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Introduction

CLINTON, SOUTH CAROLINA | FEBRUARY 2005

While corresponding with my agent, Jim Cypher, about this project, I received an e-mail in which Jim enclosed a set of dictionary definitions for the word *invincible*. The book's original subtitle was "The Invincible Music of Americana," and Jim wasn't sure I understood what *invincible* meant. I was a bit mystified until I saw his note, scribbled below the definitions: "Are you sure this is what you mean?" Or something to that effect.

Well, yes.

I called him and said that I had chosen the adjective because of my view that Americana music is invincible because it survives, endures, and even flourishes despite all efforts by the high, mighty, and monied to kill it.

It lives in the steadfast obstinacy of Steve Earle, who wrote a song in which he imagined what it would be like to be John Walker Lindh, "the American Taliban," precisely at a time when the country was roaring with nationalistic fervor. Earle wasn't being traitorous, as a thousand radio talk show dema-

gogues rashly alleged. He wasn't condoning what Lindh had done. He was trying to put himself inside Lindh's psyche and figure out how an affluent kid from Marin County had wound up training with terrorists in faraway Afghanistan. Sympathizing with the misbegotten and the downtrodden is nothing new for Earle, who also once wrote a song in which he crept inside the head of a murderer.

Americana artists such as Earle, Guy Clark, Lucinda Williams, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Emmylou Harris, Charlie and Bruce Robison, Iris DeMent, Cody Canada, Billy Joe Shaver, Willy Braun, Jack Ingram, Robert Earl Keen Jr., James McMurry, Hayes Carll, Buddy Miller, Pat Green, and Django Walker share little in terms of style. They go their own way, picking up influences from one another and heading, to paraphrase Kris Kristofferson, "in every wrong direction on their lonely way back home."

Americana isn't a musical form. It's a state of mind. Some of its adherents refer to it simply as OKOM: Our Kind of Music. It's not formulated from marketing surveys, nor is it nurtured in the common commercial environment in which record execs insist on making creative decisions. Fans don't flock to Americana artists because Clear Channel radio tells them to. The music is passed along in smoky pubs and dance halls, by Internet downloads and individual web sites and even, yes, by word of mouth.

Remember when hillbilly songwriters drove the dusty back roads, handing out sample copies of their 45-RPM singles to disc jockeys at AM radio stations? Such scenes pepper the plots of movies like the 1980 biopic *Coal Miner's Daughter* and, more recently, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. Nowadays it's next to impossible for the fans even to find a radio station willing to take their requests. Playlists are computer generated, market researched, demographically focused, centrally devised, and virtually unchangeable.

Yet the spirit lives.

Singers and songwriters still rush headlong down Earle's "Nowhere Road" or Leon Payne's "Lost Highway." That road is seldom strewn with megabucks. Often the best a man can hope for is to make a modest living for himself and his family. Sometimes he breaks into the big-time, at which time there are short-lived opportunities for his peers, if only because of Nashville and Hollywood's penchant for cloning. More often than not, though, the musical establishment welcomes him (or her) into its arms, only to chew him up eventually and spit him out.

Kelly Willis knows that feeling, and she is merely, in my view, the best female country singer there is. More people ought to know this. Nashville mishandles more than it handles, though, and those who make it typically wind up forgetting where it all started. They do it for money, and contemporary logic holds that only a fool would do otherwise.

The Americana artist wants the people to dig his stuff. He may dream of the big, long Cadillac and the sprawling country estate, but he should probably be wary of what comes with it. It's that trouble looking at one's image in the mirror that often brings the dance hall dreamer (Pat Green's term) back to Austin, Texas.

Are you sure Hank done it this way?

Fresh terrain—the late John Hartford's "Gentle on My Mind" referred to "the wheat fields and the clotheslines and the junkyards and the highways [that] come between us"—nourishes a musician; it's the fertile ground. If only Nashville could appreciate it. Too much of mainstream country music lies off the beaten path. Away from the music industry's interstate highways—bordered by their very own shopping malls, convenience stores, and fast-food franchises—there's so much to experience.

Waiting for Jack Ingram

FORT WORTH, TEXAS | DECEMBER 2003

The interview is supposed to be sometime around 4:00 p.m. at the sound check. Onstage at Billy Bob's Texas, the Fort Worth honky-tonk that includes, among other things, honest-to-gosh bull riding on the side.

Jack Ingram packs them in at Billy Bob's. That's because Texas has a musical culture all its own. Ingram's big in Texas but virtually unknown in the rest of the country. That's really a shame because Jack Ingram rocks.

There's a delay while the swarthy guy manning the entrance checks to see if anyone back in the concert venue knows who the hell I am or whether the hell I'm supposed to be here. Apparently, someone thinks, yeah, maybe somebody wants to interview Jack. *I think I heard something about that, man. Let the dude back.*

So, I'm there. But Jack isn't. Supposedly, he missed a plane from El Paso. Or maybe there was a delay. Something went wrong. Turns out he'll be here in time for the show. The road manager says we'll work something out. For a while I watch

Ingram's Beat-Up Ford Band complete the sound check. They do Ingram songs—"Hey You," "Mustang Burn"—with someone else filling in on lead vocals, but then they just start screwing around, checking the sound with songs by AC/DC and God knows who else.

