



# Jack Ingram and the Roots of the Texas Country Scene

Rich Kelly



In May of 2016 Guy Clark, a songwriting giant in both his native Texas and his adopted Nashville, passed away. A week later, a bus of Clark's Tennessee friends delivered their mentor's cremated remains to fellow artist Terry Allen's Santa Fe home for a wake for the legend. The intimate picking party featured a who's who of alternative country luminaries including Steve Earle, Emmylou Harris, Vince Gill, Joe Ely, Rodney Crowell, Lyle Lovett, and Robert Earl Keen. Among the impressive gathering of singer-songwriters, only two were under sixty years old: Allen's son Bukka, an accomplished accordionist, and Jack Ingram.<sup>1</sup> The 45-year-old Ingram had come a long way from his musical beginnings in Dallas's Deep Ellum more than twenty-five years earlier. Along with the chance to honor one of his heroes and inspirations, the invitation signaled Ingram's ascension into the pantheon of Texas's elite singer-songwriters. Along the way Ingram pushed against the prevailing musical winds, played a key role in reviving fan interest in original Texas country music, and served as the key inspiration for the early artists of the emerging Texas Country scene.

In the 1990s in college cities and towns throughout Texas, a regional country music scene developed. The artists and fans in this musical movement consciously strove to revive the values and musical heritage of the earlier progressive country scene and its outlaw offshoot. This scene would come to be called “Texas Country.” For many this name is problematic. Texas Country in its literal sense includes a quantity and variety of artists so vast as to defy any attempts to address them as a cohesive group. But genres and subgenres are not named by academics, and their names are unrelated to attempts at accurate descriptions. Institutions such as record labels, trade groups, and radio stations create genre designations for the purpose of packaging and selling a group of artists to potential listeners. Diane Pecknold traces the process of a group of recordings being labeled “hillbilly” before that name was discarded by broadcasters and the recording industry in favor of the more marketable “country” in the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> In the 1970s

Kacey Musgraves. Despite the genre’s widespread popularity, there has been little academic examination of its beginnings or impact. In dozens of interviews with artists, fans, and others who worked in the early years of the Texas Country scene, it is clear that the genre stems largely from the work of two artists, Robert Earl Keen and Jack Ingram. Keen’s role is well understood, but Ingram’s position as the first of a new generation seems to be overlooked by most who were not there in those nascent days. For all the attention and respect Ingram has earned in his three decades as a performer, it is his role in forging a trail for a new generation of Texas singer-songwriters that will be examined here.

Keen, Ingram, and those who followed them took their primary inspiration from the progressive and outlaw country scenes of the 1970s and early 1980s. In the minds of Texas Country’s progenitors, Willie Nelson and Jerry Jeff Walker playing at the Armadillo World Headquarters was a paradise

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Austin country scene, it was radio program director Rusty Bell who branded the music “progressive country.”<sup>3</sup> In this way, Lone Star 93.3 in Austin, seeking to distinguish local music from that of the station’s mostly Nashville playlist, labeled artists such as Pat Green and Cory Morrow Texas Country. This term is widely applied to regional artists who see themselves as progressive and outlaw revivalists. Texas Country as a term is used today to describe a top-ten chart and dozens of radio stations and shows, and periodicals such as the *Houston Chronicle* and *Dallas Observer* annually publish “best of” lists under that genre heading. Texas Country as a label may be unsatisfying in a semantic sense but, as with other contested genre titles such as country itself, it is the term popularly applied to the music that is the subject of this article.

Nomenclature aside, Texas Country remains a vibrant and popular regional music scene as it continues in its third decade. Some of the state’s biggest draws have emerged from the scene, including Pat Green, Cory Morrow, Roger Creager, Kevin Fowler, Randy Rogers, Wade Bowen, Hayes Carl, Aaron Watson, and

from which country music had been expelled. Nelson, Walker, and a host of their musical compatriots including Gary P. Nunn, Ray Wiley Hubbard, Rusty Weir, Guy Clark, and Townes Van Zandt would serve as both inspiration as well as wizened guides to the performers who rose to prominence in the 1990s and beyond. In order to understand the importance of Jack Ingram, and Keen for that matter, it is crucial to recognize the declining commercial success the outlaw artists suffered in the late 1980s and well into the 1990s. Between Nelson’s 1975 release *Red Headed Stranger* and 1986, Nelson and Jennings combined to place 31 albums in the top five of the country chart, 17 of which hit number one. In the decade that followed, the pair mustered a single top-five album.<sup>4</sup> In the late 1980s, Texas blues and indie rock came to the fore in terms of chart success and scene vibrancy. It was into these strong headwinds that Keen released three albums in the 1980s and Jack Ingram would launch his own progressive country revival.

