

Larry Joe Taylor's 23rd Annual Texas Music Festival & Chili Cookoff



Having recently won the 2011 "Music Festival of the Year" awarded by Texas Regional Radio for last year's [Larry Joe Taylor Music Festival](#), which was the **best Texas Music Festival of 2010**, we began to ponder how the 23rd annual would be able to top the best Texas Music Festival of the Year award! Then we noticed that the Festival was mentioned in Friday's [edition](#) of the New York Times - Wow, how 'bout that, not a bad start for the 2011 festival. But when I looked at the lineup for the 23rd annual festival, the first comment was "Larry Joe and his son Zack nailed it again!" Hands down this was the best ever mix of performers out of all the six years we have been attending this outstanding festival.

In fact, in the 2011 program Larry Joe stated "I've had the pleasure of hosting this musical event for 22 years and I'm telling you that the music lineup this year is the best ever!" I sure agree with that statement.

The 23rd annual Texas Music Festival included some veterans and Texas legends (like Richard Leigh, Michael Hearne, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Joe Ely, and Butch Hancock), some up and comers (KHYY's Battle of the Bands Winner and the 106.9 The Ranch's 2011 Singer Songwriter winner), lots of our favorite bands (Tejas Brothers, Davin James, Roger Creager, Tommy Alverson, Max Stallings, Matt Martindale, and of course Larry Joe Taylor), and some of the best of the Texas country music scene (Pat Green, Randy Rogers Band, Cody Gill, Reckless Kelly, Kevin Fowler, Stoney LaRue). It just doesn't get much better than that group of performers - and there were another 32 bands in the lineup, the vast majority of which were outstanding. In addition to a fantastic lineup, part of what makes this festival both unique and entertaining is that Larry Joe ensures that it is very "song writer" oriented - all of the artists on the bill, without exception, are songwriters and write and perform their own material. None of the phony Nashville twang here.

LJT's Texas Music Festival began in Mingus, Texas 23 years ago as a one day festival with just six artists and a busload of fans. Who would have imagined that from such a humble beginning the festival would morph into a 5 day event with 4 stages with over 50 performers and around 45,000 music fans from all corners of the US descending on Larry Joe's 400 acre Melody Mountain Ranch for camping, partying, and some excellent music! Oh, and this Music Festival is also a Chili Cook-off.

The Stages & Music

The Campfire Stage

For the last several years, the music has kicked off on the Campfire Stage and usually consists of 4 to 5 artists taking turns singing and picking on a small stone stage with a fire pit and Tiki torches. Ticket sales for the campfire music are limited to keep it small and intimate and focused on music - thanks, Larry Joe, that really makes it special. The dedicated group of fans sit in lawn chairs or atop their coolers under the trees and a sky full of stars. This year Radney Foster played solo for a little over an hour and then Larry Joe, Deryl Dodd, Dave "Skippy" Perez of the Tejas Brothers, and Matt ("you just want to squeeze him") Martindale took the stage and they kept us laughing, and singing, and drinking, and having fun for a couple hours. It all started when Matt broke out a half gallon of Tequila and gave it to the fans to pass around and then brought out a fifth of Tequila and passed it around to his fellow singers on stage. And the evening ended all too soon with an empty fifth of Tequila and a toast to Rusty Wier. In addition to great songs from each of them, the bantering back and forth and camaraderie made this a very entertaining evening that was well worth the 5 day price of admission! It just doesn't get much better than listening to some fantastic music, sitting in a comfy lawn chair under the trees and stars and sipping a cold beer.



City Limits Bar Stage

Prior to the music on the Campground Stage 7 singer songwriters took turns in three sets picking and playing in the City Limits Bar Stage. For the last two or three years, City Limits, which is a live music venue and nightclub in Stephenville, has set up a huge tent on the edge of the field close to the main stage. The tent is home to a full bar including several margarita machines, picnic tables, and a small stage for music. The stage came alive on Tuesday evening; Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday morning for an hour around 11 or 12; and after the last set on the main stage on Saturday night Cody Gill played for anyone who still had some energy after five days of music - and it was a big crowd!

