

Finding his way back

Zane Williams' latest release *Texas Like That* is a perfect synthesis of a songwriter's craft and soul combined with pure honky-tonk swagger.

By S.D. Henderson

THERE ARE WAY TOO FEW PLEASANT surprises in life; the end of a long drought and a full Cedar Creek Lake is nice, but Zane Williams' music has easily been one of my favorites of the year. If it hadn't been for a friend pointing me toward a random YouTube video, I might have overlooked one of the brighter lights in Texas music, but that wouldn't have lasted too long.

Williams has been steadily building a fanbase and an impressive body of work including his new release *Texas Like That* which is poised to transcend his hard-earned local following and put his star on the big music map.

Williams is an easy guy to root for; he's taken the long road through Nashville and landed back in Texas where his talents are appreciated. Watch him live and you'll know his days of smaller stages and wages are numbered. He's got a great band behind him, and an engaging presence on stage that's both fun to watch and translates all that he's about to a growing audience.

He's a good guy, a family guy, and suffers through interviews graciously without a hint of cynicism or impatience.

Now there are lots of really nice guys that play music with dreams of making it big as a musician, what sets Zane Williams apart from the crowd is raw skill and true craftsmanship as a songwriter.

When it comes to writing, Williams has been operating at a high level for quite some time, regardless of the volume of people following his progress. Equally impressive is Williams's ability to write across genres, he ranges from insightful observation, authentic non-pulp love songs to barn-burning honky-tonk in the span of an hour; nailing the essence of each of them without falling off the mark.

Creating order from chaos requires a fair amount of skill

and talent. Try throwing a bag of Scrabble tiles on the floor sometime and see if you get anything close to a word, much less a well-crafted piece of song writing. I've actually tried it to see if it works, and the results were not very impressive.

Zane Williams pulls it off frequently with a weekly songwriting exercise that he shares with his fans on Facebook.

Folks will throw out ten random words, and Williams will weave them into a song to work out his craft. In the hands of a lesser skilled writer, this could easily descend into a trite and twangy version of Mad Libs, but Williams forged one of these exercises into "Jayton and Jill," a genuinely moving story that he put on his new CD, *Texas Like That*.

When I saw him play at the Larry Joe Taylor festival in April, I was the fortunate beneficiary of another pleasant surprise. As I heard the first few chords of one of his songs, I realized I really liked his work long before I really liked his work.

I'd been hearing a song on the radio for months that I had been meaning to track down because it was seeping into my subconscious library in the classics section. In the hands of a more capable or attentive journalist, I probably could have found it sooner, but that's not the point.

Overnight Success

I HAD PLACED THIS MYSTERY song in the category of Greatest Unrequited Honky-Tonk Love



He will perform at *Love and War* in Texas Grapevine on June 12: Zane Williams

Songs Ever, right next to Gary Stewart's "Empty Glass." I didn't know it was possible to write a song that belongs in the pantheon without sustained blood alcohol levels of at least 0.25. It turned out to be "Little Too Late" from Williams' previous release *Overnight Success*. The fiddle line alone is haunting and the words resonate deeply without ever edging into sap. It should be required listening for all formalized Texas honky-tonk training programs.

We talked after his show about his music; his new CD, *Texas Like That*, and the path that put him where he is today.

My notes are pretty sketchy and some of the words don't make quite the same sense as they did a week ago, but his journey is a compelling one.

Williams was born in Texas, so he is a natural resource, but

his road home took him the long way around, starting at the age of six when he moved away from the Lone Star state. We shouldn't blame him for that; it's really tough for a first grader to make it on his own. He never lost that deep-seated connection to his home state, keeping a Texas flag on the wall as a little reminder, and spent the next 25 years finding his way back.

Williams made his way to Nashville where he honed his skills, but never really quite fit the mold. He wanted to write music that was mainstream with substance, but in music city he found that he was "a man without a genre" just a little too folksy for the mainstream.

Too folksy for the mainstream and too country for the folksy is a tough combination. He dreamed of finding perfect venues that would fit his vision of

where he'd like to play his kind of music, places with beer and barbecue, porches and dance floors. Those places didn't exist in Nashville; in Texas they grow under pecan trees.

Family life

IT'S A FAIRLY simple equation to work out, but a tough one to reach when you're "one of those that got pushed under the water." Fortunately for Williams his wife felt the tug back to Texas first. After marriage and family entered the picture, it helped restructure his universe, instead of being an interstellar music machine; the new goal was to "be as good as I can be without messing up my family life," which required a new start in Texas. It would prove to be a wise decision and the start of a new road that would lead him in the direction he wanted to travel.

Looking back, Williams will tell you, "I don't want to overstate the role that Texas has played in my career, it's pretty much everything... At the end of the day, I'm a singer songwriter, in Texas, that's what we value."

Establishing a base in Texas has enabled Williams to grow his fan base, craft his own brand music and drop his kiddo off at kindergarten during the week. There are big enough venues here replete with beer and porches, filled with the kind of people who seek out the kind of music that Williams creates.

Grinding path

IT WAS A PERFECT LAUNCHING pad for a new start, and one that would expand his horizons even further than anticipated. Even Nashville has developed an

appreciation for Zane Williams' hard-earned, grinding path to overnight success.

Last month he was invited to return to Tennessee and play at the Grand Old Opry. The irony of the moment was not lost on him, his path may have taken him through Nashville, but he is not from Nashville. As the title track of his new CD would suggest, Zane Williams is Texas like that.

Speaking of CD's, or downloads or whatever you call new music stuff that you can buy, Zane's latest release *Texas Like That* is a perfect synthesis of a songwriter's craft and soul combined with pure honky-tonk swagger.

It's the fifth CD that he's released, and fans of craftsman quality Texas music would be well advised to get them all, but this will be the one to propel him to the next level. Generally when you refer to someone as being all over the map, it's not a compliment, but when the map is Texas there's a lot of room for movement.

In *Texas Like That*, Zane Williams makes good use of a wide range of territory. I mentioned "Jayton and Jill" earlier as a demonstration of skill and craft, but the CD is full of music that will appeal to a wide range of listeners without pandering to any particular crowd. *Love Is On Our Side* is songwriting with authentic emotion without becoming cloying or sentimental; it's a love story without the sheen of a Lifetime movie or a Hallmark card.

There are many others worth noting from the opening tracks "Feeling Free" and "Throwback" to the title track "Texas Like That." Every Texas music guy has a Texas song, but Williams pulls from the ethos of what makes us unique instead of a litany of beer brands and local heroes to deliver his point. It's just a darn good piece of work throughout, worth the price and worth the time.

Even if you're not an early adopter, maybe you still have a flip phone, there's still a chance for you to see Zane Williams' work in progress before things accelerate too rapidly.

Go out and find a show where he's playing. They'll probably have beer, maybe some barbecue, possibly even pecan trees and a full Texas moon. Regardless of the setting, you'll find a guy who is comfortable with his path, gifted at what he does, and deserving of the notice he's receiving after he made the long journey home. ■

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