A black and white photograph of Charlie Sexton, a musician, sitting and playing a white Fender Stratocaster electric guitar. He is wearing a dark jacket over a dark shirt and a scarf. He has long, dark hair and is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a dimly lit studio with various pieces of equipment, including a microphone and cables. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting his face and the guitar.

# Charlie Sexton: Too Many Ways to Fall

Jason Crouch



Charlie Sexton's story reads like the quintessential Texas music fable: raw talent and sheer determination tempered by frustration and missed opportunities, much of it lived in the public eye. Sexton's career began as child prodigy guitarist in the Austin music scene, fostered by some of the most celebrated artists there. He became an international heartthrob in his teens, struggled with major label woes, and rubbed elbows and performed with jet-setting rock stars. He searched for his lyrical voice and found success in the recording studio as an acclaimed producer. The journey has been costly in many regards, but at this point in his life, Charlie Sexton is the essence of the Austin music scene distilled in one career and man. More than thirty-five years into his career, Sexton remains a vital guitarist, a commanding vocalist, and, now, an in-demand producer.

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Charles Wayne Sexton was born in San Antonio, Texas, on August 11, 1968, to Kay and Mike Sexton. A day short of his second birthday his brother, Will, was born. By 1972, Kay had moved with her two sons to Austin. He received his first guitar when he was about two years of age. "Before my brother was born, my mom and dad took a trip on the train. They went to San Diego, and they left me with my aunt. They were actually going to hitchhike to Altamont. Then the show got moved and they ended up going to Juarez instead and they brought me back a guitar from Mexico. And even before that, there were always guitars around; I had several uncles that played. My grandfather always had a guitar around. One of my earliest memories was watching the *Johnny Cash Show*. That was one of the shows we would watch with my grandfather. And pretty soon I had painted my guitar black. That was really funny 'cause I would try to do the intro, you know, [in high-pitched childlike voice] 'Hello, I'm Johnny Cash.'

Man, I was really little.” During these years, the only singing Charlie did was in church. But live music was already a major force in his young life. Kay would take her boys to all the acclaimed music venues to hear all varieties of music, not just country or blues. “We were going to shows all the time, since I was like five,” he says. “I was just obsessed. We were always going to shows, always seeing music. I was always that kid that would be dancing amongst all the rednecks and cowboys and hippies and bikers and whatever.” The list of acts he recalls seeing at the Armadillo World Headquarters includes Todd Rundgren with Utopia, Frank Zappa, and Head East. “We kind of went to everything,” he muses. Music played at home included hand-me-down records from his parents, one of which made a particularly big impression: *Magical Mystery Tour* by the Beatles. “That was the record I tried to learn to play guitar to. That was tough because there is not one guitar line that

[Split Rail] had burned down.’ So the night before my debut, the club burns down. It was kind of apropos the way my life has gone, as charmed as it seems from the outside. All it takes is a drop of Irish blood for that kind of luck.”

Charlie’s live debut finally arrived the day before his eleventh birthday on August 10, 1979, at the Continental Club. He both sang and played guitar with a band called the Bizarros, an adventurous conglomerate of veteran Austin musicians that at one time included Sterling Morrison, formerly of the Velvet Underground. Soon after, he finally got to perform with Kenny Acosta at the Armadillo as Little Charlie. “Kenny is the one who gave me that name. It was on the poster.” The Armadillo was a familiar setting. “I mean, I basically grew up in that club and the beer garden.” The night Charlie saw Rockpile, the seminal British pub rock band that featured Dave Edmunds and Nick Lowe, at the Armadillo is particularly

22 So the night before my debut, the club burns down. It was kind of apropos the way my life has gone, as charmed as it seems from the outside. All it takes is a drop of Irish blood for that kind of luck.

goes through a whole song. It was just moronic. That record has both scarred me and led to some of my aesthetic.” He also began to sing along with some of these records. “When I was about nine years old, maybe a little younger ... I remember trying to sing [to the record] and I opened my mouth ... and to my mind, I sounded just like Willie Nelson. And at that point, that’s just not what I was going for, the furthest thing from my mind. I barely knew a chord.”

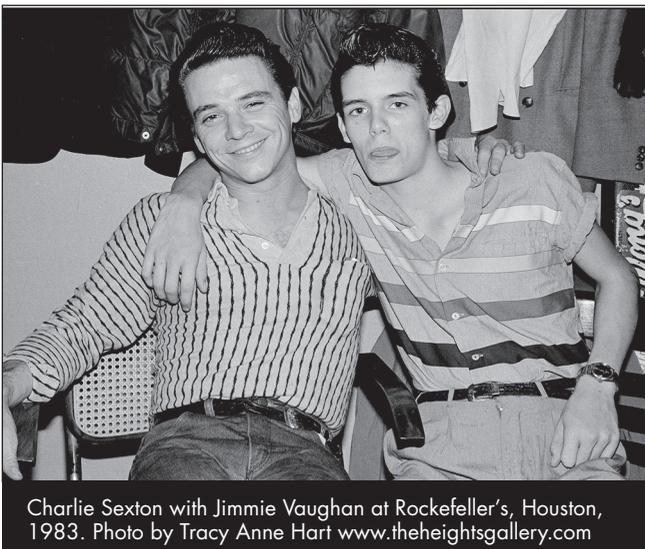
His first invitation to perform on stage came from a singer the family often went to see. “Kenny Acosta was from Louisiana but lived here in Austin. He had kind of a soul review kind of band. He was playing a place called the Split Rail, which was right across the street from where Schlotzsky’s is now [South Lamar Blvd. just south of Lady Bird Lake]. Kenny was a friend of the family and he said, ‘If you learn the words to “Jambalaya,” you can get up and sing it next week.’ So I was just so excited I went home and all week I just practiced. The day of the gig rolled around and my mother got home from work and it started getting kind of late and I told my mom we had to go because I was singing with Kenny tonight. She just said, ‘Oh honey, I forgot to tell you, when I was coming home from the Soap Creek Saloon last night, it

memorable. “That was the night I met Jimmie Vaughan, because I already knew Stevie [Ray Vaughan].” After a couple of shows playing acoustic guitar, Charlie was encouraged by family friend Speedy Sparks to invest in an electric guitar for an upcoming music fest. “We took a .22 pump rifle down to a pawnshop somewhere downtown and traded it in for a little cash for an electric guitar. I got on stage and played it that night. I didn’t know how to tune it, I didn’t know what keys were, I just played it by ear. That gave me a lot of drive to figure it all out.” Soon after Charlie met local blues legend W.C. Clark. “He became like my godfather. I played with him every Tuesday at the Continental for a year.” Subsequent appearances with area groups such as the Cobras featuring Denny Freeman continued to snowball. By the time Charlie was either twelve or thirteen (“It’s a little foggy”), his family moved to Wimberley, Texas, and Charlie stayed in Austin. First, he enrolled in school, staying with family friends, but that soon dissolved as well. He took up residence at a building on the lot of Red River Motors. Then he rented an attic apartment. “I think I had a bag of clothes, a record player, a few records, and my guitar. The school year started and then that didn’t work out and I had to transfer.” For the better part