The City Limits tent is a welcome break from the open field with no shade and a frozen margarita sure tastes great on a hot day. This year Kylie Rae Harris, Jed Zimmerman, Cody Riley, and William Clark Green played on the City Limits Bar Stage. Kylie Rae Harris was a pleasant surprise with a great voice and her meaningful, relevant, and original songs. Everyone we heard was good but Jed Zimmerman remains our favorite with his soothing tales of the muddy Mississippi Delta and the majestic mountains of the southwest.





Allsup's Acoustic Stage

When the music stops at the City Limits Stage, it starts on the Allsup's Acoustic Stage. This is our favorite stage because the crowd remains small and dedicated to music - the late night younger party crowd is still sleeping or nursing a hangover around their campsite. Signs about "No Talking During Performances" abound on the stage and the MCs constantly remind the fans that this is an acoustic stage and that the partying, talking, and texting can continue somewhere else on the 400 acre Melody Mountain Ranch. The small acoustic stage is under a large open sided roof with a large tent for additional shaded seating on the left side of the stage.

The lineup for the acoustic stage included:

Thursday Lineup	Friday Lineup	Saturday Lineup
Casey Berry Butch Hancock Keith Sykes Davin James Max Stalling Bruce Robison & Kelly Willis	Winner of 106.9 The Ranch Singer-Songwriter Showdown Ryan Beaver Bob Livingston Michael Hearne & South by Southwest Tommy Alverson Christ Knight	Joey Green Walt Wilkins Richard Leigh Ray Wylie Hubbard

Wow, what a fantastic and enjoyable lineup at the acoustic stage - to a tee every artist was outstanding, the bad news was that each set was too short! Keith Sykes, Butch Hancock, Richard Leigh, and Bob Livingston are legends and very accomplished singer songwriters. For example, Keith is a guitarist/songwriter/producer extraordinaire who has contributed to projects for Jimmy Buffett, John Pine, Guy Clark, Jerry Jeff Walker, Todd Snider, Rosanne Cash, and Patty Lovelace. Davin James is always excellent with a deep, rich voice, virtuoso chops, and a wide range of songs from country to rock to jazz - and you can't help but get wrapped up in his dynamic enthusiastic flashy handmade boot stomping, body wiggling performances.





Tommy Alverson (who has played this Festival for the 22nd year!) never disappoints and he was on a roll - a real pleasure to listen and sing along to. Max Stalling remains a favorite and he's got a lot of new stuff that was excellent. Walt Wilkens, with a voice as soothing and comfortable as a pair of old blue jeans is one of the best. And you've got to love the humor and sarcasm of one of the original "outlaws" - Ray Wylie Hubbard. How can you not enjoy someone who sings songs like "Snake Farm," "Screw You, We're From Texas," and "Redneck Mother." Michael Hearne may have stolen the show with his band of renowned which included: a Taos steel guitar player, Kylie Rae Harris, Davin James, Bob Livingston on harmonica, Steve Lane on bass fiddle, Richard Leigh, Larry Joe, and Kevin Welch. What a great set.



Bud Light Band Stage

Around 5:00 each day the music sadly ends on the acoustic stage and there is a mass migration of coolers, chairs, and music fans from the Allsup's Acoustic Stage, the parking area, and the campgrounds to the Bud Light Band Stage - and the party starts! The Bud Light Band Stage is at the bottom of a gently sloping huge open area that is lined with a variety of vendors selling good food, hats, clothing, motorcycles, sunglasses, washer boards, and more. The stage is huge with gigantic speakers putting out some quality sound that the cows grazing in the pastures will long remember. On each side of the stage are two large jumbo trons telecasting the performances and making it easy for those not close to the stage to get a good view of each of the bands. New this year are box seats - Larry Joe has added box seats above the right side of the stage for VIPs, giving them a great view of the stage and lively crowd. This stage is as much about partying as it is listening to or better yet, partying to the music - the mostly young and friendly crowd enjoys music, beer, and good

times! And the front of the stage is jam packed with fans from the time the music starts till the last song is sung.

