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The Road, the Radio and the Full Moon

Texas: Three Days and Two Nights

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HOUSTON

Houston, black hole, geographical epicenter of American culture. It is the farthest point southwest for the prototypical "Southern" culture. In the 1950s thousands upon thousands of rural farmers from East Texas moved south in search of jobs and found them, many working in the oil industry. Houston is the farthest northeast of the established Mexican-American or "Chicano" culture—corridos, norteno mixed with r and b and country; accordions gave way to keyboards to form the music now known as "Tejano".

Houston is also the farthest point west of the indigenous cajun and zydeco cultures. The white Cajuns still meet every Saturday and Sunday at Pe Te's Cajun restaurant to eat crawfish, gumbo, and boudin and dance to the (mostly white) cajun bands from Louisiana. Similarly the Creoles every Friday go to Jax or St. Mary's Catholic Church to dance to Marcus Ardoin, L'il Brian Terry and the Zydeco Travelers, Chris Ardoin, Step Rideaux, or Roy Carrier. Zydeco — the propulsive beat, the washboards, the black (and white) people all in Western clothes doing a dance that is something like a jitterbug. The band leader is usually the accordion player, and a washboard player is mandatory.

And Houston has always had a healthy blues scene highlighted by luminaries such as Lightnin' Hopkins, Pete Mayes, Joe "Guitar" Hughes, Martha Turner, and Trudy Lynn.

There is a jazz tradition in Houston. Saxophonist Arnett Cobb, a Houston native, known for his swaggering "Texas Tenor" style, lived and played here for years (when he could find work) as did Joe Sample and the Crusaders. Houston jazz, however, developed differently that it did in the North — the energy was different. The musicianship was often as good as it was in New York, Chicago, and other northern bastions of bebop and the avant-garde, and in a way just as innovative, but the jazz

musicians in Houston channeled their creativity in a more down-home way – a soul jazz deeply rooted in the blues, funk, Creole, and country of the culture they grew up in.

There is a thriving rap scene in Houston, which has given the world groups like the Geto Boys and South Park Mexican, though I know little about it.

Houston had its share of rockers too. In the sixties and early seventies, bands like the Thirteenth Floor Elevators and ZZ Top would play at Liberty Hall in lower Montrose, while in the surrounding small towns, blue-eyed soul singers BJ Thomas and Roy Head with their horn bands performed for dances at ballrooms. The Thirteenth Floor Elevators split up; Roy Head and BJ Thomas both achieved a modest success in pop music and then later as country-western singers. ZZ Top is still around and still in Houston.

Country singers like George Jones, Freddie Fender, and Gatemouth Brown used to record at Sugar Hill studios off of Wayside Drive near the Old Spanish Trail. The producer was the legendary Hughey Meaux, the "Crazy Cajun" who did time in prison in the early seventies for payola and again in the nineties for rape. A room in the back of Sugar Hill was where he brought teenage girls and plied them with drugs and alcohol.

Elvis used to perform at Magnolia Gardens on the banks of the San Jacinto River as it widened before emptying itself into the Gulf of Mexico and at the Harbor Lights club near the Ship Channel, which, before closing in the mid-nineties, was a popular watering hole for Norwegian and Greek sailors, drug addicts, motorcycle gangs, and prostitutes. When I played there, the piano player kept a loaded pistol on top of his keyboard, and the musicians openly smoked pot on the bandstand. This was one bar the police never entered.

And then there was Western Swing, which in Houston had a Dixieland flair to it with steel guitar, hot fiddles, horns, guitar, and piano all improvising simultaneously. As far as I know, this was unique to western swing in this part of the state. Twenty-five years ago all the old western swing musicians and those few (like me) who wanted to be around, play with, and learn from the masters used to congregate every Sunday afternoon at Frank's Ice House, an old beer joint in Houston's "Heights" district overlooking Buffalo Bayou. Frankie V, the owner, was once a singer with the original River Road Boys (one of Houston's more popular western swing ensembles) and was a lover of western swing. It was an open jam session, and the musicians got free drinks. Musicians in blue jeans, white shirts, cowboy hats, with grey hair and beer bellies

would pull up in old pickup trucks, broken down Fords or Chevys, and new Mercedes with their instrument in hand for these weekly gatherings. Herb Remington and Bucky Meadows would play twin parts on the steel guitar and the guitar, and Ernie Hunter, a rancher from Bryan, Texas, played fiddle rides that would be the envy of Joe Venuti. Once I thought I heard three fiddles playing harmony; I looked up and saw only Cliff Bruner, one of the founders of western swing, and then still playing in his eighties. Frank's Ice House has long since closed down. Frankie, Cliff Bruner, Ernie Hunter, and Bucky Meadows are all dead. The building was used as a Mexican ice house for several years, and is now a yuppie bar.

