

On *Solid Ground*

Wade Bowen makes his life's work out of distilling experience and setting it to music is both a creative and practical challenge
by S.D. Henderson

WRITING ONE ENDURING SONG, WHEN you really think about it, combines a dozen little miracles into three or four minutes of truth. Making your life's work out of distilling experience and setting it to music is both a creative and practical challenge. It's difficult to find sure footing in that world, constantly in search of an audience and inspiration.

Over the years, Wade Bowen has built a strong foundation as an artist and a songwriter. His February 9 release of *Solid Ground* adds another layer of growth and enduring craftsmanship to his body of work. With a slight rasp spread over a great range, Wade Bowen's vocals are immediately distinct and unique, and they pop off of the first track of *Solid Ground* and pull you in for a closer listen. Ten years ago, it was Bowen's voice that stopped me in my tracks at a music festival before I was really aware of his work. "You Had Me at My Best" was playing over the PA between sets and I had to stop my quest for beer and corn dogs to figure it out. When he played later that night, I started paying a lot closer attention. That same voice frames the songs of *Solid Ground* just as clearly as the first time I heard him play.

Rooted in Place

SOLID GROUND IS VERY much rooted in the concept of place and time. A lot of Texas artists do Texas songs about Texas places, some to greater effect than others. When it's done to sell beer, or make drunken college kids scream out popular geographical landmarks, it loses a little something. Throughout the album, Bowen has crafted an honest homage without guile to tell stories about the place he calls home.

From the Brazos riverboat that runs through "Couldn't Make You Love Me" and his hometown of Waco all the way down to Lajitas by the Rio Grande in "Day of the Dead" Bowen uses place to frame stories that resonate with him. Bowen said, *Solid Ground* is the way I feel about Texas. It's full of different characters and the areas where I'm from. It's almost a concept album without being a concept album. It's a whole record."

Bowen credits producer Keith Gattis in helping him pull everything together into one cohesive work.

Bowen said, "I was blessed to work with him, I begged him to push me as I've never been pushed before, and he really did." As a result, *Solid Ground* feels, for lack of a less redundant term, solid. Calling the album Bowen's Texas album, while true in many senses, would be a reduction of the full measure of the material.

Layered on top of the thematic landscape, there are some raw, internal portraits that Bowen shares in tracks like "Broken Glass" and "Anchor" that provide a weight and heaviness to deep spaces on the album. Bowen is thankful that his wife understands and supportive of exposing some of the feelings and moments that other artists might not include on an album, he said, "Some of these songs are



He has scheduled *Alive & Alone Acoustical Extravaganza* on February 20-21 in Tomball: Wade Bowen

intense and heavy lyrically. You can write your way out of trouble, or you can write your way into trouble. I'm fortunate that my wife understands and supports what I do."

One of my favorite elements on *Solid Ground* was the choice to have Lucie Silvas provide backing vocals on both "Anchor" and "Broken Glass." The combination of Bowen's raw vocals and with Silvas in the background added a layer of weight and pain that deepened both songs.

Collaboration

ONE OF THE HALLMARKS OF Bowen's creative process since the beginning of his career has been collaborating with other artists and writers. That collaborative spirit has already produced two albums with fellow Texas music stalwart Randy Rogers, Bowen continues incorporate it into each of the albums he's released. On *Solid Ground*, Bowen worked with friends like John Randall, Andrew Combs, Jeremy Stone and Keith Gattis. Bowen said, "I always try to write with buddies, it's always fun to get into room with those guys. Every album is a challenge and you have to embrace it."

Those creative relationships, past and present, strengthen Bowen's songwriting and leave

indelible marks that provide fuel and material long after the song writing session is over. Years ago, Bowen wrote with Guy Clark and recorded Clark's "To Live is to Fly" with Clark on Bowen's 2012 release, *The Given*. Bowen said, "I was lucky enough to write with Guy and record with him and pick his brain." The effects of that experience can still be felt on *Solid Ground* in "Death, Dying and Deviled Eggs."

Written with John Randall two weeks after Clark's passing in 2016, it wasn't about Clark, but the song certainly evokes the sense of style, word-craft and imagery gleaned from him. In terms of songwriting, as Bowen puts it, "It's a straight rip-off of Guy Clark and maybe John Prine. It reminds me of Guy Clark, and that means a lot to me." As a finished work, you can appreciate the inspiration in the little details, the starkness of the storytelling and the straightforward capture of the unnoticed moments in time after almost any funeral in Texas.

That spirit of collaboration isn't limited to writing and recording. Bowen also participated with Roger Creager and pretty much everyone who has played a gig in Texas on the "Faith in the Water" project this year benefiting the victims of hurricane

Harvey. All proceeds from that single went directly to provide assistance to hurricane victims, and Bowen took semi-loads of supplies with other artists to not only lend a voice, but also a hand in the rebuilding efforts along the devastated coastal region.

The calm before

BETWEEN THE HURRICANES and creative storms that produced *Solid Ground*, 2017 was a year to build and rebuild. At the end of the year, Bowen could reflect on the past with his feet planted on solid ground, and look forward to where this new album might take him. Bowen added, "I'm older, I'd like to think I'm wiser. I've matured and I'm happy with where I am. I'm just trying to make the best record I've made before. Hopefully, it will have a little different tone, and that's a good thing."

There is something for almost every appreciator of the best in Texas music on *Solid Ground*. I think that's a huge part of the appeal of this project. Bowen paints broad strokes of Texas without pandering, expresses pain and love without flinching or cloying and explores territory and tones that he's piously not in earlier work. And in case you're worried that there won't be any beer or whisky

music added into the mix, rest assured that *Solid Ground* contains all of the requisite ingredients for good Texas music, you'll just have to listen.

When you take the time to listen carefully to the album, be mindful of the magnitude of place, time and space whittled down to eleven songs. Think of any other form of expression that can capture that much experience into such a small space. *Solid Ground* will take you all over the map and back home again, that's a pretty cool thing to accomplish. With the creative side of the artistic equation in the box and almost ready to ship, Bowen is preparing for a 2018 dedicated to the road worn process of taking his music to his audience.

Solid Ground will be available on February 9 at finer Texas music purveyors and online at iTunes. Wade Bowen will be hitting the road in support of *Solid Ground* this week with his full band, which includes Will Knaak and Todd Laningham on guitars, Caleb Jones on bass, and Brian Zannotti on the drums. You can catch a preview of the new release this month at Cain's Ballroom, Tulsa on February 16 and Wade Bowen's *Alive & Alone Acoustical Extravaganza* on February 20-21 in Tomball.

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