Wednesday Lineup	Thursday Lineup	Friday Lineup	Saturday Lineup
Winner of Plano's KHYI Battle of the Bands Turnpike Troubadours Mark McKinney Rich O'Toole Bart Crow Kevin Fowler Stoney Larue Pat Green	Kyle Park Cody Canada & the Departed Josh Abbott Band Wade Bowen Randy Rogers Band	Six Market Boulevard No Justice Mike McClure Band Johnny Cooper Roger Creager Reckless Kelly	Charla Corn The Tejas Brothers Joe Ely Band Deryl Dodd Brandon Rhyder Jason Boland & the Stragglers Larry Joe Taylor Cody Gill Band

The lineup on any one of those nights was worth the 4 day price of admission - no other festival in Texas comes close to matching each night's lineup. For a Wednesday night, how can you beat Rich O'Toole, Bart Crow Band, Kevin Fowler, Stoney LaRue, and Pat Green in one evening? Wow, a foot stomping, beer drinking, two stepping, sing along fun evening that won't be forgotten for a long time. The pace really picked up when Kevin Fowler took the stage and got us going with his "country with a bad attitude - country with an attitude that's beer-drinkin', hell-raisin', good-time music." Stoney brought us back to reality with his red dirt rootsy, emotionally honest sound of country with the beer drinking swagger of heartland rock and a dash of the moody undercurrents of the blues.



Stoney was followed by the ever dynamic Pat Green with his comfortable and well known country rock that makes you feel good, want to dance, and sing along! He really knows how to entertain and get the juices flowing. What a great evening of music. After the music stopped on Wednesday night it was hard to believe that it was only Wednesday and we still had another 35 bands to enjoy in the next three days! Time to starting pacing myself!



On Thursday night it was hard to beat the Randy Rogers Band. Their dynamic act centered on songs that perfectly fit the lively party vibe of this music festival. As USA Today said, "The Randy Rogers Band has loads of grit, swagger, and heart." And the Josh Abbott Band captured the audiences attention with his country and raw honky tonk that evinces a slight Steve Earle sound - breathy, fiery, and intense. Another great evening - now I'm really going to have to pace myself. It's amazing how much beer you can drink and how tired you can get after dancing around to two days of foot stomping music. The good news was I didn't know a lot of the groups so my voice was still partially functioning after all the sing-a-longs.

However, I did wake up a little later on Friday morning with a slightly larger head! But I made it in time to catch Kylie Rae Harris at 11 at the City Limits Bar Stage. Could Friday's lineup on the Bud Light Band Stage top Thursday's lineup? It came very close with Six Market Blvd., No Justice, Mike McClure Band, Johnny Cooper, Roger Creager, and Reckless Kelly. Johnny Cooper has really matured from a high pitched pimply young kid to a dynamic talented and award-winning 23 year old musician, singer, and songwriter who has really grown up on the stage. His music is an interesting blend of rhythm and blues, pop music, country, Texas Country, red dirt, and Southern rock that is exemplified by the deep groove and buzzing guitars. Normally, Johnny Cooper would be a hard act to follow, but not if he's followed by one of our favorites - Roger Creager! It's hard to beat Roger's full bodied voice, energy and enthusiasm, and songs that are a mix between beer drinking ballads and songs that will penetrate the soul. What a talented and lively group that incorporates rousing guitars coupled with a fiddle, accordion, keyboard, and washerboard into some fun and lively songs delivered with high energy. Reckless Kelly kept the fans going and concluded the evening with a hell-raising, hard-playing, kick-ass set.





Thank God the music didn't start until 12 on Saturday - I needed some extra time to get some sleep, down some aspirin, recuperate, regroup, and restock the cooler!

