

TEXAS MUSIC AND LJT

(Paul Koonsman, Tarleton Alumni J-TAC, Summer 2000)

Motor homes, camper trailers, tents, trucks, buses, cars, vendor booths, flags, grandpas, grandmas, grandkids, teenagers, cowboys, bikers, frat-rats, co-eds, doctors, lawyers, professors, campfires, chili, beans, Bar-B-Q and music...music...music all thrown together in a boiling Texacana burgoo. Everything from pearly white "never seen the sun" necks to sun-scorched, tank-topped, "my mama calls me 'Sonny' but you can call me 'Bubba'" brew-blooded rednecks. Nawww.....this is not a modern day Grapes of Wrath reunion; it's Larry Joe Taylor's Texas Music Festival and Chili Cook-off. Eight thousand people, 25 acts and 28 hours of music thrown together in a three-day happening down in the Bosque bottoms at Meridian, Texas.

What is this "Texas Music"??? Is it country?...well, kinda, how about rock...a little, blues...yeah, some of that, and some folk too. Oh, and I nearly forgot, a little calypso and reggae and some that you'll just have to call coastal. Written by Texans, about Texas places, Texas people, Texas happenings, Texas thinking, Texas food, Texas hospitality, Texas pride, Texas history and anything else Texas. Does this happen anywhere else? Nope...just in Texas. You won't find it in Texas Stadium, the Astrodome, the Alamo Dome or the major indoor arenas with all the fireworks, special effects and all the glitz. You will find it in the better beer joints, the worst beer joints, hamburger joints, dance halls, river bottoms, on flatbed trailers, around campfires and in someone's living room...and you will always find it live.

There seems to be a camaraderie and a family atmosphere among the Texas musicians that exist both on and off stage. If you go to a Texas music show, you are likely to see several artists on stage at the same time. There doesn't seem to be a pecking order or a problem with who's opening the show and who's closing. They sing and record each other's songs, and often collaborate on the writing of songs. Probably the one thing that endears them to their fans the most is how they relate to their fans and their accessibility. It is not unusual to see the artists walking through the audience visiting with fans. The man who has been most instrumental in promoting the whole Texas music scene during the 90's is the man from Huckabay, Texas, Larry Joe Taylor.

Twelve years ago when LJT started his festival in Mingus, Texas with Ray Wiley Hubbard, Joe Pat Hennen and Larry Joe's drummer, eleven-year-old son Zack, he was only looking for a place to play. His attempts at getting booked into some of Texas's more recognized musical venues, and some not so well recognized, had met with little success. He readily admits that the 2000 festival had more people working behind stage than were present in the audience for the initial offering in Mingus. Now, in addition to his April bash in Meridian and his July 4th Island Time Festival in Port Aransas, Taylor regularly plays some of Texas's more popular dance halls and clubs along with several concerts and festivals. He will play over 150 dates this year, including Gruene Hall, Billy Bob's Texas, Cowboys, White Elephant Saloon, several private parties and an occasional campfire or lumberyard. Always remembering the difficulty that he had in finding a place to play, Taylor agonizes over selecting 25 acts from the 80-100 that ask to play at his April festival. He vividly remembers getting a boost years ago from Gary P. Nunn, the first man to tell him that his songs were good. (Gary P. Nunn has recorded 22 songs that LJT has penned.)

You have to meet the man to understand why it is so difficult for Larry Joe to make those decisions, which might have a profound effect on a young artist's career. Interviewing Larry Joe Taylor, however, is like giving a short answer quiz, answers are brief and calculated as if he is putting together the lyrics of another song. He seems to be almost embarrassed that he has become such a recognizable figure in the Texas music business. When asked how he felt when he was on stage and the audience was singing every word of his songs with him, he admits that he is flattered but has often thought "Hey folks, this is just Larry Joe Taylor." The words to Larry Joe's songs probably express the way he feels and the way he thinks much better than he can convey in a one-on-one conversation. Thus, his poignant summation of the average man's American dream:

*I got a brand new Chevrolet out in the drive.
I got a thirty-year fixed-rate mortgage that I live inside.
I don't think I like what I got,
Cause I think it's got me.
I guess I just woke up from my American dream.
I guess my wife she'll work for the state
for the rest of her life
When all she ever wanted to be was a mom and a wife
She tells me I don't look like the guys in Cosmopolitan magazine
I guess she just woke up from her American dream.
John he loved to teach the kids in the public school
Said it's seems a whole lot harder
since they changed the rules
Gunshots echo through the halls
Another one falls
The last bell rings
And it woke him up from his American dream.
--American Dream--*