Country music in Houston, as in most of Texas, is first and foremost for dancing, and it was usually performed in huge ballrooms with eight to ten piece bands. When I came to Houston in 1981, the current local stars were people like Randy Cornor, Kenny Dale, Mundo Earwood, and Kelly Schoppa. But this was the beginning of the end for live country music in the city. The stars of the 80's, most with only a fraction of the creativity and originality of the previous generation, wasted their time, money, and talent on liquor, gambling, and cocaine. They spent everything they had as if it would never end, but it all came crashing down in the mid-eighties when the price of oil dropped, turning Houston's boomtown mentality into its polar opposite. And it never recovered. Nowadays, there is very little country music played in the city itself, and Houston's musicians are only recognized if they leave town (which most do) and then become famous.

This is the Houston I remember, though it is long gone, by now only a shadow in this oil-driven megalopolis of heat, humidity, and glass skyscrapers, that exists mainly in bits of conversations shared by the older musicians and the people they once played for, sitting in their now-stuffy wood paneled living rooms, showing off their old 45s and long playing records, eager to share in the old stories filled with names now gone. People who used to go whip dancing to white Houston bluesman Joey Long now talk about how he died. The heroin king of white Texas blues, always with a lit cigarette stuck between the tuning keys of his guitar. Playing a lick, taking a puff, and then blowing out the smoke in ringlets while he sustained and bent the note. He was playing at the Cedar Lounge one night, and during break time, he went outside and sat on the curb and closed his eyes. It was twenty minutes before anyone realized that he was dead. And they talk about Tommy Williams the drummer who used to have a bowl of goldfish in his bass drum, but by the end of the night the fish were always floating belly up at the top. Still older voices will tell of the times when they went to Dance Town USA up on Airline Drive to dance to Bob Wills, and Tommy Duncan was singing . Willie Nelson played there too, and his steel player Jimmy Day (one of my musical

heroes) gave his steel guitar bar to an admirer who gave it to me, and I in turn eventually gave it to someone else whom I'll most likely never see again. I remember the last time I saw Arnett Cobb playing on Allen's Landing with an organ trio. He needed a cane to stand up, but stand he did all night. He died six months later.

* * *

FRIDAY

It is early Friday evening. I start loading my equipment into my van and get ready to make the 90 minute drive down to Rosenberg, Texas to play at my first country-western gig this year. It is April. While I load my van, my next door neighbor Juan, a 70 year-old immigrant from Mexico, walks over to tell me, in a mix of Spanish and English, that last night someone broke into his car and tried to steal it. His car is usually parked on the street right in front of my van, so I'm a little nervous, both at the prospect of the van being broken into, and at the prospect of having to come home late at night and unload my equipment when these people may be roaming the neighborhood. We talk and commiserate for a few minutes, then I start driving down Interstate 10, to the Loop 610, and then onto Highway 59 southwest towards Rosenberg. I pass through the Galleria area, an upscale shopping center surrounded by the large apartment complexes that are home to extremely poor, illegal, and sometimes desperate recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Past the Galleria, the scenery is more suburban. Apartment complexes giving way to ranch style houses built in the seventies and eighties, each one identical to the other — a large percentage of them owned by those who could eventually leave the Galleria ghettos. Forty years ago this was all rice paddies.

I'm driving past Wal-Marts, Targets, McDonalds, and chain stores of unlimited variety of names and a numbing sameness of concept.

Eventually, the chain stores become fewer and farther between. The sun starts to set, and I now feel more relaxed. The land is flat and green with few trees.

As I pass the prison at Sugarland, the sign says, "Do Not Pick Up Hitch hikers".

I pass Crabb River Road and the ancient, meandering, red-banked Brazos River

Through Richmond, former home of of BJ Thomas.

The next exit is Rosenberg.

There's a sign for the Rosenberg Opry (in the last twenty years or so, opries have spread up all over Southeast Texas to give people an opportunity to see live country music without the corrupting influences of alcohol, cigarette smoke, and foul language.) Ed Junot, the left-handed Cajun fiddler used to play there. Then he had a heart attack and a quadruple bypass operation. His doctor told him that he needed to stop playing music, but Ed continued to perform at the opry every Saturday singing in French, dancing, and playing the fiddle all at the same time. He had another heart attack and dropped dead on stage. His funeral was held in El Campo, Texas. Frenchie Burke, with shaking hands, played "Amazing Grace" as they laid him in the ground.