After a fantastic set by everyone on the acoustic stage, the Bud Light Band Stage came alive with Charla Corn and her infectious energy. Charla was followed by another one of our favorites, the Tejas Brothers led by high energy dynamic dancing Dave and his accordion. A fantastic set highlighted by Dave and Larry Joe singing "7 Spanish Angels." Brandon Rhyder was fantastic and what an outstanding voice. Deryl "Pearl Snaps, double D" Dodd played his typical dynamic



high energy dirt road honky tonk set, Joe Ely belted out some hard core country and raw rock and roll, Jason Boland & The Stragglers played some great contemporary country, and then the Larry Joe took the stage to a cheering fan base of thousands.

Larry Joe's set was the highlight of the evening for me - a fantastic mix of songs with the coastal atmosphere of Jimmy Buffett, the country feel of idols like Guy Clark and Jerry Jeff Walker, and some good 'ole rock and roll. But the best of the evening is when he was joined on stage by all of the musicians for a tribute to Rusty Wier and a conclusion to a memorable festival with everyone joining in for a verse of "Will the Circle be Unbroken" Wow! .





The Campground Stages

Shortly after the gates open at Melody Mountain Ranch and the campers get settled in, the music starts and continues for the next five days from just after breakfast to a few hours before sunrise. As you wander through the campgrounds you'll find everything from a couple pickers sitting in their camp chairs singing together to some pretty elaborate setups with generator powered amps and microphones as well as mini stages set up by some of the radio stations. Just in back of our motorhome, our fellow campers had a huge portable canopy, a couple couches, a homemade bar, and three microphones for live music. It's a blast to wander through the campground and participate in the singing and partying around the campfires (which weren't allowed this year thanks to a no burn ban) - everyone is welcome to pick and play or just pop a cold beer and sing along. You'll hear some very talented musicians, a few that should practice more in the shower, and quite frequently some of the main stage artists playing.

On Saturday night we stopped by some of the campfires, were gladly welcomed, offered a beer, and listened for a half hour or so to some pretty good singers and pickers playing to a group of about 25 people of all ages. And just like Joe Ely's song, "The Road Goes On Forever and The Party Never Ends" they kept jamming until 4:15 AM - just outside our bedroom window with the volume turned up full blast. I seem to remember that when we were first listening, they sounded pretty good but when I woke up at 3:45 they weren't sounding that good - in fact, the booze was doing the singing and it was hard to make out the slurring words to many of the songs and the guitars and banjos sounded out of tune!

The Fans

In addition to some fantastic music, a large part of what we love about the Larry Joe Taylor Music Festival are the wide variety of fun and lively fans that attend each year. As mentioned earlier, a lot of the fans attend each year for what may be one of the biggest parties of the year, which just happens to have some music. A lot of the crowd is from nearby Tarleton State University, in fact I would guess the professors are lecturing to empty classrooms on Wednesday to Friday and that the campus is very quiet that week. You'll find a few young kids (this is not a real kid friendly festival), several dogs, lots of middle aged music lovers, a few grandmas and grandpas, and lots of 20 to 35 year olds - in fact, this year

set a new record with around 45,000 attendees! It's a fun loving, lively, and friendly group.

A lot of them come dressed in a wide variety of interesting outfits from homemade Larry Joe tee shirts to string bikinis.



Around 12:30 or so, there is a steady migration of fans heading toward the main stage carrying their coolers and chairs and some very creative seating. The coolers of all shapes and sizes serve a couple functions - one to carry cold beer, wine, sodas, munchies, and jello shots and the other to serve as a platform for standing on to view the bands and to use as a dancing platform. You'll see very creative ways to keep the drinks cold and provide a good view of the stage. For example, one group built a large platform with wheels that carried a full size couch and a large cooler to the stage area where they flipped it over and put the couch on top of the five foot tall platform with wheels; another built a scaffold type structure with a fishing boat on top where they used fishing poles with jello shots to try to get women to show their breasts in return for a jello shot.



Not only do they go all out on ways to transport beer and seating, but they get creative with ways to consume beer or wine using home made beer bong, hydration backpacks filled with some concoction, and one person actually filled a weed sprayer with beer. And it doesn't stop there - they also get very creative with hats and head gear, masks, tee-shirts, and other interesting outfits! It's a blast to just meander through the throngs of bodies.