Larry Joe Taylor grew up in Brownwood, Texas, the son of a father who worked for the Highway Department for 27 years and a mother who worked in a sewing factory. Larry Joe started playing guitar when he was about seven years old on a guitar that his brother, Norice, had received as a Christmas gift. He played with a band called the Nomad 5 while in high school and came to Tarleton in the fall of 1970 with his musical roots firmly established in rock music. The music of the Doors, CCR and the Loving Spoonful was what he primarily played in high school but he developed an interest in country music after coming to Tarleton. He recalls going to the old Lakeside Club in Proctor to see Johnny Bush and down to Austin to see Jerry Jeff Walker, B.W. Stevenson and Steve Fromholtz. Taylor did not play in an organized band while he was in college but played at a number of parties and jam sessions. There was very little live music being performed at Tarleton during the early 70's

Although Larry did not find many places to play his music in his time at Tarleton, he did get involved in campus activities. He was a member of the Purple Poo, Lords and Commoners, sophomore class president and was selected class favorite his freshman year. Sherry Woods, a young lady from Midland, entered in the fall of 1971 and she and Larry Joe began a relationship that has now lasted more than 26 years. They were married in December of 1973 just a few months after he had taken a job with Continental Grain, and for the next six years Taylor put his musical interests on hold. They spent several years in Hutchinson, Kansas, with Continental, which was a complete musical drought for Taylor, not even owning guitar during this period. In 1979 the Taylors returned to Texas with a little extra luggage. Their son, Zack, was born on Sherry's birthday in April of 1978.

Taylor worked in auto parts sales after returning to Texas but his musical interest quickly began to rekindle, both playing and songwriting. He struggled for many years developing as a singer-songwriter but in 1998, he finally felt secure enough in the entertainment business to quit his "day job." Thus, Larry Joe Taylor, singer-songwriter, festival promoter, record producer, entertainer and auto engine salesman dropped the auto engine salesman tag and finally began living his life-long dream.

In the last dozen years, LJT has become one of the most respected men in the Texas music business. In addition to being one of the top songwriters in the state, Taylor is highly respected for his fairness and his tireless promotion of Texas singer-songwriters. He is always generous with his time and his support of young artists trying to get into the business or of performers whose careers have stagnated. After singing on LJT's last CD, the legendary Rusty Weir says, "Larry Joe Taylor has helped me a whole lot and I appreciate it from my heart, and I am proud to sing on any CD he ever has."

In spite of these generous accolades, Taylor still seems completely amazed that all of this has happened to him. However, success has not come easy for LJT. Larry Joe confesses that songwriting requires a great deal of hard work; he states, "I have to make an appointment with myself to write." He readily admits that singing is his weakness, but that seems to be a common thread that runs through the more accomplished songwriters. You don't have to be able to hold a note very long though if your lyrics really have something to say. He is highly respected as a songwriter and his songs have been recorded by other noted Texas artists, Jerry Jeff Walker, Gary P. Nunn, the Lost Gonzo Band, Rusty Weir, Tommy Alverson and Joe Pat Hennen. Taylor seems to find his greatest inspiration for song ideas down on the Texas coast and many of his songs have a coastal theme with a familiar calypso beat.

When asked where he wants to be 10 years from now, Taylor says, "I would like to be performing more acoustic music and touring more nationwide." (Taylor and cohort Davin James just recently returned from a three-week tour of the East coast.) Quizzed about the effect that his singing career has had on family life, he states, "I have been fortunate to have Zack with me most of the time, and Sherry and I stay pretty focused." Sherry Taylor is one of the more gracious and likable ladies you will ever meet and should share generously in the credit for Larry Joe's success. You get the impression with LJT that he is never really away from the family, only away from home. Zack is scheduled to graduate from Tarleton next year and when asked about breaking in a new drummer if Zack decides to leave the band, he says, "Zack is the best drummer I've ever had, I'm not sure I want anyone else; I might just start that acoustical career a little earlier."

Larry Joe Taylor is still the quiet, accommodating, good-old Texas boy that he was over 15 years ago when I first met him. He will probably be unchanged 15 years from now. He says, "The only time I had this much fun was when I was in college." I hope that doesn't change. There are too many people having fun right along with him.