

# NUTS TO THAT

by Bob Gray

Evidently the folks in charge of public relations for the pecan industry in Texas have been very busy. In the past few months I've come across four articles in magazines and newspapers extolling the virtues and importance of the Texas Pecan Growers to our state. In three of them, according to some spurious vote (exactly *who* got to vote is never stated) pecans are supposedly the Best export that Texas has to offer. Best by what standard?

I like pecans. But these surveys and votes that reportedly awarded pecans the Best Texas Product must have left something out of the choices the voters had available.

I'm talking about music. One survey sideswiped the issue by naming Gruene Hall as the best dance hall – but completely overlooked the necessary ingredient contributing to that distinction. Without the music there would be no “best dance hall.”

In terms of economics:

The over one thousand bands (some estimates put the number over 2000 – over 300 roaming the Hill Country alone) touring Texas clubs and dancehalls, county fairs, pasture parties and picnics, producing and selling hundreds of thousands of CDs annually, and performing at benefits and charitable functions, almost certainly account for more economic activity - inside and outside the state – than pecan production.

In terms of prestige and renown for Texas:

Name ten or twenty famous Texas singers. Easy, right?

Now name two famous pecan producers.

Name one.

Please. Willie Nelson alone brings Texas into more conversations in any given hour than pecans have in the history of pecans. Let alone the Dixie Chicks, Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash, Reba McEntyre, and so on.

In terms of sheer beauty:

I'll gladly stipulate that pecans are a grand, although random, miracle of nature.

Music, however, is the miraculous creation of Man. Of Man with a purpose: to share, to educate, to tell a story, to right a wrong, to illuminate the human condition, to touch the souls and hearts and minds of other men.

In terms of emotional impact:

There are hundreds of original Texas songs being performed somewhere in the state tonight that have the power to make you laugh, cry, dance, fall in love, burn with patriotic pride, and change your life.

Pecans? That's just nuts!

Sure, buy some pecans. But support Texas Music – it does and will make your life a better one.

BG

# LONG LIVE THE KING!

by Bob Gray

Edging ever closer to my heart, **Shelley King** had sung several songs the other night at Mimi's Café, a small restaurant in Comfort, Texas. Most of her audience was there to eat. A very small shop, holding not more than 25 people at a time, no one more than ten feet from the lone woman in a chair. The clatter of utensils against crockery was intense. Then suddenly it stopped. All eyes and ears turned towards Shelley, many with food poised midway between plate and face.

She began to sing a recent creation, **1940's Eyes**, the story of how her grandparents met and were swept away with each other. Saline solution sprang to my eyes with the verse that began, "He came along like a breeze through the window, and swept her away, only love was left..."

If you are one of those who says things like, "Now I've seen everything," then let me suggest that, unless you've attended a Shelley King performance, you haven't even come close (free remedy below).

This woman, with the absolute largest, most lustrous brown eyes you will ever see, can wrench your heart and stop your mind, make you want to go up and hug her and put her in your will. (Why this matters to me is that I was first drawn to my wife, Allison, for the same reason – brown eyes so large and clear they seemed to lodge in your brain. Shelley's eyes are the first in 26 years that even come close to rivaling that first glimpse of Allison's.)

It's abnormally difficult to play a tune and sing at the same time. I play the piano, and if I try to sing... well, I don't. Usually the singer plays chords, which is relatively simple, while someone else plays the song. But singing at age three for your parent's guests must provide the bedrock experience necessary to make it look easy. She said she would go up to visitors and tug on their clothing, asking, "You wanna hear me sing?" She doesn't have to do that anymore. Now we line up and beg her to do it. She wrote her first song at 13, "and it wasn't poetry, either. It was music. I had the headings in there, '1<sup>st</sup> verse, chorus, bridge, 2<sup>nd</sup> verse.'"

Her first professional appearance, back in the early 1990's, was in a little Houston club that no longer exists. Since then, she is in such demand that trying to get her to appear at the **Coffeehouse Series at Schreiner University**, in Kerrville, Texas, was a real exercise in rearranging schedules. She *will* be there – **the Kathleen Cailloux Center, 8 PM, the first Wednesday in March (the 3<sup>rd</sup>)** – and this may be the last and only chance you'll ever have to see this wonderful singer/songwriter for FREE! That's right, free – and if you don't make it you will have missed the greatest bargain of your entire lifetime.

Sitting at floor level in the small café, playing only an acoustic guitar, she held the diners spellbound for two hours. I sat with her partner of thirteen years, **Perry Drake**, drummer on her three CDs. Before she took the 'stage' I had asked her what she was most proud of. She'd replied that it was the night she was watching Austin City Limits and heard Toni Price open the show with one of her songs, **Call of My Heart**, the title song from her 1998 CD -

Verse three-

I liken love to a waterfall.