If Ingram’s position as the primary catalyst for this generation of country artists has been obscured, it may owe



Jack Ingram with Jerry Jeff Walker at Kerrville Folk Festival, ca. 1997. Photo by and courtesy of Jeremy Elliott.

something to another little-remarked-upon development of the 1990s, Dallas's rise to rival Austin as the epicenter of live music in the state. Dallas's preeminence in Texas music was not without precedent. In the roaring twenties and into the Great Depression no other scene was more important in the development of Texas blues guitar than Dallas's Deep Ellum. The legendary Blind Lemon Jefferson performed on the streets and in the venues of the black business district, serving as the fountainhead for seminal blues musicians such as Robert Johnson, Lead Belly, Blind Willie Johnson, T-Bone Walker, Lil' Son Jackson, and Lightnin' Hopkins. By the last decade of the twentieth century, gentrification and a khaki-clad college crowd from nearby Southern Methodist University, a prestigious private university, had reinvigorated Deep Ellum. The late eighties saw the emergence of Edie Brickell & New Bohemians. The alternative folk-rock group met at Booker T. Washington High School, a magnet high school in the area.<sup>5</sup> The Bohemians' 1988 Geffen release *Shooting Rubber Bands at the Moon* produced the hit singles "What I Am" and "Circle" and lent credibility to the resurgence of a new Deep Ellum live music scene. By the early 1990s, Jackopierce dominated Dallas folk pop. Jack O'Neill and Carey Pierce met in 1988 while majoring in theater at SMU. The duo combined their names and musical talents to create the most sought after ticket on the Dallas college scene. By 1994, Jackopierce had sold enough albums at their shows and in local record stores to earn a deal with Geffen A&M Records.<sup>6</sup>

Jackopierce failed to find national success as a major label act, and the duo's popularity waned after signing with A&M. The Dallas scene's national image was bolstered in 1993 by Deep Blue Something and their widely heard adult contemporary smash "Breakfast at Tiffany's," a song, as club owner John Henry Clay explains, that made minimal impact on its intended college audience but found a dramatically better reception among fans old enough to get the song's title reference.<sup>7</sup>

Tripping Daisy formed in Dallas in 1990, bringing a crunchy, neo-psychedelic grunge presence to local clubs and radio. The band hit the national charts in 1995 with "I Got a Girl"

before morphing into the symphonic pop of the Polyphonic Spree. The Deep Ellum scene was rounded out with indie rockers from nearby locales such as Fort Worth's Toadies, Oklahoma City's Nixons, Austin's Soul Hat, and Baton Rouge's Better Than Ezra. In December 1991, a relatively unknown Pearl Jam played Trees in Deep Ellum.<sup>8</sup> Two months earlier Trees narrowly avoided a riot when Nirvana performed as their "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was introducing the nation to grunge.<sup>9</sup> This was the musical world Jack Ingram found when he arrived from Houston to begin his freshman year at SMU in 1989.

Jack Owen Ingram was born on November 15, 1970, in Houston. The Ingrams moved to the prosperous Houston suburb the Woodlands when Jack was eight. Ingram was an athlete at the Woodlands, excelling in golf. His first experience on stage was playing Starbuck in Woodlands High School's UIL one act play presentation of *The Rainmaker* as a senior.<sup>10</sup> As a child Ingram took piano lessons but largely ignored the guitar he had been given. Ingram's early musical taste was shaped by his father's record collection. Like many Texans in the 1970s, the elder Ingram enjoyed the progressive country sounds of Willie Nelson, Jerry Jeff Walker, and Waylon Jennings. Fellow Texan Buddy Holly joined Don McLean, Merle Haggard, and Don Williams on his father's shelf. Jack's older brother turned him on to Bruce Springsteen and Little Feat while John Cougar Mellencamp inspired from the radio.<sup>11</sup>

