

Ballads

Texans Don't Fit In – and I'm Glad by Bob Gray

First I want to thank T.R.Fehrenbach and Derek Spence's father. Fehrenbach wrote **Lonestar**, a readable and informative book on Texas history. Derek's dad did us all a favor when he gave a copy to his son. Derek is a history buff, which shows up in his music.

So what?, you ask. Well, when his dad gave Derek the book he inscribed the flyleaf with, "If you ever wondered why you don't fit in, the answer is here." The direct result is Derek's song, ***Texans Don't Fit In***. Just about every Texas songwriter I've come across has written some version of "I Love Texas". Derek's take on the theme is original, refreshing, and funny – if you're a Texan, or a "Texafied" transplant.

Texafied? That's the word Derek uses for folks who come from elsewhere and learn why being a Texan is a different – and good – thing. I played the song for a visiting friend (who moved to Texas from Chicago thirty years ago), and his comment was as direct and emotionally fulfilling as the song's refrain. As the last words of the song faded, ... *and I'm proud to be a Texan, we just don't fit in...* with happy tears in his eyes my friend said, "Why would we want to?"

This CD, Derek's first, contains nine beautiful songs. While ***Texans Don't Fit In*** is endearing for its attitude, several of the others are entrancing for other reasons. For instance, ***Hill Country Blue*** is the heart of a Texan longing for home. Written while Derek spent five years assaulting the walls of the Nashville scene, it has the soulful sound of a soldier on a foreign shore wanting only to return to the Hill Country of Texas.

Another favorite Texas music theme is trains. Derek "can't get off this ***Train of Thought***, I paid with my heart, and the ticket's bought." All the metaphors are there, one track mind, one way ticket, no light at the end of the tunnel... The keyboards on this one are spectacular. His contribution to bewitched, bothered, and bewildered is ***My Get Up and Go (is Gone)***. It's true, love can be both energizing and enervating.

What Buffet Sings About is a wonderful romp through the Jimmy Buffet experience – about a man who wants nothing more than to be left alone to write his songs – to observe and appreciate the world around him. ***Guadalupe*** is a happy tune, again in the Buffet style, of a guy looking forward to an afternoon with his friends tubing down the Guadalupe. ***Goin' Under (Gettin' Over You)*** is just what it looks like – but highlights Derek's wonderful command of language. He combines a rainstorm and the heartbreak of separation in such a touching way that you want it to pour while you listen. And the background fiddle echoes the imagined sound of a heart tearing apart.

Okay, I've raved about several of the songs on this CD. But I haven't told you about my favorite. ***Lately, I've Been Known To*** is one of the most beautiful songs I've ever heard. "My friends used to tell me I had a heart of stone, but I guess it's turned to dust now since you left me here alone." Most of us go through life with a self-image – how we think, how we react, how we *are*. Then something life-changing happens – we lose a much loved friend, have a near death illness or experience, we age, we mature. Whatever that thing is, it also changes our self-image, often before we even realize it's happened.

“I’ve never had to wonder what I was gonna do, but lately, I’ve been known to.” And that’s the first we know that our world has changed – maybe for the worse, but forever and for certain.

If you’re a Texan – born here or Texafied – you simply should not let this collection of songs get away from you. I have a small collection of songs I listen to every night before I turn out the lights. *Lately I’ve Been Known To* became a part of that collection on the very first listen.

Derek is 31, married for ten years with an infant son. He’s been writing and performing since he was 15 (I wrote somewhere else once that I believe there is a factory in Texas that turns out to the club circuit adolescents with a song writing gene and a guitar – and Derek’s story fits the theory to a T). Starting so young, his dad had to go with him when he performed in bars. What a dad! And the life of an itinerant musician seldom lends itself to a long marriage. Given Derek’s particulars, we must also say: What a Wife!

He won his first songwriting contest at 16 – the Tru-Value Country Showdown – where he was Texas State Champion. He took the family to Nashville in 1995, spent five years trying to penetrate the thick skulls that run things (he says, “Nashville is run by New York – and New York is run by Japan”). He opened for some of the big names (Tricia Yearwood, Vince Gill, LeeAnn Womack, Kenny Rogers – many more). I’m glad he wasted no more time on them. He came home to Fredericksburg and went to school to learn how to produce and master his own songs. Nashville’s loss is a pure Texas gain.

Like most Texans living in the country, he does a variety of things to pay the bills - and to fill his time creatively. Until the recent budget cutbacks he worked for Texas Parks and Wildlife. He does chainsaw carvings – and if you walk down Fredericksburg’s main street you’ll see them – bears and eagles and, well you get the idea. He performs every Thursday at the Auslander, every Friday and Saturday night at the Rathskellar, and periodically at Lincoln Street. As I said, a typical Texas way of making ends meet in the country – except that his songwriting and performing is so far above his competitors. Part of the credit may also belong to the two people that back him up when he needs it - **John Wheeler** “who plays everything well” (and is a wonder on the piano), and **Irena Melton**, another keyboard whiz. Derek will have a website up soon. Until then you can email him at: chainsaw@ktc.com.

His next CD will come out in the Spring of 2004. He’s content with what he’s doing. The trip to Nashville taught him something important – he doesn’t really want to be famous. The notoriety is not worth the loss of a good life. He wants to live in Texas, be with his wife and son, have a life in a small town where the folks “nod when they pass by.”

I want that for him, too. He’s a decent man whose grip on reality is, well, realistic. And his music is destined to become a part of the Texas heritage – one of the better parts. As I’ve matured I’ve come to realize that what we leave for posterity is more important than what people think of us today. Not so very long ago I wouldn’t have paid the slightest attention to the Texas music legacy. But, thanks to the talent of people like Derek Spence, lately, I’ve been known to. You should too.