It'll flow sometimes, and then not at all.

But baby right now, it's pourin' down for you.

I'll be standing by your side

When planets crash and stars collide.

Yeah, we're gonna be the ones

Who are gonna make it through.

About thirty minutes into her set, something she was singing evidently jogged her memory, and she leaned away from the microphone to whisper, "I just remembered, the moment I'm most proud of was quitting my day job, doing corporate sales to businesses," and she remembers it precisely, "Monday morning, 7 AM, June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1998." She went on, "I was sure I'd starve, but I wanted *music* to be my work, and the day job was preventing me from dedicating all my energy to it. For months I was surprised there was still food in the house." She smiled, went back to the microphone and sang another song that made me thoroughly understand why there was still food in the house.

"And ... oh how they danced, nothing could break that trance, floating on air, under a spell, with stars in their eyes they danced." An expressive face, Shelley closes her transcendent eyes, returning in her mind to the inspiration for the song she's singing. You see the memory play across her features, and you can't help but listen closely to the words, to hear what she's remembering. Being a writer, I'm most impressed by words beautifully woven. And I'm not the only one: Wendy Jiminez, a waitress at the café, could be heard singing aloud the heart-wrenching refrains as she delivered plates and drinks. Shelley smiles at this, and her husband would let out a joyful whoop whenever Wendy joined in.

Shelley's released three CDs so far, *The Highway* (1998), *Call of My Heart* (2002), and *Rockin' the Dancehall* (2004), which are available on her website, <http://www.shelleyking.com>. While there, you should look over her bio, future gigs, and go to the LISTEN button to hear excerpts of some of her moving memories. (You may need to download a program to listen, but if you look carefully you'll see a rectangle with the word 'free' in it. Click there to download the program, good for 14 days.) She has already written much of the music for her next release, "probably sometime in 2005." The song mentioned above, **1940's Eyes**, will be on that one.

Regulars playing with her are **Kyle Judd** and **Kris Brown** on guitar, **Drake** (mentioned above) on drums, **Bonnie Whitmore** on bass and sometimes with **Floramay Holliday** performing as a duo. Among her major influences were those of my own youth, Fleetwood Mac, Al Green, Aretha Franklin, plus soulful Country newcomers such as Bonnie Raitt and John Hiatt. But for her own relaxation her favorites are a New Orleans band, The Subdudes, Dana Cooper, and Shake Russell. "I could go on for a couple of days," she says, "but then that wouldn't make much of an article." She shifts her position, somehow putting me in mind of a happy puppy wriggling in your arms. "But for inspiration nothing's going to beat my cousin, Wesley Clark. He's running for President, you know." She points to a huge bumper sticker that would look large on the fuselage of a 747, pasted to her guitar case. "He's been a lifelong hero of mine. Much of what I am I owe to his influence."

I know little of General Clark's military history, let alone whether he would make a good President. But it doesn't really matter to me, anyway. His most important contribution to my world is perhaps the one he doesn't know about. If his example inspired Shelley King to be and do what she is – then I wish him luck. Although, I'll admit that I'd rather have this King in my music than any President. Long live the King! BG

# FOSTERING THE MUSIC

by Bob Gray

When I found that I was going to have to settle for an email interview with **Rex Foster**, I figured I was headed for disaster. Rex was going out on tour, gone for several weeks, and my boss, while she may be a nice woman – still sets schedules she wants me to adhere to.

But I had a stroke of extremely good luck with Rex. He gave extensive answers to my questions, rather than the yes and no I feared to get. And he understands how to use words – which you'll find especially true of his music. So, much of the following was actually written by Rex, not me. He is neither shy nor unduly modest in his answers. Remember to thank him for his time and sharing so much of his life and private thoughts the next time you see him.

Q. Are you happy?

A: I have had three different lives. The first was the one my parents brought about. At 14 I died on the table of a gunshot. Dead for 3 minutes and then came back. That life a higher power chose for me.

At 34 I died again, of seizures from alcohol withdrawal. This life has been given me to learn more of the clear path, and to raise a wonderful daughter.

So, where do we put "happy" in that life-line?

I think since I had my second life start, I began to go through the processes of identifying my journey and being at peace with it. That could be related to the beginning of happiness. Having had more than my share of fantastic people in my life is related to a "good lot in life"... My accomplishments and failures are not necessarily the common denominator for my happiness scale.

It's looking into a loved ones' eyes and seeing the great mystery in it's finest. It is my daughter surviving into her young life in this crazy world. It is my sweetie (Kelly Coppage) hangin' in with me for 22 years against all odds. Etc.