As a teenager Ingram became obsessed with music. "I listened to so much music I stopped enjoying it because I was so inside the song I wanted to know what the hell they were doing," Ingram explained. In a time when LP records still dominated sales, Ingram sought answers in the liner notes that accompanied albums. Seeing Jennings had played bass with Buddy Holly and was a frequent collaborator with Nelson, as well as the frequent presence of Larry Gatlin on other artists' projects, Ingram began to gain a sense of the interconnectedness of the music industry.<sup>12</sup>

By high school Ingram was sneaking into the Wunsche Brothers Café and Saloon in nearby Spring to hear Texas legends such as Jerry Jeff Walker and Ray Wylie Hubbard. He bought a copy of a Willie Nelson songbook and immersed himself in progressive and outlaw country. "When I was a junior or senior in high school, a buddy of mine came to live with me, and we used to sit up getting high listening to [Willie Nelson's] *Red Headed Stranger* while everybody else in school was getting high listening to [Pink Floyd's] *The Wall*. We tapped into this whole other element, and it just spoke to me."<sup>13</sup>

As an Anglo Texan from a white-collar suburb born in 1970, the music of Ingram's childhood was the progressive and outlaw country scenes associated with Austin and musical institutions such as the Armadillo World Headquarters and the *Austin City*



Pat Green, Cory Morrow, and David Henry in Henry and Paige Blanton's Lubbock apartment, ca. 1993.  
Photo by and courtesy of David Henry.

*Limits* PBS television series. Ingram represents the beginning of a generation of likeminded Texans who would come to view the music and culture, or perhaps the myth constructed around the culture, of their childhoods as a pastoral state to be returned to. Of course, the artists of that 1970s movement themselves were yearning to reconnect to what they perceived as the utopian past of their own childhoods. Of the first wave of artists to become popular in the college country scene of the late nineties, four artists—Ingram, Roger Creager, Pat Green, and Cory Morrow—were born in the eighteen months between November of 1970 and May of 1972. These artists had their musical world defined by the sounds of Waylon and Willie, Jerry Jeff Walker, and the other artists of the progressive country scene.

This phenomenon is not unique to Ingram and his contemporaries. Nelson and Jennings covered and praised in song the greatest Texas star of their youths, Bob Wills. Nelson frequently covered Wills songs such as “Milk Cow Blues” and “Stay All Night,” the latter recorded by Wills when Nelson was twelve. Jennings released a B-side titled “Bob Wills is Still the King,” paying homage to the King of Western Swing who ruled the Texas airwaves for the first decade of Jennings’s life. When Ingram turned away from the pop and indie rock popular in the live music scene he found at SMU, he turned

to his own past. He turned to the music of his childhood, the music of his father.

It is important to understand the artists and fans who created the Texas Country scene were almost as united in their dislike for the country music played on top-40 radio during the 1990s as in their love of the progressive and outlaw country of the 1970s and early 1980s. Ingram considered top-40 country music “the enemy” in the early years of his career.<sup>14</sup> He saw the music coming out of Nashville as a problem he was determined to fix. Brendon Anthony, a College Station native who spent over fifteen years playing fiddle for Pat Green and now serves as the head of the Texas Music Office in the Governor’s Office, explained, “Mainstream country at this time was skewing older. Songs about the rodeo circuit, losing a wife or husband to cheating (or the rodeo), struggling to make it by, and the money being tight were romanticized by college kids but they had a hard time identifying with it personally.”<sup>15</sup>

In Alamo Heights, a wealthy downtown enclave in San Antonio, four neighbors and lifelong friends were heading off to college as the eighties ended: David Henry, Robert Henry, Stephen Harris, and Brian Zintgraff. During the 1990s they would find themselves in the heart of the developing Texas Country scene. Two of the four, David and Robert Henry, were brothers. Two would go on to become Texas Country

performers, Robert Henry and Stephen Harris. Two would attend Texas Tech University in Lubbock, David Henry and Brian Zintgraff, while two would join Ingram at SMU, Robert Henry and Stephen Harris. Their musical experiences were typical of the first wave of Texas country fans. They shared Ingram and Anthony's frustration with country radio. "Everyone wanted to change that awful shit they were putting out," according to David Henry.<sup>16</sup>