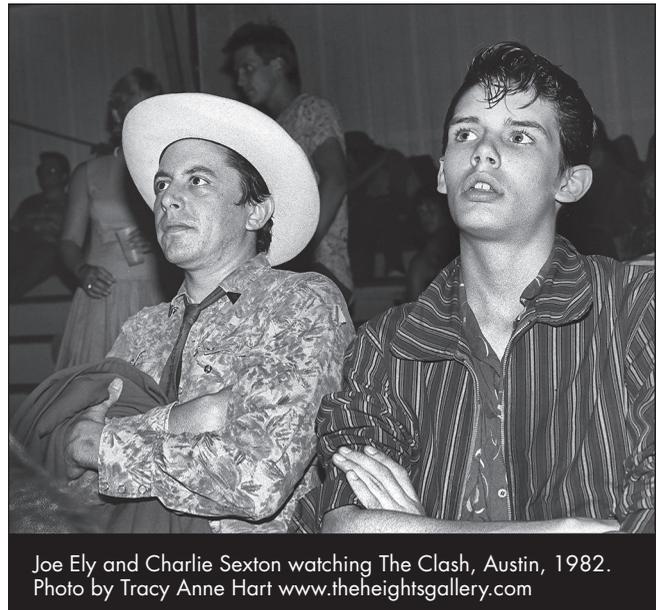
of a year Charlie lived under the table at the home of Speedy Sparks, but then a lucky break came in the form of a call from Joe Ely's management.

Joe Ely had come out of the small but vibrant music scene in Lubbock, Texas. At the dawn of the 1980s, he was riding a streak of great press and strong albums. He was particularly popular in Austin. However, his guitarist, Jesse Taylor, had suffered a serious hand injury and needed time to heal. Charlie got the call. "I was thirteen at this point, and it didn't make sense. Of all the other guitarists in town, I didn't understand. It was a very sweet thing of Joe to do. In hindsight I can see how he just said, 'Well, Jesse is going to be out for six weeks, let's do something fun and cool.' I guess he had faith that I could pull it off. That's what we did."

When asked if he had started writing songs at this point, he said, "My brother and I played together constantly then. He'd play bass and I would play guitar. We'd play old rock and roll songs and this and that. But then we started writing standard type songs. You know, 'Baby's gone, baby's leaving, simmer down, baby,' what sounds good as a title? We would do carbon copies of these songs, kind of the way those fifties songs really were [similar]." When asked if he had an affinity for that era of music, he said exposure to Speedy's records was the catalyst for that interest. "Speedy started dating our mom. When he moved in with us, with him came his record collection. I mean he had every Elvis Sun 45. I would just play those records and just study it, study it, study it until I figured it out. All the modern records I had been given, like Boston or Kiss, got literally thrown out the window. They were replaced by Little Richard, Buddy Holly, Elvis, Gene Vincent, I mean all that stuff." Local rockabilly outfit the Leroi Brothers were a big inspiration as well. "They were the best, I mean they



Charlie Sexton with Jimmie Vaughan at Rockefeller's, Houston, 1983. Photo by Tracy Anne Hart [www.theheightsgallery.com](http://www.theheightsgallery.com)



Joe Ely and Charlie Sexton watching The Clash, Austin, 1982. Photo by Tracy Anne Hart [www.theheightsgallery.com](http://www.theheightsgallery.com)

were so great." When Charlie decided to put together his first band, he sought guidance from drummer Mike Buck, who had played with both the LeRoi Bros. and the Fabulous Thunderbirds. Buck was another record collector who offered Charlie some obscure songs to cover. One of the songs selected was "Eager Beaver Boy" by the Austin [via New York] rockabilly raver Ray Campi. The song also provided Charlie with the name of his first band, the Eager Beaver Boys. Little Charlie and the Eager Beaver Boys consistently performed around town. "Basically, back then I was singing the songs, writing some of the songs, fronting the band, and booking the band. I had some friends that worked for Jim Ramsey, the promoter. I'd call and see if I could get any gigs for the month and you know, 'Got anything coming up?' Well my friend says, 'The Clash are coming and they're doing these shows.' I was a huge Clash fan and I knew them through Joe [Ely] and we'd hung out. So I thought that would be great. My friend said, 'Alright, you can do the first show, and if they like you, then you can do the rest of the shows.' The dates stretched out to El Paso, Wichita Falls, and Tucson. So, basically, it was a loose sort of negotiation and we did the first show and they knew me and they thought this was a perfect band to open up." Charlie and the band did the tour in their broken-down Suburban only to find after a particularly long drive that they were not scheduled to play one of the dates. "I was horrified. We didn't have enough money to get back to Austin. The promoter came and got in my face saying I couldn't do this show and it was real ugly. Finally, the guys from the Clash came over and said, 'Hey, get out of that guy's face. You leave him alone and if he don't play, we don't play.' Well I played. Then we rode on the bus with them to Tucson

and they invited us to come to the US Festival in California, just to come. But I said we just had to get home because we were going to have a hard enough time getting home from Tucson, much less California. So that's how that happened." The Clash's appearance at the US Festival that May in 1983 would be their last ever with founding member Mick Jones and would signal the end of the band as a viable creative force.

Charlie says that "a huge part of that story from the time I was eleven to thirteen was Stevie Vaughan and I were real close. He was just Stevie Vaughan back then." Before Charlie had formed his band, he would make the rounds nightly, going from bar to bar, sitting in with the local outfits. "At the time Stevie was doing a weekly gig down at Cheatham Street Warehouse down in San Marcos, and there was never more than six people there. So my brother and I we'd go and play part of the set. And before that I'd go to the Steamboat and

house in South Austin. I got real sleepy one afternoon and it was so cold in the winter and I had this old funky heater. He came and woke me up; the whole house had this gas leaking [in it]. He had come by just to say 'Hi,' or whatever and I was [knocked] out on the couch. That would have been it!"

