

TEXAS HIGHWAYS--SONGWRITER'S PARADISE--MALLORY

Story and photos by Randy Mallory

While most of the coffeehouses of the Sixties are gone, the tradition of the traveling troubadour lives on in the Lone Star State. During the last decade, an informal circuit of places to hear folk music sprang up across Texas.

From metropolitan Houston to minuscule Coahoma, stops on the new folk circuit present intimate concerts held in churches and other public halls (called "listening rooms") and even in people's homes (dubbed "house concerts"). These non-commercial venues attract small attentive audiences who congregate for one reason: to hear some of the nation's top songwriters sing their own songs. For music lovers and musicians alike, you could call it...

Songwriter's Paradise

Up in booming Big D, a handful of volunteers gathers under the vaulted ceiling of Uncle Calvin's Coffeehouse, a listening room located in Northpark Presbyterian Church. They set up chairs and tables topped with blue-checkered cloths, white flickering candles, and flowers in green Perrier bottles. Before showtime 150 or so people--some families but mostly 40-something or older couples--filter in and find their seats, cups of gourmet coffee in hand.

Down in music-lovin' Austin, the scene's much the same, on a smaller scale, at the house concert home of Bruce and Liz Rouse. Helpers move pieces of furniture out of the Rouses' living room, replacing them with 75 folding chairs arranged in neat rows. They leave one corner of the room open. That's where

the featured musician will perform. In the kitchen Liz puts the finishing touches on the evening's refreshments. At the front door Bruce welcomes a steady stream of patrons--from professional people and employees of high-tech firms to college students, aging hippies, and even a few seniors.

At both Uncle Calvin's and the Rouses'--as well as other listening rooms and house concerts around the state--loyal fans flock to hear singer-songwriters perform what's often called contemporary folk music. Once the music starts, smiles and applause flow as easily from the audience as do songs (and the stories behind the songs) from the artists in the spotlight.

In the tradition of folk music, a typical performance features a single artist playing guitar and singing songs. Instead of songs handed down for generations, however, these contemporary singer-songwriters mostly perform self-written songs about real people, places, and feelings they've experienced. Their musical styles frequently blend various influences, including traditional folk, rock, blues, and country. And, in standard folk fashion, it's the words that move the audiences--lyrics that may be happy or sad, angry or glad...but always sincere.

Though hardly household names, many of the singer-songwriters who regularly tour Texas' folk-based venues also regularly write songs which big-name stars turn into hits. Such songwriters include Jon Ims (who wrote "She's In Love With the Boy," a #1 smash hit performed by Trisha Yearwood), Tom Kimmel (who wrote "The Blue Train," a top-10 ballad for Linda Ronstadt), and Steve Seskin (who penned "Life's a Dance," a chart topper for John Michael Montgomery).

Renewed interest in singer-songwriters amounts to a growing grassroots folk music revival, says Arkansas-based singer/songwriter Crow Johnson. She's a veteran of the Houston folk scene of the Sixties that helped produce legends

such as Guy Clark, Jerry Jeff Walker, and the late Townes Van Zandt. "While the early wave of clubs and coffeehouses laid the seeds for today's second wave, this isn't a rehash of the Sixties."

It's the kind of music that makes you think, adds Crow. The volunteers who run Texas' listening rooms and house concerts tend to agree. And, they're quick to add, it's the kind of music experienced at the Kerrville Folk Festival, the state's "Mother Ship" of singer/songwriter festivals. (For more on the annual Hill Country festival, see *Texas Highways*, May 1996.)

"We've had an explosion of singer/songwriters in the last 10 years," says festival director Rod Kennedy. "And they're producing music that meets the same human needs as do ballet, opera, jazz, and other great performing arts. These songs provide a wealth of emotional nutrition and help people recharge their batteries."

In between festivals, however, Kerrville devotees found few opportunities to hear their favorite artists. Only a few radio stations played singer/songwriters performing their own music. And only a handful of commercial clubs featured their live shows.

