



So, the **21st Annual Larry Joe Taylor's Music Festival** has come and gone, and it was one for the record books in more ways than one. 41,000 folks through the gates, good weather the entire time, and hundreds of tweets pouring out from my Blackberry and others when technology allowed. What follows is my near 5,000 word recap on what happened.

-Brad

I hear and read lots of people cracking on the Texas/Red Dirt scene and if they write it off as simply a rowdy soundtrack for beer drinking they are truly ignorant. While that happens to some extent out at LJsTs, to reduce this music, scene and festivals of all kinds into that small-mindedness is missing out on a lot of cool stuff. As pointed out by Kelly over at the Gobbler's Knob /the9513 during his coverage, not many festivals and scenes can have Walt Wilkins and Ray Wylie Hubbard in an acoustic format, then 100 yards away have a huge stage with thousands of people rocking along to Cross Canadian Ragweed or Reckless Kelly, topped off by late night acoustic campfire jams simultaneously involving Randy Rogers and Susan Gibson. With that clarification out of the way, I'll try to recap and describe the highlights from five days of musical perfection.

Wednesday:

Kicked off with the quickest trip through the entrance lines I've ever encountered at LJsTs. Good thing, because I was running late and wanted to get my camp set up, passes acquired and be up front for **Josh Grider Trio**. Luckily, my crew of buddies arrived several hours ahead of me and had things rolling along smoothly at our compound. Rushing to the stage to the sounds of G-Ride at the acoustic stage and seeing a huge crowd thoroughly enjoying the Trio's set upon arrival was further justification for one of the most unique artists in Americana music. Just as last year, I think Grider may have had the set of the festival at the acoustic stage. By the time he wrapped up with "Dollar Tree" he had people clapping and standing up in a listening room environment because they were helpless against the Trio's groove. After a stop at the Mandatory compound for some koozies and supplies from the good folks at Woly Board and Lone Star Beer, things quickly transitioned over to the mainstage for **Bart Crow**. Bart gets what the festival is all about and plays it with the respect it deserves. The crowd was wild for his entire set, but just as I'd predicted would happen, the crowd went bonkers (real words edited had something to do with large monkeys and their bathroom process) when he played "Wear My Ring" and I was correct.

The Gourds were up next. I don't know how many in the crowd knew exactly what they were getting into. While waiting for the Gourds to start Shayne Hollinger of Mandatory FM filled me in on the happenings of the Tuesday night crowd. Seems like Todd Snider was on his game for the most part...eccentricities and all. After a painstakingly long set-change and sound check, The Gourds began. The crowd swayed along respectfully, but it wasn't until the opening strains of "Gin and Juice" that the crowd predictably erupted. It was sad that they only knew that song by the Gourds, but it safe to say that by the end of their set, they had won over many new fans.



Jason Boland and the Stragglers were up next, and continuing to build on the momentum of the past year (vocal surgery aside) turned in one of the finest sets of the festival. Since returning from surgery, Boland seems to have recaptured his passion with both hands and grown it into something even better than before. The energy onstage was amazing and Jason was in fine voice. Of course, Roger Ray is usually one of the MVP's of LJT's, and this year was no exception. Like many musicians I talked to, Roger had arrived a day early just to squeeze in as much LJT's as he could. Whether it is leading a campfire jam, playing with other people, talking to folks, or just rocking out the mainstage, Roger does it all out at Melody Mountain Ranch. It's like he's running for mayor of LJT's, but in a good way. During their superb set of tunes, The Stragglers busted out a really cool cover of Haggard's "Rainbow Stew". A timely tune indeed. When they rolled through "My Baby Loves Me When I'm Stoned", a sheepish Jason Eady humorously informed me that his wife does not in fact love him when he is stoned.

Up next on the big stage was **Ragweed**, a band that has been playing this festival for years and who's set last year was interrupted by Mother Nature. Well, she was no competition this year as Cody and the gang ripped through an incredible set featuring new and old. After a lengthy drum solo by Ragsdale, Cody even inserted a really cool acoustic set into the big set, at one point segueing into "When It Comes To You" made most famous by John Anderson, but in fact written by Mark Knopfler of Dire Straits. The boys even obliged the rowdy Stephenville crowd by begrudgingly throwing "Carney Man" into the mix with a submissive laugh and shrug from Cody as he started the opening strains.