Even during the first year on his own Charlie kept up with school, waking himself up every morning to make it to class. However, the late-night schedule eventually began to take its toll. "I did one year living by myself in Austin going to school. At the end of that year I was fourteen and was burned out. I looked at what was available before me was not going to include tuition or a scholarship of any sort. So I decided, 'I'm gonna make records.' That part has worked out pretty decent." Not having graduated from high school failed to dampen his prospects or ambitions. At the age of sixteen, Charlie moved to Los Angeles to cut his first record.

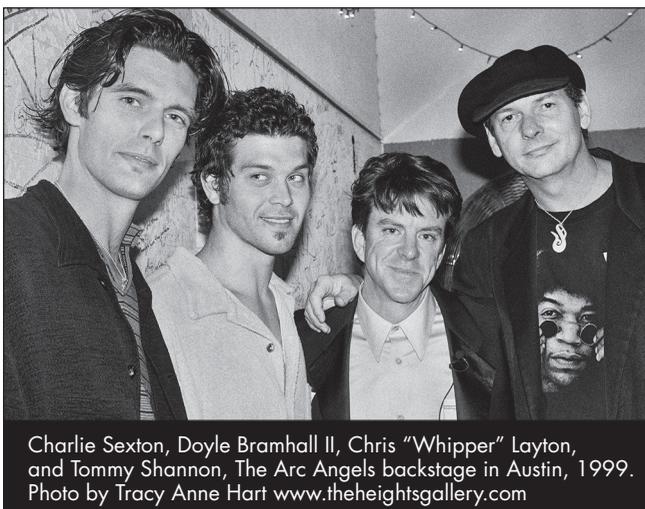
A big part of my story is that all those years with Stevie. Stevie and I were so close and Stevie was so great, and Jimmie too. They both took care of me when I was living on my own, those guys would look after me.

Stevie would be playing like at 1:30 and I'd walk in and he'd see me and go, 'Come up! Come here!' He'd give me his guitar and it would be Little Charlie and Double Trouble." This was not an invitation that Stevie gave to many others, perhaps only his own brother Jimmie Vaughan. But it was a method of mentoring the younger guitarist. "I think he just got a kick out of me playing," says Charlie. "He'd just go to the bar and listen to me." At this time Double Trouble, Stevie's rhythm section, was made up of drummer Chris "Whipper" Layton and bassist Jackie Newhouse. It was one of these scenarios when Charlie sat in with Stevie that he first met new Double Trouble bassist Tommy Shannon. "Chris knew what was happening because we'd played together before," said Charlie. "But Tommy was just looking like, 'What is Stevie doing? He's giving a guitar to this kid?' I think we did an Elmore James [song] or something. A big part of my story is all those years with Stevie. Stevie and I were so close and Stevie was so great, and Jimmie too. They both took care of me when I was living on my own, those guys would look after me. Make sure I could eat or if I needed a ride, you know? In fact, Franny Christina, who was the drummer for the [Fabulous] Thunderbirds after Mike Buck left, saved my life one time when I was living in some crappy

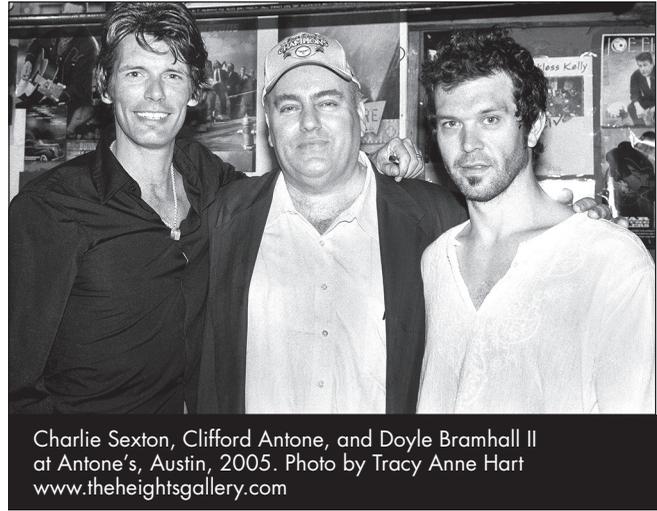
The tremendous success of the debut album by Texan singer Christopher Cross resulted in a large contingent of Cross's team relocating to Southern California. Joe Priesnitz, who has worked with Cross, Eric Johnson, and the Gourds, arranged for Charlie to shoot some video footage back at Club Foot in Austin featuring original compositions by Charlie and filmed by local director Tim Hamblin. This prototypical electronic press kit was shipped to one label prior to Charlie being picked up by MCA Records in L.A. in 1985. After being signed, Charlie's first assignment was to cut a number for former Eagle [and Texan] Don Henley's second solo album, a track called "Man with a Mission." He also cut a track with avant-garde new wave duo Sparks. His first proper gig for MCA was to fly to New York to record a song for the soundtrack of the film *The Wild Life* starring Christopher Penn, brother of actor Sean Penn. The song was a cover of the Rolling Stones' "It's Not Easy" from the album *Aftermath*. "So I go out there to work with Woody (Rolling Stone Ron Wood) and Keith [Richards] shows up. So that week, I'm working with Keith and Woody. So Woody and I really hit it off, and I ended up staying for like a week or two in New York. So a week goes by in the studio ... and that's when I met Bob

[Dylan]. Woody said, 'Yeah Bob is gonna come by today.' Well, he didn't say Dylan, he just said Bob. You know, I thought some guy Bob would come by and that's it. Even with Keith I was all business back then. You know I was excited about music and the people that made it, but when it came down to it, I just wanted to work. But it was really cool to meet Keith and Woody for that matter. But really, the weird thing was the 'Bob thing.' I mean Woody said, 'This is the guy I was telling you about.' This kind of [response] was a recurring experience. So Bob shook his cane at me and said, 'Oh, I've heard about you.' I mean this had been going on for a while. Nick Lowe would come to one of our little shows at Liberty Lunch and there would be like fourteen people and he would come check us out with Jimmie Vaughan or something." Word was getting around. Charlie likens it to a tall tale from Texas.