In the Eighties a cadre of faithful Texas folkies began spreading Kerrville fever around the state. Under the slogan "Because music is too important to leave to professionals," they gradually organized a loose-knit circuit of places for traveling troubadours to play.

Today, more than 20 such homegrown venues spotlight nationally-acclaimed artists, including many Kerrville regulars. Dynamic duos such as Trout Fishing in America (Keith Grimwood and Ezra Idlet), Steve Gillette and Cindy Mangsen, Bill and Bonnie Hearne, and Christine Albert and Chris Gage (alias Boxcars). Plus long-time favorites such as Carolyn Hester, Allen Wayne

Damron, and Chuck Pyle. And respected songwriters such as Darden Smith, Sara Hickman, Buddy Mondlock, Anne Hills, and Tom Prasada-Rao.

MUSIC AMONG FRIENDS

The listening room/house concert formula remains simple: Provide an intimate non-smoking setting that encourages friendly interaction between performer and audience. Most venues also feature snacks or desserts and non-alcoholic drinks such as coffee, tea, and juice.

A typical evening begins with 20 minutes of music by an "opening artist." Then the main singer/songwriter plays two 45-minute sets, interrupted by a short break for refreshments and visits with performers. To accommodate fans of all ages, concerts start and end early. (For die-hards, some house concerts stage after-show jam sessions, open to all comers, that last into the wee hours of the morning.)

Songwriters sing the praises of listening rooms and house concerts. "Word gets out about these places," notes seasoned songwriter Shake Russell of Houston, who's co-written songs with country star Clint Black. "They help us put together several show dates in a row in the same area to cut down on travel time."

"They also help us introduce our music to new audiences," chimes in Shake's long-standing singing partner, Dana Cooper, a noted Nashville songwriter. "I think of today's folk style as 'acoustic eclectic' because it's a mix of a lot of musical influences. So it's stuff many different kinds of people can get into."

Most if not all of the ticket or donation price goes directly to the artists. Add in CD and tape sales, and the shows often prove more lucrative than commercial club gigs. Many show hosts even provide free room and board in a volunteer's home to reduce performers' on-the-road expenses.

These intimate venues can, however, test a performer's poise. "It's so different from playing a noisy club where people are milling around," explains bluesy Dallas folk artist Ann Armstrong. "Here, all eyes and ears are on you. It can be intimidating, but it allows you to play more contemplative songs."

Honky-tonk hero Ray Wylie Hubbard, an inductee into the Kerrville Folk Festival's Hall of Fame, couldn't agree more. "People come to these places for the music, rather than to drink beer and meet somebody of the opposite sex." Ray Wylie wrote the Seventies' country-rock anthem, "Up Against the Wall Red-Neck Mother," made famous by Jerry Jeff Walker. He still commands widespread loyalty for his more poetic newer songs about life and love. "There's such a thirst for music with integrity these days. It's so gratifying to play where people appreciate your craft and art. You can tell when something's working, and these places are working."

LISTENING ROOMS

The granddaddy of these "working places" sits beside busy North Central Freeway in the heart of Dallas. Uncle Calvin's Coffeehouse, housed in Northpark Presbyterian Church, began in 1982 as a non-threatening environment for people to enjoy music and fellowship. Founder Trey Hammond, then associate pastor of the church and folk music lover, named it after John Calvin (1509-1564), a Protestant reformer, teacher, and humanist whose "lighter side" the coffeehouse celebrates.

At first, Uncle Calvin's featured local talent. Now it attracts the top names in contemporary folk music. "We get four times as many requests to perform here as there are available show dates. That's how popular it has become," explains volunteer assistant manager Michael Terry, adding that the venue hosts about 50 shows per year.

Some songs performed at Uncle Calvin's tell hilarious tales, such as Chicagoan Michael Smith's "Dead Egyptian Blues": "Your sarcophagus is glowing, but your esophagus is showing. Who cares how rich you are, love, when you look like Boris Karloff."

