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# FROM BIG SPRING TO BIG TIME: MARK MCKINNEY

WRITTEN BY DANIEL MILLER ON OCTOBER 24, 2013



After over twenty years of playing music, the last five of which have been spent playing full time, Mark McKinney still approaches his music with the enthusiasm and drive many lack, and few will ever put forth.

Growing up in Big Spring, the McKinney house was filled with the sounds of the Beatles, Stones, Charlie Daniels, Willie Nelson and Eric Clapton, among many others.

"Another huge one that my dad turned me on to, and who made me want to play harmonica, was Tony Joe White," McKinney adds. "He had that swampy blues sound, played the harp with the headset. I really got into him."

The epiphany of playing lived happen when Mark was around eight years old and Willie Nelson played the football stadium in Big Spring.

McKinney remembers looking up at Nelson on stage, playing his heart out in front of the crowd, and thinking "now that's what I wanna do!"

His parents being the supportive music lovers who had passed such a love on to their sons, they gladly got the boys guitar lessons, instruments, and allowed them and their friends to rehearse in the home. The first band came together around middle school, made up of Mark, his brother Eric, and some middle school friends. McKinney's father made the group a deal that if they would learn 10 songs, he would book them a show.

That first show took place at Godfather's Pizza in Big Spring between their sixth and seventh grade years.

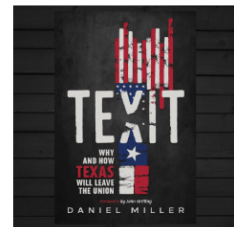
"We played our 10 songs, the girls screamed, and we were hooked!" McKinney recalls. "We sucked, I can imagine what it sounded like."

From there, the McKinney boys grew both in size, and in their musical talent. After school, Mark and Eric started a group aptly called the McKinney Brothers, which was heavily influenced by the then current Austin scene. As McKinney described the incarnation, "it was rhythm and blues, kinda rock, a little funky, but still based in roots."

Following the McKinney Brothers was the Cosmic Cowboys, where the music started to come back into the country realm and even garnered the attention of Virgin records. Virgin liked what they found in the Cosmic Cowboys, and signed them to a development deal. Between 1998 and 2000, McKinney and his Cosmic brothers were busy putting together what they thought would become the first Cosmic Cowboys album.

Sadly, it was not to be. While they were slaving away in the studio, Virgin was being acquired by Capitol Records. After the merger, Capitol dropped all of Virgin's development signings, which included the

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records. After the merger, Capitol dropped all of Vignin's development signings, which included the Cosmic Cowboys.

After being on the cusp of many independent artist's dream, McKinney spent the next few years working construction and doing real estate around Austin. He would sporadically play a few shows, but never laid his pen aside. He continued writing and playing the guitar, hoping that maybe he would get someone to cut a song or two one day. Then around 2006, Mark said he decided to start doing what he loved, come what may. He scaled back on the day jobs and began performing a lot more.

"I always try to get better as a songwriter. Also, I don't consider myself some great singer," McKinney admits. "But maybe it's a unique voice that some people are going to love, and some people are going to hate. I just basically liked writing songs and I needed somebody to sing them. So I was like 'Aw hell, I guess I'll sing them!'"

Around 2008, McKinney decided it was time to go completely full time with his music, and hasn't looked back. Obviously, the timing was right and the stars were aligned, as McKinney and his group won the French Country Music Awards "Live Performance of the Year" for their show at the Equiblues Festival in St Agreves, France. Also on the lineup that weekend was one Kevin Fowler and a then-seventeen year old Kasey Musgraves.



"Five thousand people come out, they put on this rodeo, you do one show, they wine and dine you, and then you fly home," McKinney says. "Next thing you know, we find out that from that one performance, we'd won best country live performance for 2008."

Considering the previous winners (Jamey Johnson, Brad Paisley and Dierks Bentley to name a few), and the others on that weekend's bill, this was quite and impressive feat.

"That night, we were on fire. You fly over there for five days for this one show, and you better make it count."

Make it count they did.

Though the award was unexpected, it doesn't quite rank as McKinney's favorite moment. In the late 90's, Mark spent roughly four months playing bass for Paula Nelson. Through this, he was able to meet the man who inspired him to play in the first place. Not only was he able to hang out with the Nelson bunch, he opened for Nelson a time or two, and related his story about that long ago concert in Big Spring to Willie himself.