Meetings commenced in New York to discuss potential producers for Charlie's debut record. Terry Manning had been a member of the West Texas band the Bobby Fuller Four and had a long slew of hits as producer and engineer. Manning's most recent success had been with ZZ Top's *Eliminator* album, and executives thought there would be a natural rapport with the young, bluesy artist. However, Charlie had other designs on his career. "Before that I spent a lot of time at Raul's, the punk club, because Speedy played with Joe 'King' Carrasco. I saw Carrasco a lot. [Then] my band had begun to morph from a rockabilly band into a kind of punk band. I'd been hanging out with [Austin punk rock band] the Big Boys. Basically, once I heard the Sex Pistols, I thought, 'Well this is rock and roll!' and that led me to other things. It also led me to a lot more English music, you know, and I was really soaking up all these other influences." The powers that be at MCA had planned on pitching Charlie as a blues artist. "I had been really fortunate. I got to open for John Lee Hooker at Antone's, and Clifford Antone had been really supportive of



Charlie Sexton, Doyle Bramhall II, Chris "Whipper" Layton, and Tommy Shannon, The Arc Angels backstage in Austin, 1999. Photo by Tracy Anne Hart [www.theheightsgallery.com](http://www.theheightsgallery.com)



Charlie Sexton, Clifford Antone, and Doyle Bramhall II at Antone's, Austin, 2005. Photo by Tracy Anne Hart [www.theheightsgallery.com](http://www.theheightsgallery.com)

my family and me. And blues was a big part of what was going on in this town. So that was the vehicle [that allowed me] to get up and play with people at Antone's. Of course, I learned tons from Stevie; I learned tons from Jimmie and among other people. But really when I thought about making my own record, I was influenced by all this great music; I was lucky to have that education with old rock and roll, rockabilly and blues and country stuff before all that. But as far as the blues guitar hero ... the person that was going to deliver all that to the world was Stevie. I knew that, and that was his job. And this was before Stevie really blew up. But that's where he was going. And also sometimes when I was singing [the blues] I didn't always feel as sincere, given my age and all. So I didn't identify with Terry Manning." MCA executives agreed to let Charlie do some investigating on his own. His next option proved to be very interesting, and this individual had a very storied pedigree as well.

Mick Ronson was David Bowie's right-hand man in the early 1970s. He had played guitar on every Bowie record from *The Man Who Sold the World* through *Aladdin Sane*. He went on to play with Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, Elton John, Ian Hunter, and many others. He arranged string parts on numerous records. With Bowie, he co-produced the classic Lou Reed album *Transformer*. He had a major hand in the success of John Cougar's *American Fool*. Charlie felt like Mick Ronson might provide the right guidance. "He was just lovely, a beautiful guy," says Charlie. "He came down and saw the band and he was into it! So we went up to his house in Bearsville, in Woodstock [New York], in the dead of winter for a week or five days. We would work in the day, kind of like a development thing, you know? We'd try this and that. Mick's wife Susie Ronson would make tea every morning and shepherd's pie for dinner; it was a very English existence.

One night he said, 'Oh we've got to quit kind of early.' 'Why's that?' I asked. 'Because Michael Caine's on the telly,' Ronson replied. While I was there we did a couple of things. He had me demo [the Yardbirds'] 'Heart Full of Soul' one day and then another day he had me sing this Billy Swan version of [Elvis's classic] 'Don't Be Cruel.' He had picked up on the influence Elvis had had on me vocally. It was a slow groove version, mostly piano. He said, 'We're running short of time. Why don't I just put the record down to tape and you just sing over it?' So that's basically what we did. So I go home and the A&R guy hears these few recordings we'd done and he said exasperatedly, "'Heart Full of Soul?' That song's been so overdone. "Don't Be Cruel." What were you thinking?' So they basically fired Mick." To Ronson's credit both songs proved to be sizable hits in '87 and '88 for Chris Isaak and Cheap Trick, respectively. So the search for a producer continued.

Back in Los Angeles, Charlie approached producer Keith Forsey, who had in the previous year had enormous hits with Billy Idol (the *Rebel Yell* album) and Simple Minds ("Don't You (Forget About Me)"), which Forsey had also composed. Forsey swore he was much too busy and turned down the project. After some effort a meeting was arranged, and Forsey and Charlie hit it off. As fate would have it, the demo of Charlie doing the Billy Swan/Elvis tribute was what hooked Forsey. "He said, 'It's like you're the next Elvis or something!' Well, he agreed to do the record. He even thought we would do the southern kind of rockabilly thing. But I really had no intention [of doing that kind of record]. So, on that first record, Keith got a lot of the heat for what was done. But essentially, he and I did the record together and I really pushed the envelope to make it more contemporary. I mean I was really into the Pistols, Bowie, 999, the Stranglers, and all kinds of stuff. But it was really about writing the songs and that was a really long process. It was all new songs for this record. Oddly enough, the first day I went to work with Keith, we did a little preproduction day, I went up to his house and we wrote the single ["Beat So Lonely."] We made the record a couple of times. First with the band in the studio, drummer Ian Bailey and [bassist] Nigel Harrison from Blondie. The second single ["Impressed"] led to my long friendship with [songwriter] Tonio K. Keith brought in the ballad 'Hold Me,' made popular by [Texan] P.J. Proby, to sort of riff off the Elvis ballad-style number. It was about getting all the songs together. But once I learned what all you could do [in the studio], I really got the bug!"

Once the album was completed and band members selected, the promotional machine got underway. "I was shipped back and forth from Europe and England, probably four times before we even did a show. So by the time we actually started

the tour, I was like toast. It was: shoot videos, fly to Europe to do the press, do this, do that. Then the first gig was the MTV New Year's Ball with us, the Divinyls, the Hooters, and Starship. We all had to get up there and sing, 'We built this city ... [grumbles, laughs].' At least the Divinyls were awesome," he recalls.

When it came time for promoting the album *Pictures for Pleasure*, Charlie said the marketing was "Strong. Strong and wrong." "MCA was a real interesting company, but it wasn't called Musical Cemetery of America for nothing. But they really wanted to push the teen idol thing and I just said, 'Hey man, I just wanna play and make records.' The thing for me was I was always the weird-looking kid that fought my way through school every day of my life. I'm pretty self-effacing in a lot of ways. Anyway, 'Beat So Lonely' was only supposed to be the warm-up single. The second single, 'Impressed,' was meant to get the major attention. Anyhow, MTV picked up 'Beat So Lonely' and put it in heavy rotation. By the time the second video was done, there was some political something going on behind the scenes with MCA and accusations of payola and how they promoted things and all that. There were a couple of books about it and everything."

As was the popular format of the era, remix/12" singles were produced for both projected singles. In a stroke of good luck, Charlie met English singer Kirsty MacColl in a bar. She happened to be married to producer Steve Lillywhite. Lillywhite had produced dozens of hit albums, chief among them the first three U2 records as well as hits for Big Country, Simple Minds, the Smiths, and the Psychedelic Furs. After a rousing time on the town, Charlie asked Lillywhite if he had plans for the weekend. Lillywhite said, "No," and commenced to remix Charlie's second single, "Impressed." Charlie says, "So that was like part of the charmed part of my life. Just meeting Lillywhite in a bar and him being free that weekend. I mean some small part of it could be talent, raw, natural talent or whatever. And the rest of it is just being a decent guy, I hope."