I gaze to my right to see the mist is rising above Rabbs Bayou. It's been years since I was here. I take the State Highway 36 Exit. There's a huge Wal-Mart of the corner, a billboard says, "Bud Light". On the other corner is a Toyota dealership with acres of cars. Rosenberg is not as rural as I remember it. An old Silver Eagle Bus with a sign on it that says "Los Chaves" is parked at the McDonalds. I go south on Highway 36, and finally for a few miles there is nothing but country. In the fields I can see mounds of fire ant hills. When there is a flood, these hardy creatures will all lock their bodies together and form a miniature boat. I pass the American Legion Hall, which is having a bingo tournament. A minute later on the right is the Fort Bend County Fairgrounds. It has a new sign. Twenty years ago I played here with James Casey and the Texas Swing Band. Bucky Meadows was playing guitar. Going south, there is nothing but cotton fields for twenty miles.

At last I reach the corrugated metal building with a big neon sign that says "Chelsea's".

Twenty years ago this place would have been called something like "Silver Wings Ballroom" or "Larry Joe's Dance City", or "Cowboy Country", but times have changed. I get out of my van and walk inside. There is a full moon overhead, and a dead possum next to the back door. On the wall facing the bandstand is a large painting of the Texas flag. On the wall to the left is an equally large and somewhat menacing looking bald eagle. The audience, the club owners, and the band are, I'm sure, very conservative, so I am careful not to talk about politics (which is difficult to avoid at this time in America).

It's a Friday night, so there are not too many people in the building; perhaps they will all come later. After setting up my equipment, I look for a place to sit where I won't be conspicuous sitting alone.

Everyone in the band is dressed in blue jeans and "Brooks and Dunn" style western shirts. Before we start the first song, the singer shouts out "Are there any rednecks out

there?" A tepid response. He tries again, "I said, ARE THERE ANY REDNECKS OUT THERE?" A slightly better response. Then he yells, "Can I hear a 'Yee Haw'?" A few people shout out "Yee Haw" and the band begins to play. They play the current Top 40 country hits as much like the record as they can. This band, made up of weekend warriors, gets through the first set. The bass player, playing an old fretless bass (a big no no in c&w) is hopelessly and blissfully out of tune. Annoyed, I look over at him while we're playing, and he just smiles and nods as if everything is going great. This is a bit frustrating for me because as the player of a different fretless instrument, the pedal steel guitar, I am unable to find a pitch to lock in to. During break time I broach the subject with him, but my advice to him to check his tuning falls on deaf ears. "Well, I think that everybody should check their tuning. The next set he smiles at me less. The night seems to be going OK even though I don't know the tunes. I try to play what seems to me appropriate, and the band seems to appreciate it.

Third set — the band goes into "Old Time Rock and Roll". If you have not had the distinct misfortune to watch drunken middle-aged rednecks try to dance to rock and roll, I'll spare you the details.

Fourth set — they play some Merle Haggard, and I feel more comfortable. At the end of the last song, the singer announces, "Last Call for Alcohol," and then tones into the microphone, "You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here." The club owner starts flashing the lights. At 2 AM we are finished and begin the fun part, tearing down. The guitar player, who is the bandleader, leans over to me and announces that I play so well that he's in love and wants to marry me. I ask him what his wife would think of that. He shouts to his wife (the drummer) standing behind him, "Rita, you heard me, get lost!" I chuckled all the way home.

* * *

SATURDAY

My Saturday night gig is in Cleveland, Texas with my old friend Brian (brother of a famous country singer) who until 4:30 Saturday afternoon owed me money from a gig I did with him back in November. He had to pay me in cash, plus the amount for that night's gig before I would leave my house. He tells me, "Sound check is at 5:30." I leave home at six o'clock and drive again on Highway 59, this time in the other direction, northeast, into the piney-woods of East Texas. Along 59 North through Houston are peppered dozens of tire shops, discount furniture stores, and also what are euphemistically called "Gentlemen's Clubs".

After Houston comes Montgomery County and I pass through Kingwood, Houston's last suburb to the northeast. After Kingwood, there is nothing on either side of the road but the towering pines, their presence not entirely benevolent. I feel as if they are watching and harboring a silent dislike for anything human including me. Their old enemies the timber companies are fading away (I remember playing at dances in East Texas twenty years ago for loggers who were missing fingers from their work at the saw mill and missing teeth from god knows what else.) being replaced by bull dozers, housing subdivisions, and outlet malls.

The sun is beginning to set.

Twenty minutes later I become bored. I fish out a disk and put it into CD player. Albert Ayler, "Ghosts".