The Vendors

After all that partying you're going to be starving and you won't go hungry at Larry Joe Taylor's Music Festival. All along the perimeter of the main stage are several vendors selling everything from BBQ to Pizzas. You can get a hot dog, chicken salad sandwich, patty melt, corny dog, gyro, taco or fajita - just to mention a few of the choices. We can't resist the patty melts and fresh cut fries from Katie's Cafe - to die for and nothing better than some fries loaded with salt and a hot patty melt after a long day of music and drinking. This year there were a couple new vendors that we had to try. We kept seeing people eating pizza and raving about it, so we had to try one from Fired Up Pizza - yummmmm, individually made with fresh ingredients and your choice of some great toppings ranging from spinach to goat cheese. Then the pizzas are baked to perfection in an authentic wood fired oven imported from Italy. Ask Gino the owner to cook you one of his favorites - good for breakfast, lunch or dinner! We also had one of the chicken gyros from Greek Corner and went back a half hour later to share another one they were soooo good - they sell Greek Salads, lamb and chicken gyros, and a Greek ribeye! And one vendor sells very tasty Philly Cheesesteaks and a variety of fancy "dawgs & weennies," BLT's, Tacos, and fresh squeezed lemonade.





Good news - you also shouldn't run out of beer or ice. Larry Joe opened up his own mini mart selling a wide variety of beer by the six pack or case and bags of ice to get it cold. But every once in awhile you need a break from the beer, jello shots, or box wine - so treat yourself to a very tasty Pina Colada or Daiquiri. They sell frozen strawberry, coconut, and pineapple Daiquiris that are delicious and it's hard to have just one. But don't worry, when you buy one of their drinks in a souvenir glass, you get a free refill! How good is that?

Mixed in with all that tasty festival food and drink are a few other vendors selling cowboy hats, sunglasses, clothes, jewelry, washer boards, and custom built motorcycles. If inclined, you can even sign up for a free trip to California by joining the Marines.

In addition, there is the Merch Booth that is loaded with T-shirts, koozies, and CDs from all the performing artists.

Camping

Larry Joe's Texas Music Festival is also all about camping! In fact, it is clearly the best way to truly enjoy this fun festival - after all that music and drinking, anytime you feel like it you can cozy back to your campsite and take a nap. Melody Mountain Ranch is 400 acres that is mostly prime pasture land until the festival where it is taken over with tents of all shapes and sizes, travel trailers, motorhomes, converted school buses, and just about everything else that can provide a little shelter and a place to catch some zzzzs. You'll find new \$400,000 motor homes surrounded by tents and very dated travel trailers that look like they are on their last leg.



From sunrise to sunrise there is always something going on in the campground - groups picking and jamming, playing all sorts of games from poker to washers, cooking and drinking, or just trying to get some shut eye. A few sites have water and electric, but it's virtually impossible to get them - they have been taken since the festival first moved to Melody Mountain Ranch. A few RV rental firms rent and deliver RVs to the festival. If you truly want to enjoy the festival, find something to sleep in or someone to bunk with during the festival.

Bottom Line - Larry Joe and Zack and their crew of thousands did it again - the Larry Joe Taylor Music Festival is the

best Music Festival in Texas and if it doesn't win another award or recognition as such, something is wrong. From the time you enter the gate until it's time to head home, the hundreds of volunteers, security team, local police, vendors, stage and sound crew, clean-up party, and porta potty crew do a superb job of making this festival painless and enjoyable for everyone who is attending. Thanks to all of you for making this so much fun.

We can't wait to see what for April 2012 to see what they have planned to try and top this year's festival. Mark you calendars now. See you there. Visit [Larry Joe Taylor's Website](#) to find out more about the 24th annual Texas Music Festival or any of the other fun events that he puts on each year. One of our favorites is his Wine and Vines Festival in October at Melody Mountain Ranch - three days of great country music, camping, and a smaller more serious group of music fans. Read our [review of last year's Rhymes & Vines](#).