As the stage wound down, it was time for the campfire jams. My first stop was Mandatory FM's stage, which found some young teenage kids in the middle of a crazy good jam led by a female vocalist whose name I never got. She was good. It wasn't long before they were joined by Jason Eady, Josh Grider and Scott Davis who plays with Eady and Hayes Carll. I wondered over to Crazy Ray's for a little while and then back to Mandatory where I stayed until about 3AM. During the jam session with the young musicians, a young fiddle player stood out. So much so, that Eady invited him to play during Eady's official set the next afternoon. Only at LJT's! I then meandered back to camp where I found a huge fire and party going on at our place. I quickly called it a night as it was only day 1!

Thursday:

I woke up around 7AM after my sleeping arrangements became less than ideal. My air mattress had taco'd out and I was basically on the ground. So, with a sore back and a little over 3 hours of sleep I took a shower and started breakfast. Around 10AM I mozied up to the stage area to check in on the goings on and clean-up process. It's always interesting to see the post-Woodstock like sea of cans and dirt that is around the morning after.



It was at this time that I realized the helicopter I'd been seeing all day Wednesday wasn't just there to take photos, but was in fact a ride you could pay to take essentially. For \$25 per person with a minimum of 2 and maximum of 3 involved, you could get a ride on the chopper. They started around noon each day and stayed in the air until 2AM grazing over the campfires. I didn't do it, but I know several people who did willingly participate. Including Miss Joni and Jason Eady who rode together in honor of Joni's birthday. Due to it being Joni's b-day, the pilot gave them some extra rock n' roll with there trip. Eady was braver than most every other musician I talked to who mentioned the history of helicopters, musicians and music festivals didn't bode so well. High flying reviews from both of them once they were back on the ground. Others I talked to weren't so happy about the `copter as at times due to the wind, the noise it created made acoustic jams unlistenable. But, I think it was a cool addition to the festival, it just may need a little tweaking of rules.



The first act I caught on stage was the multi-times aforementioned **Jason Eady** accompanied by 2/4 of the Wayward Apostles and the young fiddle player from the night before. Eady with a fiddle is cool. Eady in an environment that fosters listening is perfect. New songs and old songs side by side. He did inform me that the new record has been pushed back a bit, but from what I keep hearing at gigs, it will more than be worth the wait. It was around this time I found Brady Black walking around with Geoffrey Hill looking for redneck games. And, Brady was more than dressed for the occasion.



They found a hearty game of washers as we waited for **Ray Wylie Hubbard** to take the stage and tried to convince Brady to wear that attire onstage. Ray climbed onstage and dominated from the first sound to come out of his mouth and guitar. Ray had some typically humorous stories, including one about the guitar he was playing that he had to buy from his grandpa. It was a you had to be there kind of moment. The soul and energy that Ray puts into a show is a lesson that many younger acts could take a lesson from. Of the newer acts who kicked off the mainstage, I was most impressed by Josh Abbot . It had been a while since I'd seen him play, and the last time I'd seen him play was acoustic. He did a great job, and the crowd really dug his cover of the Wallflowers "One Headlight". Speaking of Mr. Abbott, it was around this time, that I met up with Randy Rogers as he was preparing to go for a LJT chauffeured tour of the campgrounds with Josh. I was invited along, but hung back to hear Johnny Cooper . Upon returning from their jaunt, Randy joked that he must be getting old because as they pulled up to campsites, people didn't recognize him and went crazy for Josh.



As Casey Donahew hit the stage, we hopped on Randy's bus to hear some new tunes he's working on. He played me three of the most solid tunes he's ever written, including the first one that he'd written by himself in quite a while and one he wrote with Sean McConnell. The solo penned one might have been my favorite, and he would employ it in his mainstage set later in the evening. Shortly thereafter, we were joined by Jevan Snead and his girlfriend. For those who saw me tweet about that and were confused, Jevan is a former high school superstar quarterback from

Stephenville who played at the University of Texas prior to transferring to Ole Miss and lighting up the SEC this past year. Jevan was as grounded of a high-level athlete I've ever met. It's not often you can gurm a future millionaire out about what it's like to play with Quan Cosby and beat the hell out of Tech in the Cotton Bowl. A great kid that now gives me a rooting interest in the SEC aside from gambling and hating Nick Saban. Back to the music. Next up onstage is a rejuvenated **Roger Creager** . Creager's always been one of the best entertainers in this scene, even when his setlist didn't change for five years. On the heels of a comeback album of sorts, and in front of an eager crowd, Creager delivered. The set highlight for me was probably "From Shreveport to New Orleans", it seemed to swing a little harder than usual...and that was a good thing.



