jimmy Buffet of Texas. "That's crazy because Jimmy Buffet is just huge. So I said I wasn't even the Don Ho of Texas, I'm just the Don Ho of Port Aransas - pretty small-time stuff, as far as comparisons to Jimmy Buffet."

So far, Taylor hasn't angered any fans of the Hawaiian pop singer. "But I don't know if he has any around Port Aransas," he said. "I don't get many requests for 'Tiny Bubbles.'"