Then there was the time he opened for Ted Nugent at Lonestar Park in Grand Prairie, Tx. When asked about standing in front of 28,000+ people and opening for the Nuge, McKinney's response is an understatement: "It was pretty cool."

When asked what the hardest thing about being a full time musician is, his answer is many fold.

"The previous bands I'd always played with, we'd do weekend shows. We wouldn't do Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and sometimes Sunday afternoon. The hardest is building up that stamina to give your best and sing four or five nights a week. Not taking too many shots or drinking too many beers the first night, then be out of breath and hungover the next three or four days. That was hard to get the ebb and flow of."

Another thing McKinney says makes for a constant struggle is the number of artists around the scene today.



"There's a lot of great music out there. Sometimes it's tough to make yourself stand out, to be noticed. There's so many great singers, songwriters, bands and performers. It's just a huge sea of talent. The hardest part is standing out in a sea of talent."


Though he strives to always put out better music and grow his fanbase, McKinney says he's happy with where he is.


"I'm real happy being an Americana Texas country artist with a good fanbase," McKinney says.


Although being happy can sometimes be a relative term.


"I remember doing one show about five or six years ago in Waco. It was outside downtown. I can't remember what it was for. It was 38 degrees, and we were supposed to put on a ninety plus minute show. I think we ended up giving them about seventy-five minutes and we were just frozen. There were probably about five people there, that was probably the worst," McKinney remembers.

But things are looking up for McKinney these days. His latest album, "Standing My Ground," provided


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his first #1 single. "She Ain't Leaving," featuring Bri Bagwell, went to the top of the chart, which isn't bad for a hastily released single.

"It was the first song, the only song, we had done and we knew we needed to get a song out to radio. We threw out 'She Ain't Leaving' and lo and behold, it did well. I've had a bunch of top tens, but it was my first #1."

The current single "Stolen Cash" is riding high in the top five on the charts, but McKinney says the next single "Lonely Bones" will be the first from the album with a music video. The album was produced by Mark and his brother Eric, and recorded in Austin at Eric McKinney's Wonderland Studios. McKinney has also taken a more hands on approach to all other aspects of his music, releasing his manager and also taking on the duties of his websites, Facebook and twitter. Although he admits some of the info on markmckinney.com may be a bit outdated, he says that the tour dates are kept current. Unlike many at his level and above, McKinney keeps the personal relationship with his fans tight by updating and responding to his fans on twitter and facebook himself.

Heeding the advice of friend and sometime writing partner Kevin Fowler, McKinney is quick to pass it along to newer artist. This advice has obviously paid dividends for McKinney.

"Don't give up. Keep pounding at it, keep doing your thing," McKinney says. "It's kind of like 'who can outlast.' Don't try to copy anyone else."

For more information, show dates, and current happenings in the world of Mark McKinney, fans can follow him on Twitter, like his fanpage on Facebook, or check the tour dates on [www.markmckinney.com](http://www.markmckinney.com).

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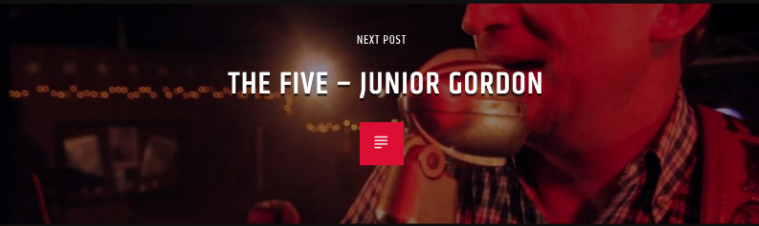
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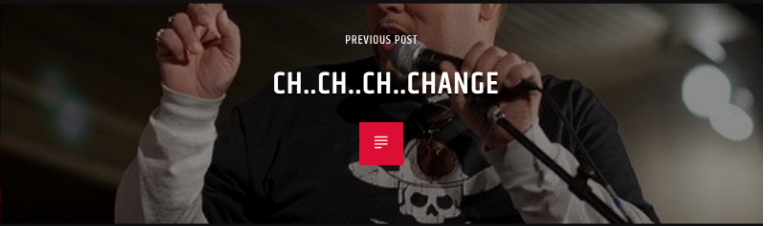


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