Robert Henry explained, "I think of my football tape in high school. The one I listened to on the bus and in the locker room. It was Guns and Roses, it was the Cult, it was Kool Moe Dee. Anything that was kick ass. Run-DMC was on there. Van Halen. It was heavy shit."<sup>17</sup> Harris, an honorable mention All-State center, was recruited to play football for the SMU Mustangs as they attempted to rebuild their program from an NCAA-levelled "death penalty." "I had a meathead side of me. Growing up in San Antonio, the Detroit Rock

role model for Ingram. "He was closer to where I was," Ingram recalled. "He made it a little more attainable."<sup>23</sup> Ingram was not the only young Texan to embrace Keen as an alternative to mainstream country music, but he was the first of his generation to gain a significant following performing his own original material. In doing so Ingram became the inspiration for those who followed. As Dub Miller, an early Texas Country star in College Station, explained, "Robert Earl Keen made you want to do it, Jack Ingram made you believe you could."<sup>24</sup>

In that first year at SMU, Ingram discovered the venue that would become his musical home. Adair's Saloon was already a Deep Ellum institution, featuring live music, patrons' signatures and messages on every inch of every surface, and "definitely the best burgers in the South."<sup>25</sup> Ingram's older brother was a senior at SMU, captain of the golf team, and an Adair's regular. When the younger Ingram moved to campus he was surprised to get a call from his brother inviting him

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City of the South, I definitely had a hankering for good hairband rock and roll, too. But so did Kevin Fowler so we're even there."<sup>18</sup> Fowler, who became one of the scene's biggest stars with anthems such as "Beer, Bait, and Ammo," began his music career playing lead guitar on a national tour with Austin metal band Dangerous Toys.<sup>19</sup> Pat Green, when he began playing publicly in the mid-1990s, regularly included covers of bands such as the Violent Femmes and Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble while his band inserted Metallica fills into Green's own compositions.<sup>20</sup> Future Texas Country superstar Randy Rogers, who had been raised on country radio, chose to cover Stone Temple Pilots' "Creep" in his high school talent show.<sup>21</sup> Over dozens of interviews of early participants in the Texas country scene, the vast majority of respondents made clear they were listening to grunge, hip-hop, or heavy metal when they discovered Keen and Ingram.

Early Texas Country fans and artists tended to see their genre as not an extension of but a protest of country music. As Robert Earl Keen likes to explain, "I make country music for people who hate country music."<sup>22</sup> Ingram ended up with a copy of Keen's 1988 *The Live Album* around the time he left for SMU and Dallas. Seeing that Keen's album had been recorded at the Sons of Hermann Hall in Deep Ellum inspired Ingram. Keen, who lacked label support, seemed a more realistic

to the saloon. "Hey, why don't you come down?" It was the first time he ever asked me to do something. He was four years older than me. He also asked me to go see *The Last Picture Show* with him. It was the first time I knew he knew my name because he didn't say, 'Hey asshole.'<sup>26</sup>

The Ingram brothers were regulars at Tony Lane's Thursday night shows at Adair's. Lane came to Dallas from Comanche, Texas, where John Wesley Hardin once killed a deputy. A veteran of the bar circuit, the thirtysomething Lane seemed ancient to Ingram, but the songwriting skill was hard to miss. Lane inspired Ingram to begin writing before moving on to Nashville where dozens of his songs have appeared on major label country albums. Lane owns writing credits on nine Top 40 country hits and Easton Corbin's 2010 #1 hit "Roll With It."<sup>27</sup> Ingram's first public performance was at an open mic night in the spring of 1990 at Deep Ellum's Rhythm Room. He teamed up with a friend and played "basic covers, like R.E.M. songs."<sup>28</sup> Originally Ingram performed with a partner under the name Jack and the Other Guy. Robert Henry recalls those early shows. "I was in this class with 'the other guy,' I think that's what his name was, and all these girls are talking to this kind of chunky guy and I was like, 'Who the hell is he?' 'They play at Adair's every Tuesday night. It's the greatest thing since sliced bread.'" Ingram played guitar and sang while

