

Forever the Iconoclastic gonzo singer and minstrel

Well-traveled wordsmith, Bob Livingston set to release *Up the Flatland Stairs*
By Jan Sikes

BOB LIVINGSTON HAS BEEN UP AND DOWN a road or two since he first founded the legendary Lost Gonzo Band in 1973. And, while he's changed directions now and then, he's never slowed down.

I caught up with him on his way to perform at the 20th Annual Woody Guthrie Folk Festival in Okemah, Oklahoma and we talked about everything from his upcoming album release to the atmosphere of country music these days and a memoir he is writing.

His album, *Up The Flatland Stairs*, is scheduled for release in August.

"In a way, I sort of fudged the rules on autobiographies here, because this album is somewhat autobiographical," Bob explained. "Most of the songs on it are originals. There is one called 'I Can't Get Enough of It' and has a line that says, 'The magic of the mission up the flatland stairs,' so that's where I got the album title."

It's no secret Bob came from the flatlands around Lubbock, Texas.

"It was kinda like getting away from the flat land and going up those stairs, which I'm still trying to do," he added.

This new album is unique in a lot of ways including one special song from Walter Hyatt that Bob was compelled to include.

Bob said "There is an unrecorded Walter Hyatt song called 'The Early Days' on this album.

I don't know if folks are familiar with him, but he was in Uncle Walt's band and he passed away on that Value Jet crash in the Everglades way back when. He left a treasure trove of songs. Most of them have been recorded or at least heard, but nobody ever cut this song, so I did. Walter was a good friend of mine. I respected him so much and loved his songwriting. It was an honor to include his song on this album."

Grass roots music

ANOTHER UNIQUE ASPECT to this album was a Kickstarter campaign that Bob launched to help fund it. "I had never done anything like this before and was blown away by the response. I have the most supportive fans in the world," he explained.

Recorded in Alamosa, Co. on the Howlin' Dog Record label, *Up The Flatland Stairs* is being produced by Don Richmond. Logistics demanded a different way of recording.

"I went up there on three different trips to record, but we've been doing this mix in a way that's definitely out of my comfort zone. Don sends me the mixes, and then I tweak them



In addition to his August CD release, the 1998 Buddy Texas Tornado is also completing a book on his world travels: Bob Livingston

"I am basically a storyteller and I've got a million and one stories about being on the road with Jerry Jeff and Michael Martin Murphy as well as all my foreign tours. I've been to thirty countries for the state department. It's exciting stuff and to be able to put it down, I tell stories about it. So, I started working on this book before I had a contract.

—BOB LIVINGSTON

and send them back. I have a painfully hard time making up my mind about things and the birth of this album is taking a lot longer than I intended, but that's the way it always is. My records take longer than they should."

While this may be true, the end results are worth the wait. Bob's last album, *Gypsy Alibi*, won the 2011 Album of the Year at the Texas Music Awards.

The road

HE SPOKE CANDIDLY ABOUT the road. "You know I work about 180 dates a year. But, when you add two to three driving days to every show, I'm out on the road all year long."

Everyone seems to agree that the face of country music has changed over time, and Bob has seen a lot of it come and go. That aroused my curiosity to ask, from his perspective, what are some of

the biggest changes he's seen in the business?

"My career has been so varied that a lot of it was on automatic pilot. For instance, when I first started out making records with Michael Murphy, he was on the A&M label. Jerry Jeff was on MCA. They were big time record companies. We had good budgets when we'd go in to record. Then they'd distribute these records worldwide. But, these nationally released albums are few and far between now. You've got to be twenty-something and sexy and they develop you.

"They spend a ton of money on songwriters and get you to tailor-make your sound with the world's greatest producers. When I did it, even with the Gonzo Band, we produced it ourselves. No one was coming in from outside. It was all raw and funky. But, it caught on. So, the

biggest change I see is that nowadays, you've got to put out your own stuff or have a boutique label like the one my latest album is on. So, you're responsible for not only making the record but also promoting it. Most of the time, you make this record and put all your money into it and now what do you do? You don't have any money left to promote it so you just get it out there. You send it to as many radio stations as you can and hope something happens. If you don't have a love for it, you wear out pretty quick."

Longevity

THE LONGEVITY BOB HAS in this business gives him lots of stories to tell. "For years everyone has been telling me that I needed to write a book. I am basically a storyteller and I've got a million and one stories about

being on the road with Jerry Jeff and Michael Martin Murphy as well as all my foreign tours. I've been to thirty countries for the state department. It's exciting stuff and to be able to put it down, I tell stories about it. So, I started working on this book before I had a contract. UT Press, Texas Tech Press, and Texas State Press approached me, but Andy Wilkinson who is one of the editors at Texas Tech Press called me and pretty much made me an offer I couldn't refuse. Plus, I felt some loyalty to Texas Tech. So, I'm now in the editing process."

As an author, I related to one thing Bob said about the first draft of the manuscript he turned in.

Bob added that "Andy Wilkinson called me and asked if I was crazy. I had turned in a manuscript that was 265,000 words. He gave me the task of cutting 100,000 words. So far, I've managed to cut about 20,000 so I still have a long way to go. But, there's a lot of bark on this book. The first sentence is 'He charged at me.'"

This will be one to watch for along with *Up The Flatland Stairs*.

Bob Livingston offered some parting advice to up and coming songwriters. "You've just got to keep with it. If you're working on collaboration, check your ego at the door. Don't be offended if someone cuts one of your lines. Write what you see. And, as Billy Joe Shaver says, 'Write like you can pull a string through it.'"

Bob Livingston is scheduled to perform at Kerrville on September 1 and at the Big Barn Dance in Taos on September 8, Fort Worth Live on October 20, and Forney House Concerts October 21.