The record did respectfully on the international market, particularly in Australia and Japan. However, the press in Austin was less receptive. "Here I got my weekly slogging from local writers." Jeff Whittington's review of *Pictures for Pleasure* from the *Austin Chronicle*, December 13, 1985, opens with, "Charlie Sexton is going to be bigger than Corey Hart and John Parr put together. This is not a compliment." Both of the aforementioned artists had had major hits in the previous year but have had little lasting resonance in the subsequent three decades. Whittington claimed "\$400,000 worth of overproduction by eight engineers" had provided Sexton "with an album virtually indistinguishable from the pack of interchangeable 'artists' cluttering up the airwaves and MTV.

Besides, maybe all the time he was playing those blazing blues riffs and gritty rockabilly runs he was really yearning to be Aldo Nova,” conjuring up another eighties relic. The review goes on to slag producer Forsey and bemoan the lack of guitar on the synth-dappled songs. “It made for good copy, I guess,” Sexton shrugs.

After the promotion of the record had run its course and a projected tour of Australia was scrapped, an executive decision was made to concentrate on writing new material for a new record. Shortly thereafter, Charlie was in a bad motorcycle accident and could not play guitar at all for six months. In the meantime, MCA was doing what it did best by assembling hit soundtracks for hit movies and placing their stable of artists squarely in the proceedings. Soundtrack sales were huge for eighties movies like *Beverly Hills Cop*, *Back to the Future*, *Ghostbusters*, *The Color of Money*, and *Streets of Fire*, among others. Soundtracks for popular television shows such as *Miami Vice* and *Moonlighting* also generated major sales. This approach was used with Charlie’s songs that generated a desired ambiance in a film. During these years Charlie would be heard in films such as *Beverly Hills Cop 2*, *True Romance*, *The Wild Life*, *Air America*, and *Roadracers*. In addition to two songs performed on the soundtrack, Charlie briefly appeared in the 1991 film *Thelma & Louise*. His interest in acting began to emerge.

Meanwhile, Charlie turned up in another major music release at the end of the 80s, albeit in an unexpected manner. The boxset *Biograph*, a career retrospective of the work of Bob Dylan, was unveiled to capitalize on the new format of compact disc and hopefully repeat the lucrative sales of Eric Clapton’s box *Crossroads* in 1988. Within the liner notes Dylan lamented the state of popular music with the following. “Rock and roll, I don’t know, rhythm and blues or whatever, I think it’s all gone. In its pure form. There are some guys true to it, but it’s so hard. You have to be so dedicated and committed and everything is against it. I’d like to see Charlie Sexton become a big star, but the whole machine would have to break down right now before that could happen.” This sentiment was as much a surprise to Charlie as anybody. But it would not be the last time Dylan would talk up Charlie.

1987 was a fallow year for Charlie artistically, but he spent some of that time gallivanting around the United States and Australia with David Bowie. “He called me and said, ‘Hey, I’m going to be in your town. Why don’t you come around?’ and I asked him ‘You’re gonna be in Austin?’ He said, ‘No, Houston.’ So I met David in Houston and played one song. Then David thought I should go to California with him. Then he suggested that I go down to Australia as well.” Peter Frampton was the guitarist on the Glass Spider tour and

seemed non-plussed by Bowie’s favoritism towards Charlie. “He [Frampton] wasn’t very nice.” Ultimately the concert was broadcast on network television in the States, and a home video was released as well. Before bringing Charlie out for a version of the Velvet Underground’s “White Light, White Heat,” Bowie introduced “My young friend from America, Charlie Sexton!”

In 1989 Charlie’s second album, *Charlie Sexton*, was released. Produced by Tony Berg, the label monitored the process more closely this time and considered more outside writers. The closing song “Cry Little Sister” had been featured in the soundtrack to the teen vampire film *The Lost Boys* just two years previously and seemed an odd choice for Charlie. “It was a label thing. But some of the other things I was proposed to do, I mean no way. Honestly, in hindsight that was one of the personal tragedies for myself, I didn’t put myself around the right writers. I mean I knew Steve Earle then, Gary Louris from the Jayhawks was around and we’d all see each other around. But I was so enamored with the studio aspect of things and production, what I gravitated to was [laying] tracks and sonics that I [missed opportunities] to write more. I mean, I’m not super prolific anyway. Most of the time I’ll work on a musical or melodic idea and figure out how to go from there. Sometimes I’ll get lucky and [whistles, simulates an explosion] and there it all is. Some of the better ones are the ones that happened like that.”

As it became apparent that the record was not taking off, Charlie occupied his time by motorcycling about California with his mates. Usual riding buddies included Steve Jones of the Sex Pistols, actors Mickey Rourke and Michael Bowen, and “whatever Soap Opera dude had just bought a bike. I mean after I recovered [from the accident] I went and bought a brand new bike. I didn’t own a car for years.” When asked about drinking, drugs, and partying, he responded, “Yeah I partied. You know, whatever was around. It was by proxy. After hanging out with people and doing this and doing that I remembered, ‘Hey, I do music, that’s what I do.’ I didn’t buy into the romance of drugs or addiction. Luckily, I never became a junkie, although I look like one.”

After so many years living in Los Angeles, Charlie found that it was “hollow,” and made a trip to his old hometown, Austin. “I was hanging out with some of my old friends and we’d ride around in old cars, sweating our asses off, we’d go to Barton Springs, let’s go get some tacos, let’s go to the club, eat hot sauce, all that stuff. I thought, ‘I’ll come back here!’ So I did. The ARC [Austin Rehearsal Complex] was just getting started and the people who owned the ARC, one was my road manager and the other was my drummer [Wayne Nagel and Don Harvey, respectively.] So I got my own [rehearsal]

room, and I had that for nine years. Once it was up and going I was there for twelve, thirteen hours a day, working on songs, working on tracks. That's where most of the Arc Angels stuff was created."

"In all those years as close as I was to Stevie, I only saw him a couple of times because everyone was always on tour. I think I saw him at Jimmie's house maybe. But, when I moved back, Stevie was taking a break from Double Trouble because he was gonna do the *Family Style* record and tour with Jimmie and use another band on the road. So I was always at the ARC working and Chris [Layton] had a locker and was practicing there and in the hall one time and he said, 'So Stevie's going out with Jimmie for this tour and we're not gonna be doing anything. You're in town and Doyle [Bramhall II] has been around. We should book something at the Continental Club on a Tuesday or something.' So we had booked a gig, you know we were gonna get together and work some stuff up, just for fun. And then Stevie got killed."