Up ahead I cross the San Jacinto River where my daughter Rose and I once saw a four year-old girl drown. It was twenty-two years ago at a party/benefit for the victims of a tornado that had recently passed through the outskirts of Houston. The girl's parents were hosting the event and, like most of the people there, were so drunk they could hardly walk. Roy Head, a neighbor of the organizers, was the main entertainment. Rose and I watched as they dragged her limp body out of the muddy river, and, a minute later, when a fight broke out over whether the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation was being done correctly, we walked away. The girl's mother, held by two women, was screaming. Roy Head, wearing a black t-shirt and black shorts, his hair dyed purple, was standing behind a barbecue pit and sobbing. The next time I saw him was a year ago on the bandstand. While I was playing, he whispered into my ear, "Play something sexy", and while I played, he did something slightly unnatural with his microphone.

On the left is a billboard for a tent revival. This, as they like to say, is the buckle of the Bible Belt. My mind flashes back to my old friends Ronnie Mack and Bucky Meadows. Ronnie grew up playing at these revivals while his father preached, his family traveling from town to town through the Piney Woods. In the seventies Ronnie wound up playing piano with Mel Tillis and writing several of his big hits. But Ronnie had a drinking problem. One morning he woke up, and his wife was lying next to him dead. The police asked him if he had killed her, and he answered, honestly, that he didn't remember. I don't think he ever recovered from that, and it gnawed on him for the rest of his life. He would go on binges, get fired from his country gigs or just disappear for weeks or months at a time. Then he would re-appear with some Pentecostalist friends of his driving him to the gigs. He would play beautifully and between sets he would drink coffee. Then a few weeks later he'd be drinking beer, and then whiskey. Then he

would disappear again, this pattern repeating itself for years. At his funeral the Holy Rollers sat on one side of the church, and the country musicians sat on the other. Both claimed him as their own. The owner of a local beer joint had paid for his funeral, which did not however include an expert embalming job. I remember it was quiet in the chapel (provided by the Pentecostals) and very serious. I was crying and even the most hardened men were getting tearful, then someone blurted out, "Ronnie looks like a god damned wooden Indian." We all busted out laughing.

Bucky Meadows came from Livingston, down the road from Cleveland. When he was seventeen, in the early 50s, he hit the road with Hank Thompson and the Brazos Valley Boys playing piano and later guitar. In the sixties he wound up playing with Willie Nelson (he did the guitar ride on "Remember Me" in Willie's acclaimed "Red Headed Stranger" album). When I knew Bucky he owned two pairs of pants, a couple shirts, a small black and white TV, a dog named "PJ" (Pure Jazz — the dog before PJ was named Tal) and two old Gibson Super 400 guitars. He could barely write his own name, couldn't drive a car, and couldn't play the same lick twice if his life depended on it, but he could play "What's New" for three hours straight without repeating himself. Ronnie Mack said that Bucky had "seen something really bad" when he was a boy, and he had never been the same since. In the 1980's, Bucky could not hold down a job playing in Houston — they wanted copy musicians playing the same exact things night after night. When he got evicted from his apartment and his friends got tired of taking him in, Willie Nelson gave him a condo on his property outside of Austin and a job as mayor of his Western town. Bucky lived there until he died.

I cross Caney Creek and pass Porter, Texas.

A billboard for a right wing "Christian" radio station announces, "He loves you, yeah yeah, yeah."

New Caney, Texas where a drummer I knew, Jack Fielder, a soft-spoken man with shoulder length blond hair, a mustache and a beard, was shot in the chest point blank by his wife Tara. His last word was "Why?"

As much as this part of Texas repulses me and sometimes scares me, I don't for a minute forget that this forgotten murky backwoods is a Cradle of American culture both black and white. Perhaps it was the forest that shielded East Texas from the passing of time, allowing culture, both black and white, sheltered in some way from the stifling influences of racism, fundamentalism and political conservatism, to stew and mix in its own way producing a mix of blues and country that to a small extent still exists today. If you've seen the movie "Deliverance", that is East Texas too, and

perhaps more appropriately, "O Brother Where Art Thou." In Texas we chuckle quite a bit at that movie because those archetypal characters actually exist here. We all know people here who are exactly like the characters in the film—the same wide-eyed wonder, superstitiousness, but mixed with a certain anger and resentment, and a profound suspicion of outsiders.

On the left a billboard announces "Cleveland Chili Cook-off".

Patton Village — speed trap. I slow down.

An old shack by the side of the road. The sign says, "Granny's Country Antiques".