Then it was time for **Randy Rogers Band** to hit the stage. In what's become a Thursday LJT's tradition, the boys hit Melody Mountain early in the day and soak all of it up. I've seen these boys a lot, and they always bring it just a little bit harder at this gig. As I sat on the bus with Randy beforehand, he was debating what all to put in the setlist because it was going to be 22 songs plus an encore. His dilemma as he saw it was playing last to a crowd that had been sunbaked, filled with suds and pounded over the head by amazing music all day. Well, let's just say that the songs he and the band put together were a perfect mix for the crowd. I think the coolest thing was seeing the response to the new songs being so heavy and loud. The roar when Geoff kicked off the intro riff to "Buy Myself a Chance" was like Zeppelin at the Garden but for country folks. Aside from the idiots who decide throwing a couple beers onstage and narrowly missed destroying Brady's fiddle, the set was perfect. Special props to RRB crewman Toby Hamm for arriving a day early just to party and then work his tail off during the Thursday night set.

Another part of the RRB Thursday LJT tradition is the Tadlock led hayride. Tadlock is the big, burly, bald headed LJT's stage manager. He's a big teddy bear, but he takes care of business. And, when his work night is over he fires up the tractor and takes musicians around to campfires on a cool hayride. Well, once we got everything loaded up and accounted for we had most of the RRB, Eady, and some other pickers all in tow. Oh, there may have also been copious amounts of Boone's Farm Wine and champagne even though the rules strictly prohibit glass products. Blame it on Geoff Hill. With mandolins, fiddles and guitars blazing we tooled around the sea of campfires and revelers under a clear moonless sky. Strains of Haggard covers, which was starting to become a theme throughout the weekend, raged as Eady took lead vocals. Throw in some Oasis, Toadies and Hank Sr. and it became one hell of a jam. After going through several of the camping sections, Tadlock drove us around to the Mandatory stage. Mandatory and Crazy Ray's compounds are neighbors, so that's always a good place to hop in and visit for a jam. This night was no exception. I called it a night around 5AM and the party was still raging.

Friday:

I felt like that old song "Too Much Tequila Last Night" as I arose Friday morning with about four hours sleep and the pounding of a champagne/Boone's Farm rebellion in my head to find that our camp shower was out of order. Therefore, that meant I'd have to suck it up and go hop in line at the community rinser, I mean shower. After a thirty minute wait, I was able to hop into a surprisingly clean shower stall to enjoy a cold trickle that allowed me to rinse the dust off my body but not much more. It served it's purpose and as I was leaving, I ran into some Marines on leave

that were having a mighty good time at LJs and entertaining the whole scene with tales from their previous night. After getting some grub in my tummy, and chugging some G2's and waters, it was time to hit the music again.

My musical day started with **Susan Gibson**. I had missed **Maren Morris** on Wednesday and was determined not to miss the only other official female on the bill. Susan did not disappoint. I took a break to chill out in the Mandatory camper with Kristen Kelly and catch up on some business. The coolest thing about it was that with the camper windows open, I could hear **Walt Wilkins** loud and clear like he was on a satellite radio beaming into the camper. Walt was made for an event like this. He had the crowd's attention from the first note to the last. I think it has something to do with the soul and pride he delivers each lyrical convention with. It doesn't hurt that he's a super dude either. By the time **Max Stalling** hit the stage, it was the largest crowd I've ever seen at the "acoustic" stage ever. "Acoustic" stage was a misnomer this year as many bands eschewed the notion and had their bands behind them, or portions of their bands. Max was no different and by the time he played "Bass Run" the crowd was huge and electric.

Between chatting and hanging with folks like Mike Mancy and most of the Wade Bowen crew, I caught parts of **Joe Pat Hennen** and the living legend **Michael Martin Murphey**. Mancy is working with Roger Ray on some new tunes and should have a record out really soon. I enjoyed the new one's of his I heard. Joe Pat is a very entertaining songwriter and he was joined by his wife for a couple songs. And, then of course Michael Martin Murphey was at the nexus of Texas Music back in the 70's with Willie, Jerry Jeff and Rusty Wier. His sound has swung from Cosmic Cowboy to just Cowboy, but it was still a cool change of pace.