the other guy played “this weird fold-out briefcase thing.”<sup>29</sup> Soon after, Lois Adair gave in to Ingram’s pestering and gave the nineteen-year-old college freshman the Tuesday slot, a residency he held until the end of 1995.<sup>30</sup> Ingram was paid in cheeseburgers and beer despite being still a teenager. He used his brother’s ID even though his brother was in attendance. “I think Lois was in on it,” Ingram quipped.<sup>31</sup> Harris recalled Ingram’s Adair’s Tuesday nights. “When you get to Adair’s it’s like twenty, thirty feet across and you’re like, ‘We’re not going here, this place is packed!’ Of course, right as you walk in the door the band is immediately to your left. You open the door and the bandstand is right there. All you can see is a sea of heads going down this narrow shotgun of a bar and you’re wondering how am I ever going to make it to the bar to actually go and get a beer.”<sup>32</sup> Harris’s childhood friend and neighbor Robert Henry joined him on these Tuesdays. “A dirty dingy beer hall with surly bartenders and waitresses and good music in the corner and you could still hear yourself talk. We loved it.”<sup>33</sup>

John Clay Wolfe met Ingram in SMU’s *Mirror of the Age* course during their freshman year. The enterprising Wolfe, who owned a handful of bars in nearby Fort Worth, was an early Ingram fan. He even tried to manage the fledgling Ingram but settled for giving him a weekly Thursday night gig at Wolfe’s Plaid Pig and promoting the aspiring performer as often as he could. By the time he could legally drink, Ingram had established himself as a favorite in both Dallas’s SMU and Fort Worth’s TCU music scenes.<sup>34</sup> According to Pete Coatney, a drummer in several Deep Ellum rock bands during the eighties and early nineties, despite Ingram’s youth and country inclinations, he found a degree of respect among other local artists.

“I’d be talking to people and guys I’d known for years that were venue managers or bookers—I never knew them to dig country or anything in the country realm. In fact, a lot of them looked like your typical rock and roller or punk rock dude—tattooed, shaved heads, multiple piercings—and they sit down and talk knowledgeably about Jack and what they liked about Jack and the band.”

The devoutly Christian Coatney filled in with Ingram at Adair’s one Tuesday in 1994 and remained the Beat Up Ford Band’s drummer and spiritual advisor for the next twenty-five years.<sup>35</sup>

For Ingram, Keen, and later Texas Country artists, the growth of the scene was facilitated by tapping into college students who are more open to experiment with their identities and have access to disposable income and free time. Robert Henry observed, “A big thing for those guys was that they were in college when they did it, which was brilliant. Everyone had a

brother or sister that went to Baylor or Southwest Texas or UT or whatever, so we shared those CDs. Then we all graduated and little brothers and sisters all wanted to listen because that’s what their big brothers and sisters did.”<sup>36</sup> Will Dupuy, San Antonio native and bassist for the South Austin Jug Band, Harris and Ryden, and Bruce Robison, explained, “A lot of that music was what I call older brother music. What I mean by that is a lot of kids got into it because their older brothers were into it. Like Jerry Jeff, I remember seeing Jerry Jeff shirts when I was in junior high because older brother went and saw Jerry Jeff.”<sup>37</sup> Ingram, for his part, saw it a little differently:

I don’t think there was necessarily a certain appeal that I had that attracted college kids. It’s just that I asked whoever I knew to come, and who I knew were college kids. That’s how that got to be, and I’m glad for it. Not only did it create a way for me to stick to doing what I was doing after college, but I’m also positive it made me better. You’ve seen college crowds, they can be really hard to work with. It made me force myself to feel proud of what I was doing, become a true performer, and make them watch. If you don’t really feel good about what you’re doing in your heart and you play for people who are talking and not listening, you can feel like a big poser when you walk out. I did that a couple of times, and then I was like, ‘Let’s go practice and get good before we put ourselves through that again.’ At least then, we knew in our hearts we were good.<sup>38</sup>

Another key element to the appeal of Keen, Ingram, and Texas Country generally is the ritual that historian Jason Mellard refers to as “performing the Texan.” Mellard discusses how the progressive country scene of the 1970s allowed young Texans to embrace and participate in their Texan identity through music.<sup>39</sup> Young Texan country music fans and musicians continue this same ritual. Harris recalled booking Ray Wylie Hubbard to play a fraternity party to hear him play “Up Against the Wall, Redneck Mother.”<sup>40</sup> Robert Henry reflected, “Here we were twenty-one, twenty years old. We listened to Willie Nelson. For a fraternity party if you could raise enough money to have Jerry Jeff, that was your huge party for the year. But all the sudden comes a kid who literally lives next door and he’s damn good and he was kind of like our generation’s guy. And you could catch him at places you could afford to go.”<sup>41</sup> For these early fans, rejecting mainstream country music they associated with Nashville in favor of an idealized Texas country past served as a bridge connecting themselves to their native state. Harris saw this in the music. “I never got to really know my grandparents. My one grandfather