Vaughan for all the mentoring they had offered Charlie early in his career. "The best medicine for them after the initial grieving was to get out and play, and I owed it to them."

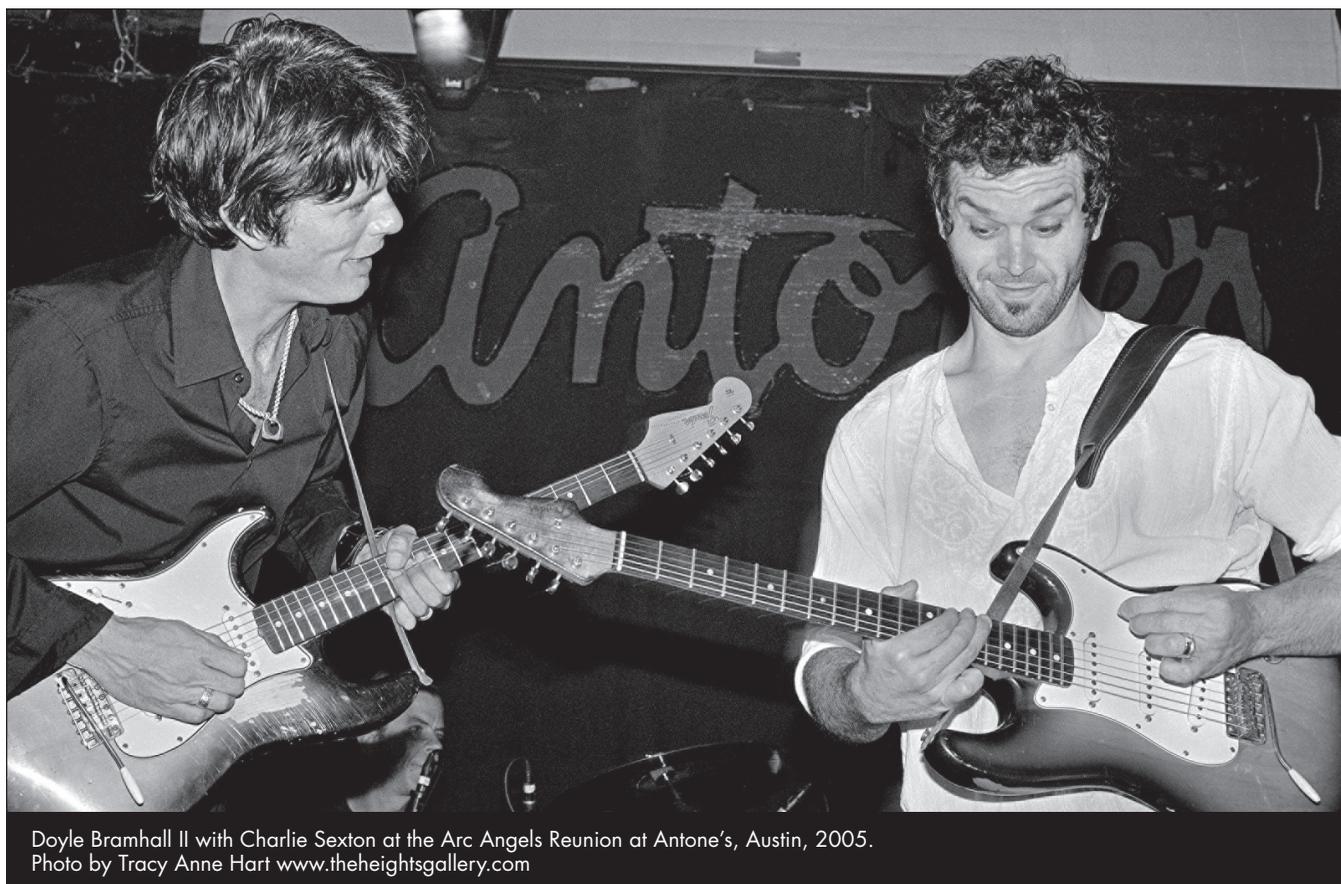
When asked how long he had known Doyle Bramhall II, he said, "That's the funny thing because I knew Doyle a long time. The first time I met Doyle was when I had the rockabilly band and we played at a place called the Hop, in Ft. Worth. His grandmother brought him to our show. He and his half-brother were there and he [Doyle] was kind of preppy then. He had on a little tennis shirt, and I was all greasy, looking like a road dog already. I had a step-grandmother that would dress me up like that too when she brought me to Ft. Worth. She didn't want me looking like the little Bohemian that I was. That's when I was fourteen, when that happened."

"So once I said yes completely to the Arc Angels I said, 'Okay, this couldn't be a straight up blues band.' What I wanted was like a Texas Led Zeppelin. Essentially there were two producers in the running. Little Steven [Van Zandt of the E Street Band]

So once I said yes completely to the Arc Angels I said, 'Okay, this couldn't be a straight up blues band.' What I wanted was like a Texas Led Zeppelin.

"After it had been a while, Tommy [Shannon, on whom Vaughan's death had been particularly rough] and Mark Proct who managed the Thunderbirds [and later the Arc Angels], heard there was some band with Double Trouble and Charlie and Doyle. Robert Cray was coming to play the Opry House and needed an opener. He asked if we wanted to do it. We said, 'Okay' and worked up some shit real quick, eight or nine songs and we did it!" Thus were born the Arc Angels, an Austin supergroup. "Even after that one show, like Warner Bros. came around saying 'Hey man!' sniffing around. Different label guys, I guess they smelled blood. For me, that was a kind of crossroads because I'd already started writing for what was gonna be my third record. There was all this heat about the Angels because I was on MCA, and we end up getting signed by Geffen. So basically, David Geffen and the president of MCA get into a plane and took a flight and worked it out. But for me, it was a step backwards, because I had already decided against the bluesy thing since my first record. I mean I love to play it, but what I was working on for [projected third album] *Under the Wishing Tree* was more of a grown-up record." Charlie did continue the Arc Angels for the most part out of dedication to Chris Layton and Tommy Shannon and even Stevie Ray

and I had been talking about working together for years. He always told me, 'I wanna see you in a band, man! It's always gotta be a band! You got the Beatles and the Stones, man!' So he was always trying to draw me into some project with this Scottish guy. Anyway, Little Steven and I hit it off and that's great. But then during SXSW, we had a meeting with [Led Zeppelin bassist] John Paul Jones. He came to our rehearsal space at the ARC to hear the band. He was into it too, and he is really amazing! And artistically with John Paul Jones, I thought, 'Well yeah!' The label really wanted Little Steven and I had to kind of pull back and take out what I thought was really cool out of the equation and look at it. I knew that one thing that really had to happen for the record was collaboration vocally between Doyle and me. I knew Little Steven could broker collaboration. There was a little bit of friction there too, because Doyle hadn't done too much by then. And Little Steven knew what a band did; I mean he was in the E Street Band. And so I pushed all the way for Steven, saying, 'He's the guy, he's the guy.'" The self-titled debut by the Arc Angels was released on Geffen Records in April 1992. The first single "Living in a Dream" featured lead vocal chores split by Charlie and Doyle. They made their network television debut on



