

The Man Behind the Music

Larry Joe Taylor celebrates 20 years of good music, good times, at his annual Texas Music Festival, April 22 to 26

By Sheila Bishop, Texan News Service

A gravel road outside of Stephenville leads to a simple country house where a man strums his guitar outside. In this gathering place for musicians, the hills are about to come alive with the sound of the music. The man behind it all, Larry Joe Taylor, emerges from the house wearing a salmon-colored shirt, jeans, work boots and a big smile.

To look at Taylor's unassuming demeanor, you might not guess that he's an influential force in Texas music. But for 20 years Taylor has been bringing musical friends and hometown comfort together at his annual Texas Music Festival and Chili Cookoff. This year's event runs from April 22 to 26 at Melody Mountain Ranch on Farm Road 3025 off U.S 281.

The musical line-up includes Cross Canadian Ragweed, Reckless Kelly, Kevin Welch, Jason Boland, Stoney LaRue, Walt Wilkins, Owen Temple, Wade Bowen, Chris Knight, legendary songwriter Richard Leigh (who penned the Dixie Chicks' "A Cold Day in July" and Crystal Gayle's hit "Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue"), Deryl Dodd, Davin James, Brandon Rhyder, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Michael Hearne and cosmic cowboy music pioneer Rusty Wier.

Over the years the festival has grown bigger, attracting more than 30,000 fans. But it still aims to keep that small-town, intimate feeling. People attending the five-day festival and the musicians themselves bring in RVs or set up campsites. Music plays from daybreak to the wee hours of the morning as artists stroll from campfire to campfire and play songs with other musicians.

"This is a true music festival," Taylor said. "These musicians love music so much that at 3 in the morning there are no fans around and they are still playing."

These days the festival attracts major corporate sponsors such as Coors Light, Ford and Coca-Cola. The slick color program is a whopping 64 pages. That's quite a change from the event's humble beginnings in 1989 when Taylor was an up-and-coming musician who simply wanted to find a way to bring his friends together and play their brand of original music that combined elements of folk, country, rock and blues for a distinctive sound that can only be described as "Texas."

"A gallon of gas was 97 cents, a postage stamp was 25 cents, the Berlin Wall came down, Ted Bundy was executed, George Bush Sr. became president, the Exxon Valdez ran aground and spilled 11 million gallons of oil, Johnny Cooper was 1 year old, and I was in a field in Mingus, Texas, playing music for a bunch of chili cooks and fans of original music," Taylor recalled.

Taylor drew inspiration from the Kerrville Folk Fest, the famous chili cook-off in Terlingua and Willie Nelson's annual Fourth of July celebration. Although attendance at the first festival was small, it launched what has become one of Texas' largest outdoor music events.

"I just wanted people to hear our music," Taylor said. "After the first year I didn't think that we were going to do this again."

But year after year, fans enjoyed the festival so much that they looked forward to it again the next year. Word spread and more and more people attended. Taylor had to find venues to accommodate the growing number of fans. Over the years the festival has been held in Mingus, Thurber, Glen Rose and, finally, Melody Mountain Ranch.

"Someone asked me, 'How big do you want this thing to get?'" Taylor recalled. "I just want to turn on as many people to this music as I can."

One festival particularly stands out in his mind. It was the year Taylor knew he was on to something big.

"It was about year eight; we had it in Glen Rose then," Taylor said. "I was walking along the Brazos River and I had my guitar with me. It was the last night, Saturday, and it was pretty late. I could see way down there this campfire and everyone else had gone to bed and I thought, 'Let me go down there and pick with those guys.'

I'm not ready for bed yet.

"The closer I got, I could see that these were good pickers," he continued. "I walked up there and saw Guy Clark, Rusty Wier, Joe Pat Hennen, Pat Green and a couple of other guys playing. That cemented in my mind that we were doing something right."

Some of the musicians that have played at Taylor's festival, such as Pat Green, have made big names for themselves and become more popular without having to leave Texas and travel to Nashville or other places to be heard. But Taylor said "the music hasn't really changed."

Taylor's wife, Sherry, son and daughter-in-law keep the music and the tradition alive. "It's a family business," Taylor said. Without the help of a garbage detail or clean-up crew, the Taylors roam from campsite to campsite after the festival and pick up trash left by fans.

Along with staging the festival, Taylor wants to keep playing his own music. He's recorded six CDs, the most recent one being Times.

"Someone asked me, 'When are you going to retire?'" Taylor said. "I answered, 'Retire from what?' As long as the music is good and the people want to hear me, then I am ready to play."

For more information about Larry Joe Taylor's Texas Music Festival, call (254) 968-8505 or visit www.larryjoetaylor.com. One-day tickets are \$20 in advance, \$23 at the gate; two-day tickets are \$28 in advance, \$33 at the gate; and three-day tickets are \$38 in advance, \$43 at the gate. Four-day and five-day tickets are sold out.

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