Some, like Austinite Betty Elders' "Crayons," carry more serious social commentary: "It's not the color of your skin, not who's out but who's within. And if my eyes no sight beheld, I'd know you very well."

Others metaphorically challenge the human spirit, such as Michael Lille's "Ships" (co-written with Tom Kimmel): "A calm is on the water and part of us would linger by the shore. Our ships are safe at harbor, but that's not what ships are for."

"It's great to hear such a variety of songs with such meaning," says Uncle Calvin's Michael Terry. "The immediacy of the experience brings people together. It's like sitting down with friends and having a conversation."

Sitting down with friends was just what a couple of Texas folk musicians had in mind when they opened their listening rooms.

In 1989 in the East Texas railroad town of Mineola, John DeFoore opened the Piney Woods Pickin' Parlor in a small hall above a shoe repair shop. "I decided if I could sell enough tickets, we could pay our songwriting friends to come play for us," recalls John, a professional musician since the Sixties. A steady stream of regular patrons, especially from the Dallas-Fort Worth area, now allows the Pickin' Parlor to host weekly shows in the large ballroom of Mineola's historic Beckham Hotel. The venue's musical tastes run from new folk and blues to Celtic, zydeco, and bluegrass.

In 1990 another veteran folk singer, Linda Lowe, began experimenting with a different musical format. After a decade of playing folk clubs across the U.S., Linda married and settled down to start a family in Houston. But she

missed her songwriting friends. "So I started inviting artists I knew to come play in my living room just for fun. Then I asked certain combinations of them to do some public concerts," Linda says. "It was a success right away. Bringing this caliber of people together creates such energy and spontaneity." Her Writers in the Round concert series now stages half a dozen new folk concerts a year at Houston's Main Street Theater or at the larger Hamman Hall at Rice University.

Personally and professionally, however, Linda still wasn't satisfied. "With some of my women musician friends I wanted more than just an evening of fun. I really wanted a nice long slumber party," she laughs. As a result, Linda started the Women in the Round on the Road series which tours each summer playing folk venues across Texas...dressed in their pajamas. Her spirited touring companions include accomplished singer/songwriters Ann Armstrong, Darcie Deaville, and Emily Kaitz, plus others added periodically.

Regardless of numbers of performers or venue size, listening rooms try to present original music with a personal touch, explains Val Denn. She's a performer, agent for other songwriters, and manager of Susanna's Kitchen, a Hill Country listening room located in the Wimberley United Methodist Church. "At Susanna's Kitchen [named for the mother of John Wesley, founder of Methodism], performers really let their hair down and develop a rapport with listeners," she says. "It's very natural, like someone coming and hanging out in your living room."

HOUSE CONCERTS

That's literally what happens at half a dozen or so house concerts on the Texas new folk circuit.

Circuit talk tags the Rouse House Concert as a must-do venue. That's no surprise, considering its location--Austin, home of perhaps the nation's liveliest live music scene.

"Our reputation has grown," admits Bruce Rouse who, along with wife Liz, hosts a big-name singer/songwriter each month in their cozy home on Austin's near north side. "Performers can count on a good crowd and a good time. We have artists, who can sell out a 2,000-seat hall, ask to come play for us, it's such a special evening."

For many Rouse House regulars, the evening invokes a nostalgic déjà vu. "Many in the crowd went to folk coffeehouses when they were younger, before they had their families. Now that the kids are gone from home, they're returning to folk-type venues," says Austinite Charly Mann. Fellow regulars Claire and Tom Bray maintain they've never stopped listening to their old folk albums. "But since we moved to Austin," notes Tom, "it's been refreshing to see that folk music is still living and growing with a whole new generation of writers."