I pass through Splendora, Texas, which used to be (and maybe still is) a stronghold of the Texas KKK. Years ago I visited a middle school in Splendora, and the principal, wearing a black cowboy hat and chewing tobacco, tried to recruit me to teach special education. "Yup," he said, "there was a little problem with, um, inbreedin' several years ago, so we have a lot of special ed kids now. Know what I mean?"

I drive on.

The last of the Texas spring wildflowers—Indian Paintbrushes, Pink Buttercups. The Bluebonnets (the state flower) have probably been gone for a few weeks.

I enter Liberty County.

On the right a tent with a big sign that says "Swords and Knives".

Another sign—"Hog Processing"

Cold Spring—Kent Morrison, a guitar player who had played briefly with Barbara Mandrell in the 60s used to be the county judge up here until he was convicted of taking bribes. I had played a few gigs with him—always very proud, very stubborn, and very serious. Kent died late one night on his way home from a gig when his car struck a tree. Everyone said it was suicide.

Huge building on the left — "Bethel Assembly of God".

Sign on the right — "East Texas Drug Screening and Consortium"

My directions say to go past the Cleveland cutoff and take a left at the first gravel road after "Joy Juice". Most of East Texas is still dry, so the liquor stores are located just outside the city limits. I drive twenty feet, and there it is, another large corrugated

steel building; the sign on the building says, "Reno". By now it's dark outside. I get out of my van, open the door, and immediately, I'm struck by the scent of pine needles, dirt, and barbecue smoke. I walk across the parking lot and into the door. There's a grey haired man standing next to a woman sitting at a table who tells me to pay seven dollars. I tell them I'm in the band. They don't want to let me in — a girl playing steel guitar? Finally someone recognizes me and they tell me to come in, but first I need to have a membership. It is illegal to sell alcohol in a public place, so all night clubs and dance halls are private clubs, most of them selling memberships at the door. I fill out the card.

It is 7:30 and there is no sound check. Another band is playing. I sit around for three hours while this band plays. Inside it is dark, smokey, and loud. Drunks are falling down on the dance floor. The singer introduces a song that he dedicates to "our fighting men in Iraq who are dying so that we can be free at home." A man in a cowboy hat, missing a couple teeth and carrying a longneck bottle of beer in his hand, runs up to the dance floor and shouts, "You god damned right! You god damned right!" As I walk to the rest rooms I notice there is fresh blood on the floor. Two women in front of the mirror fixing their makeup, "Yeah, it wuz somethin' else. Did you see it? Billy Ray told Justin to back off, but he wouldn't listen." "Well, he really messed up Justin's face. I just hope he'll be all right." I walk out and toward the bandstand. The cigarette smoke is starting to bother me, and I wipe my eyes which only makes it worse.

Finally we start playing. Brian's reputation with money is such that he has a difficult time keeping a steady band, so this gig is done with hired guns — some of the better country musicians from Houston, but instead of gelling, the feeling becomes somewhat stiff as the musicians try to prove themselves to each other by over-playing. The sound from the vocal monitors is so loud that I can barely hear my own instrument. Brian tells the drummer to "rock it more". The drummer, misinterpreting this comment as an instruction to turn up, starts banging so hard and so loud that he breaks the head on his snare drum. Then the guitar player turns up. People on the dance floor are feverishly two-stepping to the music, occasionally someone falls down.

During the break when I tell the drummer that he really didn't need to play that loud, he replies, "Well, if you want me to turn down, you should have Brian talk to me." As you can see, my frank and opinionated nature usually gets me nowhere.

As I walk back up to the bandstand, I notice a sign for a Bobbie Blue Bland concert, "Live at Reno's". During the second set, Brian leaves the stage after the first song to dance with his new girlfriend, and his brother Kevin comes up to sing. His voice blares

through the monitor, ". . . I'm proud to be an A-me-ri-can where at least I know I'm free. Where the fighting men who died . . . blah blah blah ", the Lee Greenwood's song. I try turning my head to different angles so that the volume won't hurt my ears, but nothing works. The smoke is now so thick that I am playing with my eyes closed.

At two AM we are finally finished. I pack up and load my equipment as fast as I can, then say good bye to the other musicians sitting around the empty bandstand waiting to get paid. I walk out the door, get into my van, put the key in the ignition, start the engine, and pull out onto the gravel road that leads to the highway. My ears are ringing. Later I turn on the radio to help me stay awake. Art Bell's late night talk show is on. A woman from Phoenix is talking about a UFO she has just seen. As I drive, there is nothing but the road, the sound of the radio, and the full moon reflected dimly through the pines.

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