Friday night was promising to be the most solid part of the line-up all weekend. So, toward the end of Murphey's set, I decided it was time to head back to camp and check in. I cleaned up as fast as I could to not miss a thing. After watching a very competitive battle of Guitar Hero on Wade's bus, I headed out to watch the shows. **Rich O' Toole** was up first. A lot of folks hate on Rich, and I don't know why. His music keeps getting better, his band is great, and he's one of the most hardworking and nice guys I've encountered in this scene. The crowd dug him and he was a seamless switch to the combo of **Matt Martindale** backed by **Charlie Shafter** and crew. Matt's solo stuff blew me away. It seems like the only time I see Matt is every year at LJs, I need to correct that.

Band of Heathens rolled up next and dominated like they've been doing for over a year. They continue to be referred to as the most buzzed about and hottest new thing etcetera, but by the looks of that crowd, they're just one of the coolest things. So glad to see a true band getting so much recognition. "Cornbread" was of course a set highlight as the growing throngs observed the double entendres and bounced along to the grooves. After an afternoon that saw Steve join Shayne for the funniest interview of the festival, **No Justice** hit the stage and by the time they hit "Don't Walk Away" the crowd was singing along loud enough that they drowned the band out in parts. Very cool to see that for those guys. While this was going on, Rusty Wier rolled up backstage in a limo looking surprisingly good. I spoke to him briefly and said I was looking forward to his set tomorrow, he said "Good, at least we'll have one person in the crowd!" Folks, if this man's sunny side of life in the face of adversity doesn't inspire or move you, I don't know what's wrong with you.

Wade Bowen was up next on the big stage and after being a first-timer on the big stage last year, he and the guys were excited to hit the mainstage again. Some technical difficulties delayed their set a bit and caused them to cut a couple songs off the setlist. However, these guys still brought it big time. There was not one slow song to be found in

the setlist and the crowd loudly sang along to every note. I've said it before recently and it bears repeating, I think this band might be the tightest and best in the Texas/Red Dirt scene at the moment. Caleb and Brooks are an amazing rhythm section, Gary Wooten is probably the best guitar player working in a band right now, Matt Miller is the glue that holds it all together and the latest addition of Ross Smith on keys is a cool fit to an already cool band. Plus, it doesn't hurt when you are fronted by an incredible songwriter with a powerfully unique voice.

Reckless Kelly were next up. These guys are LJT's veterans and by the time they hit the stage I could've sworn I was at Bonaroo. There were faces and arms as far as I could see from sidestage. At the risk of sounding redundant, RK's set was excellent. I don't know that I've ever seen them play a bad set, and certainly not out at LJT's. They must be the most consistent band working. David Abeyta's guitar was on fire and by the time he sang lead on an old Albert King tune, my ears were in heaven. Willy and Cody Braun paced the band and crowd through a fiery set heavy on the hits and good times.

As they tore into "Crazy Eddie's" for a superly receptive audience, I headed over to Mandatory stage to stake out a good spot. The crowd there was already 10 deep for the night's festivities which kicked off with **Modern Day Drifters**. If Gary Wooten is the best guitar player in Texas, Derrick Dutton isn't far behind. His blues infused licks and riffs are the tastiest in the scene, which should be evidenced on the live album those guys have coming out later this year. Due to the fact that the crowd was becoming a bit unruly and not really respecting the listening room silence required, I soon found myself over at Crazy Ray's again watching Charlie Shafter tear it up. Pretty soon, I was over at some random campfire listening to MDD again as they played for a really receptive audience of people who'd never heard of them. I heard a familiar singing voice behind me as they were playing and turned around to find Charlie Shafter soaking it all in. Great Friday night, that ended on Saturday morning around 4AM.

Saturday:

My crew has been going to LJT's for over a decade, since we were college freshman. Now, that we're all old men around 30, some in the crew decided it would be a cool idea to actually enter the Chili Cookoff portion of the festival. So, with another four hours of shuteye behind us, we began preparations for our chili. I won't share our secret ingredients because after not placing we are taking it serious next year and will definitely win the showmanship award. Count on it!

Due to the many days of little sleep and musical debauchery starting to catch up with me, I took it easy as the chili cooking was going on and decided to chill out until Texas Renegade fired up in the afternoon. Yet, early in the morning I could hear the notes and voices blaring from Mike Mancy's traditional Saturday morning wake-up call. **Texas Renegade** proved to be some serious road dogs. Vanning it from San Marcos to Lubbock to LJT's back to Midland all in two days. That's dedication and passion, and that same dedication and passion showed up in their performance. The crowd was small for them at the start, but by the time they reached the halfway point it was justifiably packed. **Tommy Alverson** was up next and the veteran honky-tonker had just the right mix of subdued rowdiness to fit the wind-swept Saturday afternoon. People were dancing and rubbing the flying dirt out of their eyes and beers simultaneously. It was a beautiful thing.