Doyle Bramhall II with Charlie Sexton at the Arc Angels Reunion at Antone's, Austin, 2005.  
Photo by Tracy Anne Hart [www.theheightsgallery.com](http://www.theheightsgallery.com)

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*Late Night with David Letterman* in June 1992 performing “Living in a Dream” and returned the following January to present Charlie’s cautionary tale of excess, “Too Many Ways to Fall.” That song, the album’s closer, would be sadly prophetic concerning the band’s future.

There was no second record. Even as the band toured extensively, it became apparent that Doyle was becoming addicted to heroin. “Doyle quit, then he kinda got fired and then he became a junkie. Everything that could be fucked up was. And the more fucked up he was, the crazier his outfits got, just like Stevie; big hats, feathers, purple clothes, a weird tail thing.” When asked about his willingness to record a second album, had Doyle not been sick, he said, “Well yeah, that band had legs! I mean there was no other rock and roll then, it was all R & B and beginning of the grunge thing and all that. And there could have been another record because that’s what the label wanted, just to replace Doyle. Boy, they had ideas. Bad ideas.” He refuses to name any of the label’s suggestions. “It just made no sense. Of course, that happens to bands all the time. Something goes wrong, and they bring in someone new and it’s up to the band to make that work.” So that chapter came to an end, and Charlie could return to *Under the Wishing Tree* with his full attention.

Charlie and his management hoped to shake off the contract at MCA. “We were gonna play our big card with MCA, because I wanted off of the label. I was crazy in debt at that label, and that is not the reason I wanted off. I was in the hole over there for easily seven figures and most of that money you have no control over how and when it is spent. I wanted off because the contract was for a lot of records, I mean a lot. Anyhow we went to them with several songs that I had demoed and felt very strongly about. Well we hoped when they heard these demos, they would cut me loose, saying, ‘Oh, this isn’t a pop record, get out of here!’ Instead they said, ‘Hey, you learned how to write! This is good stuff!’ So we made a brand new deal over there with some serious renegotiations. ‘We’ll get rid of the debt if you don’t deliver this amount of success if we promote you in some sort of decent way’ . . . blah, blah. Anyway, it all backfired. And then to stick it to me after all that, that’s the only record that is out-of-print. The other two have always been available. And they won’t give it up either. You can no longer buy *Wishing Tree*. It’s all public affairs and bean counters. They just decide they are not gonna pay you half of what they owe you. They say, ‘You wanna get paid? Ha, ha, ha. Go fuck yourself. Go ahead sue us. Good luck with that!’” Charlie is no longer on the MCA roster.

Attempts to record an album with his brother Will Sexton also fizzled out due to label challenges. After writing together, recording songs, and getting signed to A&M records, the whole thing was discarded when Universal Records bought out dozens of smaller labels in the largest such deal in recorded music history. Hundreds of artists were dropped from labels as varied as Island, Polygram, Mercury, MCA, and A&M as they were folded into a giant conglomerate that in actuality belonged to Seagram's, the liquor and refreshment empire. It should be mentioned that Charlie's old label, MCA, had done this very thing in the early seventies, purchasing smaller labels such as Duke/Peacock, ABC/Dunhill, Uni, etc., assuming control of the roster and catalogue associated with each label it acquired. It just had never occurred at this volume previously. A&M

During the nineties, Charlie got married and became a father. But once again, opportunity came knocking. Bob Dylan had approached him in the past about joining his touring band. Dylan tours ceaselessly, playing dozens of shows every year. Charlie declined the offer during the making of the aborted album with his brother. But with little on his docket, Charlie couldn't think of a good reason to say "no," and he accepted the job. He also assisted Dylan in the studio when Dylan recorded "Things Have Changed," which went on to win an Oscar for Best Original Song in 2001. Since that time Charlie has appeared on most of Dylan's records, including *Love and Theft*, *Tempest*, and *Fallen Angels*. Charlie also appeared in Dylan's own movie, *Masked and Anonymous*. Between tours with Dylan, Charlie had regular gigs producing

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Then Ethan [Hawke] said, "I want you to play Townes Van Zandt.' There was a long pause. A long silence. I said, 'Well that's terrifying.' He said, 'I know.'"

