

A Song For the Journey

by Bob Gray

A friend of mine bemoans the demise of Texas Country music and, for reasons I don't understand, resents the Americana genre. Except.

Except when he is confronted with one song at a time. His weakness is the same as mine – the dopamine stuff - songs that enable one to add to the bank of good memories (that, believe me, you are going to be glad you have) on which we draw to make good decisions.

Extroversion being the currency nowadays, little thought is given to why emotions are such motivators. We just accept them as cognitive tools, not realizing that emotions are programmed by intellectual convictions. In this context, the recent delivery of extremely high quality life-positive music from the people who, from one end or another, comprise the Americana genre, is a reason for rejoicing.

Few things speak as loudly about a culture's outlook, and continued viability, as its art – especially its music. In just the past three or four years, the Texas contingent has, thankfully, produced an antithetical anthology to gangsta' rap. Even though born and raised in the same environment as Country, Americana investigates life beyond the prison-pickup truck-momma-runaway dog-cuckold limitations. More idea driven than rock and roll, more rational than folk, less sexual than R & B or Soul, it's woven of strands from the fringes of all of them with the salient shared characteristic being story telling. The very best of it discerns joy and encourages hope.

Take Robert Earl Keen's *Feelin' Good Again*. He actually has several excellent songs in the category, but this one is quite wonderful. A young man feeling bereft after a long absence, on his return discovers all his friends together, laughing and singing. He also realizes that all the things that would make him happy are in the room with him. He wants to laugh out loud for joy, but tells us simply how happy it makes him "...feels so good, feelin' good again..." Most everyone has had similar experiences, but what we learn from the song is that we most probably did not properly appreciate these serendipities when they happened to us. The song enables us to relive those moments, this time to truly enjoy them in memory. And finally, leaves us more aware of such joyful moments occurring in our daily lives.

Stephanie Urbina Jones also has several songs in the category, but *God Loves It When We Dance* is in a class by itself. Grab yourself a partner and have a ball. Forget "cool" because "...this not a dress rehearsal, we don't get a second chance, so get on up, jump on in, havin' fun is not a sin, in fact, God loves it when we dance." I can't say I've heard anything in my lifetime with a better message. There is a lot packed into that refrain: enjoyment of the immediacy of life, the vibrant, real, right-here right-now stuff; that such enjoyment is a proper reward from a spirit that sees human happiness as an end itself; and all that's required to partake is to reach for it. The listener is somehow struck by superimposed pictures: a lonely woman buttoned to the chin sitting with hands folded in a

bay window - dreaming of a dancehall full of laughing people. The picture you are in is the one you draw.

And we have the title song by Tish Hinojosa, *A Song for the Journey*, in which she makes us do some introverted inventory. "...if we don't count our blessings we're wasting our time. When I think of the treasures and pleasures we find, there were many, and many were mine." This is true for each of us. The song, a lilting, almost lullaby, gently prods us to confess – we *have* had things worth having, lived at least a few moments in which we truly *lived*, were free, joyous, *happy*. Life is not always a bucket of pits. Just admitting that can make a person feel better.

Derek Spence has several entries, but his song *I've Been Known To* explores another aspect of the human journey, emotional maturation. The proximate cause doesn't really matter in this song so much as the fact of finding and finally accommodating, even finding pleasure in that new crease in one's emotional content and consciousness. A powerful message, and a necessary part of a successful trip.

Katherine Dawn's *Beautiful Day* is another type of reward – from nature and outlook. A young girl has a gorgeous day to herself, to spend as she pleases. She intends to do what makes her happy. Innocence is a joy in itself, and few lyrics provide a father the slow daughter-indulgent smile this one does. Dawn's repertoire is amazing, and another of her songs, *I'd Fight the Devil for You Tonight*, is an unusual take on loyalty and certainty. Knowing what you will fight for is important to happiness. Certainty brings confidence.

Most all of Scott Rotge's catalogue would easily fit into the 'happy' category. Johnny Bush has a few, especially his duet with Stephanie Urbina Jones, *Some People Just Get Lucky*. Kenny Chesney has several sweet ones. Kenny Dale's music, rousing and thoughtful by turns, is mostly of the "so happy I think I may be crazy" variety.

There are dozens more, each a thread in the tapestry. The wonderful thing about this explosion of feel-good music is the soaring counterpoint to the defeatism of rap and the real disappointments thrust upon us by hard lives. Making this music part of your memories is a significant step in making those memories, and thus life, delightful. We all need songs for the journey, and Americana storytelling in Texas is the place to get them. My friend is nuts. BG