My grandmother raised me to be inherently cheap in a nitpicky sort of way, and I already paid to park outside Billy Bob's, and there's no way I'm going to leave and fork over five bucks for nothing again. So, I wind up wandering the Stockyards. For five hours.

There's a lot to amuse a person. A big horse show is going on at the "historic" rodeo arena. I grew up around horses, and even though I haven't ridden a horse in a decade or two, I sit around on this review stand and watch all the cowboys and cowgirls loping around, making sure their quarter horses are in the right leads, which is horse show lingo for the inside foot falling first at every stride of a canter. I guess you have to be in that world to understand the crucial importance of such things.

There are many women, dressed up in their cowgirl suits, pink hats, and sequined jackets and the like, and it strikes me that relatively few of them really know how to ride. Many of them are holding the reins too tightly. All the poor horse needs is the slightest flick of the wrist, but some of these girls seem intent on yanking the poor animal's teeth out. Too many of them are would-be beauty queens—I guarantee the teenage ones enter or have entered pageants at the local armadillo festival (Armadillo Days!)—and trophy wives. Some of them know what they're doing. I bet I can pick who wins based on the way they hold their reins, but I didn't come here to watch a horse show, so after an hour or so, I move on.

I look at the menus of a dozen restaurants, all posted behind glass outside the front door. I take a look at who's play-

ing at the various clubs. I even hang out in one for a while, watching the afternoon act play to a mostly empty house and eventually leaving a couple of dollars in the mayonnaise jar at the front of the bandstand. It's a big mayonnaise jar, restaurant sized, but there's not much in it.

I browse in a bunch of shops and am mildly inclined to buy a piece of cowboy art to put up on the wall of my house. What dissuades me is the thought of trying to get it back to South Carolina. Too complicated. But I chuckle to think of the scene at the airline counter, in which I'm trying to explain myself. I guess they'd plaster a *FRAGILE* sticker on the back, which wouldn't prevent the harried employees of *US Airways* from "taking infield" with it out on the tarmac.

For a while—a long while, actually—I sit outside in the evening air, listening to classic country tunes being played over the *PA* system. God, how long has it been since I heard Cal Smith's "Country Bumpkin"? When did music reach the point where rhyming *bumpkin* with *pumpkin* became passé? I mean, once you accept the premise of writing a song about a bumpkin, what else could you do but contrive a rhyme with *pumpkin*? Guess that's why there aren't nearly enough bumpkin songs.

I have a steak at the Cattleman, where, since I was too lazy to go back to the car and pick up a book to read, I basically consider all the overdeveloped bulls, steers, and heifers that won awards at the nearby cattle shows and thus had photographs taken with their dour owners, eventually to be hung on the Cattleman walls and pondered by lonely diners. I wonder if any part of Clara Belle II ever ended up being served in this very steakhouse. Probably not. One would hope award-winning beef would earn a better fate.

I'm wearing tennis shoes, which sort of stigmatizes me, but I'm glad I've got them because after wandering around for hours, my feet are hurting. Eventually, I return to Billy

Bob's, where I have a beer and watch the house acts over in front of the dance floor. One of the things that would surely be different if I lived in Texas is that I would eventually be able to two-step. It looks so simple, yet I can attest from experience that it's not so easy. Then again, I reckon I've never tried it when I'm sober. It's one dance that defies any gap between generations—it's practiced by aging couples and fresh-faced youngsters alike. The older two-steppers do it with a relaxed professionalism, smiling at each other in an old-time, romantic way, while the young whippersnappers gyrate around and wonder about "gettin' some." It's second nature to all of them.

Eventually, I move down into the concert hall, and there, freshly arrived from somewhere like El Paso, is Jack Ingram. Sure enough, he doesn't show up until there are only minutes to spare. The interview will have to wait until after the show, but, yeah, the road manager tells me, just hang around—Jack wants to talk to you.

I don't know that I've ever seen anyone connect more intimately with an audience than Ingram, who is intense and charismatic. He works his ass off up there, but the guy with the really demanding job is the young man who must constantly restring and retune Ingram's guitars, for he is truly a string-busting sonovagun.

And Jack has his dreams. He's a damn fine fish in a pond that's too damn small. Not that Texas is small. Oh, no. Them's fightin' words. But Jack Ingram ought to be playing coliseums, not dance halls, and packing them in ought to mean twenty thousand, not three. This man is truly what Jimmy Buffett many years ago referred to as "a hot Roman candle from the Texas Panhandle," even though Ingram isn't from Lubbock or, a late plane flight notwithstanding, El Paso.

Ingram is a onetime psychology major from SMU; per-