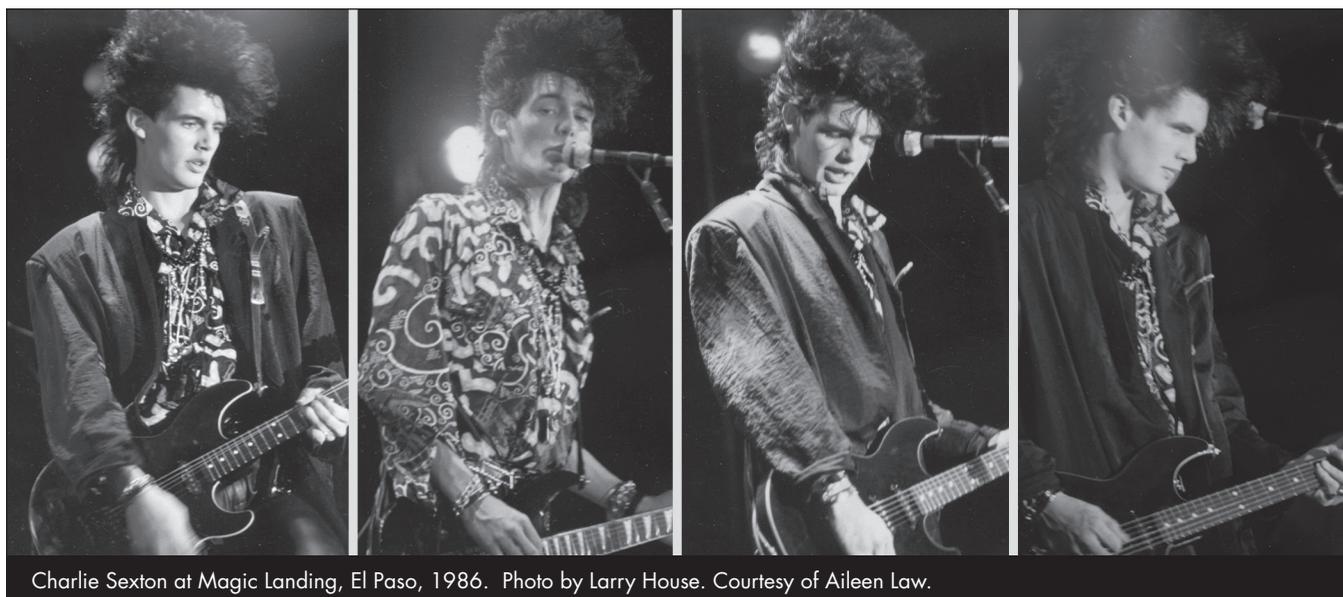
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Records was maintained almost as a pet imprint for superstars Sting and Sheryl Crow. The Sexton Bros. album remains unreleased. "Four years for naught. Well, there are still plenty of songs we wrote during that time, but ..." his voice trailing off. "I'm telling you, it's that one drop of Irish blood. That is all it takes." In 2008, a massive fire on the Universal Studios lot in Los Angeles destroyed hundreds, if not thousands, of master recordings acquired and stored by the Universal Music Group. The true extent of the loss was not revealed until the summer of 2019 when investigations by *New York Times* reporters determined the true scale of loss. Charlie's name was listed with hundreds of other artists whose material was gone forever. The incident had to be brought to Charlie's attention as he had heard nothing from Universal. It just served to further illustrate his personal distaste for corporate meddling.

In an effort to release his fourth solo record, *Cruel and Gentle Things*, with minimal mishaps and no meddling label executives, Charlie went with a smaller company. "It was this tiny little label out of Minneapolis called Backporch. For years they were just a jazz label and then they were looking to broaden their roster. They pretty much left us alone; wait, what us? They left me alone. I only spent maybe seven actual days in a studio making it. Two or three of the songs I did in one night. I'd go in at 8:00 at night and work till 4:00 in the morning." The album was released in the autumn of 2005.

critically-acclaimed albums by Edie Brickell, Lucinda Williams, Los Super Seven, and a stand-alone record by old friends Double Trouble.

Charlie was invited by Austin filmmaker Richard Linklater to act in the Oscar-nominated motion picture *Boyhood*. The film was famously shot over a number of years in the first decade of the 21st century, and Charlie was cast as the roommate of Ethan Hawke's character. Off screen Hawke and Charlie became great friends, which lead to a collaboration that Charlie did not anticipate. In 2016, Hawke posited a series of questions to Charlie about a projected film project. "First Ethan asked me, 'What do you think if I write and do a film about Blaze Foley?' I told him, 'Yes, that's a movie. Good story.' Then he asked me, 'Will you help me and oversee the musical aspects, help with the musicians, etc.' I said 'Of course.' Then Ethan said, 'I want you to play Townes Van Zandt.' There was a long pause. A long silence. I said, 'Well that's terrifying.' He said, 'I know.' 'So that means we're supposed to do it?' 'Yes.'" The film was both written and directed by Hawke. It tells the story of star-crossed Southern singer-songwriter Blaze Foley. Charlie played the part of the more celebrated Texas singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt, whom he knew personally. Charlie said, "I didn't know Townes as well as my brother did, or certainly as well as my mother did, but I was able to include little small details about



Charlie Sexton at Magic Landing, El Paso, 1986. Photo by Larry House. Courtesy of Aileen Law.

him that most people didn't know. It was something I had to do, respectfully. I only do things I believe in." As renowned as Van Zandt was as a songwriter, Charlie says, "He also had impeccable comic timing." The film was a success, with Charlie receiving praise for his sensitive rendering of the singer. The artistic partnership between Ethan Hawke and Charlie will undoubtedly furnish future works.

Charlie is frequently called upon to be the musical director at local events such as the annual Austin Music Awards and high-profile benefits such as the Hurricane Harvey Relief Show in September 2017. "I'm blessed with being this weird conduit between people," he laughs. Yes, famous people, artistic people, generous people. He spent the first months of 2019 as a guest on "A Bowie Celebration" tour spearheaded by long-time Bowie pianist Mike Garson. Charlie turned in emotional performances of "Space Oddity" and others amidst a cast of Bowie alumni. Today, Charlie tours regularly with Dylan, generally for about half of the year. Very few reviews of Dylan's performances fail to mention Charlie's substantial contribution to the show as bandleader. Charlie is divorced but has custody of his son, Marlon, and is particularly attentive to his duties as a father. "It is unfortunate that what I do for a living takes me away for months at a time," he ponders. As this article was being concluded, Charlie had just finished a four-month tour of Europe with Bob Dylan that took them to several countries, playing historic halls and theatres. With no further Dylan dates on the calendar for the remainder of 2019, Charlie will have more time to spend with his son and resume his perpetual tinkering in his studio. After all, a rock music veteran with a career of more than three decades ought to get to work on his fifth solo record. ★

## Bibliography

This article is the culmination of a lengthy personal interview with Charlie Sexton on October 9, 2013, at his home in Oak Hill, Texas. Additional information was extracted from an evening telephone interview on August 4, 2019. I thank Charlie for the generous gift of his time and accessibility.

The quote from Bob Dylan appears in the liner notes authored by Cameron Crowe in the box set *Biograph*. Issued in 1985 by Columbia Records, New York, New York.

The review of Charlie's debut album by Jeff Whittington appeared in the *Austin Chronicle* on December 13, 1985. It can also be found on p. 55 in *The Austin Chronicle Music Anthology*, published in 2011 by University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas.

The collage photos of Charlie were taken at a performance in El Paso, Texas, May 24, 1986, at the now defunct amusement park Magic Landing. Those photos were taken by Larry House and tracked down by Aileen Law. Many thanks to both of them.

Tracy Anne Hart graciously provided the majority of images accompanying this article as a preview for her upcoming book *Seeing Stevie Ray* in the John and Robin Dickson Series in Texas Music History at Texas A & M University Press, available February 2020. From 1983 until just before Vaughan's untimely death in 1990, Hart crafted a vibrant photographic mosaic of Vaughan and other Texas blues artists.