After attending a house concert seminar during the 1991 Kerrville Folk Festival, the Rouses decided to take the plunge. By year's end, they booked Nashville songwriter Jon Ims for their first concert. "The Saturday before the concert, "She's in Love With the Boy" by Trisha Yearwood was #1 in the nation, and "Falling Out of Love" by Reba McEntyre was #2," Bruce recalls. "Jon wrote both those songs, so he attracted 50 people to our very first show."

The number of addresses on the Rouses' mailing list has grown from 12 to 200 (plus unlimited numbers via electronic mail), yet they still take reservations for only 75 per show. They do so for pragmatic reasons (their living room holds only so many) and to preserve the intimate atmosphere.

"We do this strictly for the love of the music," Liz says. "And so do our patrons. People trust us to bring in the best songwriters available. They'll come even when they've never heard of the artist before."

Fans also come to house concerts even when they're hard to find. That's what some Wylie folks found out when they fired up the Acoustic Concert Tours

(ACT) series five years ago in the A-frame home of Tom Noe and Linda Silas. Tucked in the woods near Lake Lavon (just outside Dallas), the hideaway has become, as Tom like to put it, a "Home for Wayward Women, Musicians' Rest, and Wildlife Refuge."

Tom's partner in music, Paul Porter, DJ'ed a folk show on Dallas radio station KNON for several years. A couple of those years, Paul booked singer/songwriters for non-profit shows at various small halls and churches around the city. In 1992 he hooked up with friend Tom to establish a permanent house concert in the country. "House concerts had been popular on the West Coast and the Midwest for years, but we didn't know if people would drive from Dallas to hear somebody play," Paul remembers. Some 80 concerts later, he's convinced they will.

At a typical show 30 to 40 people gather in Tom and Linda's living room on couches and brought-in chairs...all under the watchful eye of the late Hondo Crouch. A picture of the beloved Texas entertainer who put Luckenbach on the map hangs on the wall behind the performer. The audience hangs on every word of every song. Some even hum or sing along. After the show, a handful of listeners--musicians in their own right--break out guitars and launch into an all-out jam session that can last until dawn.

"The atmosphere is so relaxed, and everyone is so friendly." says ACT regular Larry Rouse of Plano. "The whole experience of the music and the people cultivates the more human side of life."

Sharing music and friendship hooked a San Antonio couple at the 1988 Kerrville Folk Festival. It hooked them deeply enough that they established the state's oldest house concert.

Chatting with songwriters at Kerrville's campfires (where artists play informally around open fires), John and Sherry Arnold first learned about house

concerts. "It took us a couple of years to commit to the idea," says Sherry, "but once we did, we got so excited we even dug a fire pit in our backyard to sing and play around." The Arnolds, along with co-founders Sean and Jan McMulty, appropriately named their house concert Urban Campfires.

Over the years, several San Antonio couples have hosted the once-a-month shows in their living rooms. Steve and Jayne Clark currently serve as the venue's "trail bosses." With renewed interest in folk music, Urban Campfires has outgrown itself, they report. Beginning last November, the house concert evolved into a listening room, with concerts now held at city-owned Lion's Field Adult Center. But the intimate spirit of a house concert continues. "We began with the idea of taking the feeling of a Kerrville campfire and carrying it into our lives the rest of the year," says Glen Pilant who, along with wife LaJeanna, hosted many Urban Campfires concerts in their home. "We hope to always keep the campfires burning."

Legendary folk singer Tom Rush once wrote that in the early days of folk music, "You couldn't make a living as a folk singer, and nobody tried.... As audiences came to recognize and appreciate individual artists, they lost interest in the 'hootenannies' and in folk music for its own sake. They wanted to hear... 'name acts.'"

Today, followers of contemporary folk music, while interested in "name acts," also seem increasingly interested in singer-songwriters, well-known or unknown, who perform music that speaks to them.

A frequent performer on the Texas folk circuit, New England songwriter Bob Franke, put it perhaps best in "A Healing In This Night": "There are words that change the way you look at things. There are sounds that silence idle talk. And there are songs that circle in your mind, and seek your heart, and find it, and seize it like a hawk."

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