One of the highlights of each LJT's is **Rusty Wier**'s Saturday afternoon performance. The man is a living legend whose shoulders did a lot of heavy lifting for this scene in it's infancy. Rusty's set is the only one I make sure I push my way to the front for like I'm still a 21 year old kid. After obtaining a spot front and center, the first thing I noticed was three guitar amps set-up and Coby Wier tuning up. I was very excited about this prospect because it has been several years since I've seen Coby plug in and wail. Everything looked normal as John Hollinger strode up to the mic to do his regular introduction of Rusty. John began with "Well, it's that time folks...it wouldn't be a LJT without Mr. Rusty Wier" (crowd roars approval). John continues "Well, folks I've got some bad news, Rusty is under the weather and can't join us today. But, we've decided that you're right...it would not be an LJT without Rusty Wier, so some friends of his are going to join the Rusty Wier Band and sing his songs. So, let's get a chant of Rusty! Rusty! going and welcome them to the stage!"

As a lone bottle of tequila set alone centerstage an array of folks including Matt Martindale, Mike Mancy, Tommy Alverson, Davin James, and LJT himself on lead vocals in front of a 3-headed Coby led guitar attack, they tore through some of Rusty's concert staples and even a few he doesn't play that often anymore. Coby sang lead for a bit on "I Heard You Been Laying My Old Lady" which had a very "Boys From Oklahoma" vibe with people taking verses and switching them up a bit. The emotion that Coby laid into his guitar was the coolest spectacle of the entire festival. He was even moved to tears at one point he was playing so damn hard and emotionally. Some of the best guitar playing I've ever seen. Best of a bad situation, a really cool moment...one that only happens at LJT's! Rusty needs to be the tribute artist in Steamboat next year. The **Tejas Brothers** rolled onstage next, and capitalized on the momentum they gained after the tornadoes hit LJT 2008. Their Tex-Mex flavored take on Texas Music would make Doug Sahm proud.

Brandon Rhyder was an artist I was looking forward to seeing in front of such a large crowd, as I've seen him play many, many times but never in front of a crowd this size. Well, this was the set of the festival for my money. It was so good, I had to ask Eddie if Stephenville is their best market. The energy from the crowd was the best I saw all weekend. They were giving off so much and were in tune with Brandon from the time he stepped up to the mic, to the time he walked offstage. "Backroads" seemed like the "Star-Spangled Banner" as the entire place was on their feet and singing along. Really, really cool. Up next was another longtime LJT survivor and Stephenville area favorite **Mike McClure**. Mac and the boys were joined by a harp player whose harmonica really added some cool textures to the rocking trio sound they've developed over the past years. Great set with old favorites like "Yesterday Road" mixed in with stuff from *did7*. My only complaint was not hearing "Keep On Rockin' in the Free World" which goes over so well at this festival. As the night and festival were coming to a close with LJT getting ready to hit the stage, the sound crew was rocking some Journey over the PA.

A few months ago, I wrote an article about how I often ponder the song choices of the sound crews at large shows like this. Well, these guys get an A plus this year. Everything from Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline", Journey's "Don't Stop Believing", and Dwight Yoakam's "Streets of Bakersfield" kept people in tune and focused on the good times at hand. As LJT and friends closed out the festival, I wearily made my way back to camp to settle in for our own Saturday night tradition of handing out awards to each other such as "Rookie of the Year", "MVP" and just having some cool, laid-back fellowship as we all realize our utopian musical vacation is coming to a close. We were able to hit the hay around 1AM and be up and at 'em by 7AM Sunday morning to roll out of town and back to the real life grind for another year.

Major kudos to the entire LJT staff for creating such a well-organized and cool festival. Larry Joe, Sherry, Zack, Emily, Tadlock, Ben and everyone else I'm leaving out are incredibly accommodating and I hope and plan to continue our relationship infinitely. Also, I must give major thanks to the good folks at Mandatory FM. Each and everyone of the Hollingers (Shayne, AnnaBeth, John and Pam) are incredibly gracious and willing to help out with whatever needs to happen. Is it too early to make plans for next year? See you at LJTs 2010!