There is nothing I would change.

(For my money, being able to say, "There is nothing I would change" might easily be the best barometer of happiness there is. BG)

Q: In the song, Pitchin' Pennies - does this describe a real person, and if so, who?

They'd line up all night waitin' for his songs  
Then they'd wonder what went wrong.  
I'd find him out back with the soundman pitchin' coins.

He was a poet king for too many men,  
They bought him drinks right up to the end.

A: The song is about Townes Van Zandt. He was a good friend of mine. Since I sobered up in 1982.

Q: In "When the Lady Dances" (one of my favorites), what is meant by the line: The lady packs her eyelids...?"

A: ...a metaphor... for the power of vanity and false presentation. A twist on "false eyelashes"...and of course, in real life the concept is not limited to women.

Q: Do you remember your first professional performance? First song performed?

A: A hard question to answer simply. I started my stage work as an actor in high school. In the summer after my junior year I joined a summer stock theatre, where I realized I had a voice and could be trained to sing.

So, my first on-stage singing was in the musical "South Pacific." I will state here that the training I received as an actor/singer for the next three years has been one of the best disciplines for...solo performing/songwriting. I learned about audience communication and concept interpretation....delivery of lines (or lyrics, if you will).

Q: Names of the albums/CDs you've released so far?

A: I have one vinyl, produced by Jean Fernandez in Paris, France, in 1970, for Barclay Records/RCA England, titled, "**Roads of Tomorrow**." A collectors item now, \$250 a copy. Some of the songs I wrote for that project were way ahead of their time and were personally prophetic. "Turn the Page Over", "Climb", "Roads of Tomorrow", "Don't Throw Your Life Away", "Friends."

In 1974 I produced ...the **Ashby Project**. It has never been released. Oddly enough I have just moved the master 2" tapes to a climate controlled location, so I can eventually transfer them to digital for posterity and to possibly do a final mix and master and release an extremely historic and fine piece of work. (If any of your audience would like to help me with the logistics and finance it would require, I certainly do need the help, since I am jammed busy all the time. Contact me at: [rfoster@ktc.com](mailto:rfoster@ktc.com))

I took a drinking break for about 5 years. Sobered up in '82. Had my child, Rachel, in '84. Started playing professionally again around that time. I was one of the first singer/songwriters to help Jud Pickard fire up the music at Leon Springs Café, which was one of the premier listening rooms in Texas for about 10 years running. Townes and I played together there many times.

In 1989 I started going to Nashville and hanging out with my best friend, Rick Beresford ("If Drinkin' Don't Kill Me", "Harmony", etc.) and we started on the first CD project, "**Artist**." Then in 1994 we went back into the studio and did "**Believin'**."

Then in 1999 Peter Rowan came on board and produced the latest project, "**Buffalo Zen**", which took us two years to finish and press. We are both so slammed busy that we could only do a few days work every few months. But it was certainly worth it. Now I am itching to go back in and start work on whatever will be the next CD.

Q: How many songs have you written?

A: I have written and forgotten more songs than most ever write. I have no idea how many hundred songs I've written over the last 40 years. A passle. Many, of course, are not very good.

Q: How many actually recorded and produced?

A: The number of songs I've recorded is somewhere around 40-50. Not all have been released.

Q: I notice that most of the songs on the **Buffalo Zen** CD were collaborations. Do you usually do the music or lyrics, or both? What do you consider your forte?

A: When you see collaborations of mine, they are mostly songs that I started both the music and lyrics...then another writer will jump in and work with me on developing and finishing. I have written more songs by myself than I have collaborated on.

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About some of that music: The lyrics are quite exceptional for their ability to create new connections in your mind, the way you see the world around you, as in **When the Lady Dances**:

She's had her beauty  
Since she was young  
And never worked a day in her life.  
And she's used her men  
For money and for fun  
And dealt out the aces one by one.

Or, **Blue Moon Over Texas** (written with his daughter)

I know I got my blindside  
Where I don't see too well  
Like when you were hurting  
I only saw myself

The voice is reminiscent of Bob Dylan, with the major advantage that you can understand Rex. This is music to relax to after a full day of making pizzas or being otherwise jangled by the world beyond your window.

Visit his website, [www.rexfoster.com](http://www.rexfoster.com), but you might want to keep your wife out of the room. In addition to his music, he's been designing and selling an outrageously beautiful and unique collection of jewelry for thirty years. And if you happen to be one of the lucky ones with that collector's vinyl, would you let me hear it ([allisongray@hctc.net](mailto:allisongray@hctc.net))? BG