was a country sheriff in East Texas for twenty years and my other grandfather built highways in Colorado, drove a maintainer and bulldozer. I never got to really know them. They both died when I was really young. There's something about getting back to the past or your grandparents or where your family has been. Most of the time that comes from rural Texas. That music kind of comes from that."<sup>42</sup>

In the summer of 1992, Ingram enrolled in summer classes at the University of Texas to have an excuse to play in the musical mecca of Texas: Austin. As the main progressive country revivalist among Generation Xers, Ingram relished the opportunity to perform in the city most associated with artists such as Willie Nelson and Jerry Jeff Walker. He landed weekly spots on Tuesdays at the Cloak Room, a basement bar across the street from the state capitol populated by legislative staffers and lobbyists, and a Thursday night slot at O. Henry's Back Forty.<sup>43</sup>

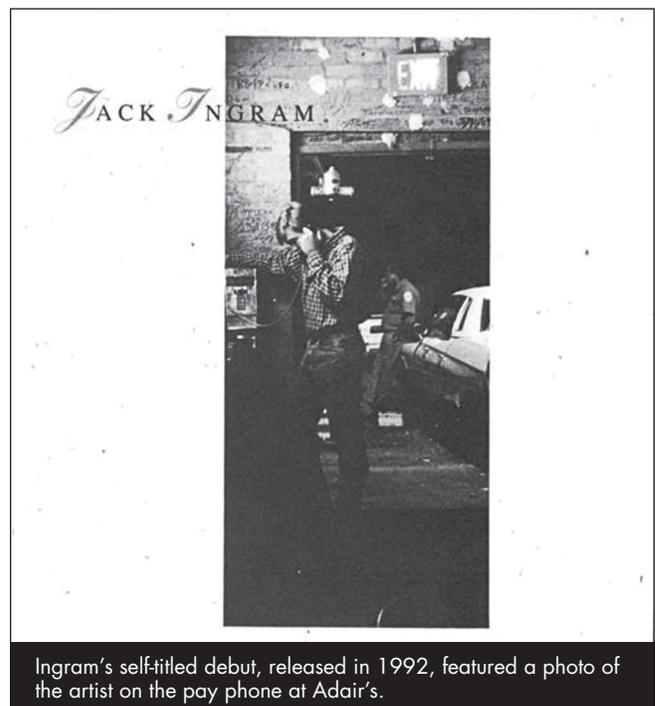
The Back Forty sat on the northeast corner of 5th and Neches, just a block from Austin's nationally famous Sixth Street party district. O. Henry did not refer to the owner of the bar but rather the renowned short story author of such standards as "The Gift of the Magi," "The Cop and the Anthem," and "The Ransom of Red Chief." In the 1880s William Sydney Porter rambled from South Carolina to Austin where he charmed his way into the local social scene through his singing and skill with the mandolin and guitar. Porter also published a short-lived periodical with the portentous title *The Rolling Stone*. In Austin, Porter eloped before moving to Houston, where he was arrested for embezzling from the bank where he worked. This development prompted Porter to flee to Honduras, a venue made attractive to Porter by that nation's lack of an extradition treaty. Porter returned to America to seek treatment for tuberculosis and spent four years in an Ohio federal penitentiary. In prison he first had a short story published and used the pen name O. Henry. Most of Porter's publishing output occurred in the final years of his life spent in New York before he died in 1910 at the age of 47. The bar took its name from the fact that it faced the back of Porter's house.<sup>44</sup>

O. Henry's Back Forty catered to a fraternity crowd seeking cheap Natural Light and live music as they whiled away their college nights shooting pool. The *Austin Chronicle*, eternally unimpressed, concluded, "The writer for whom it is named wouldn't likely recognize the decor, which is straight out of Roy Rogers' rec room—formica tables, faux-tile linoleum bar, and red woven-vinyl chairs."<sup>45</sup> The Back Forty did not seek out talent to strum away on the stool masquerading as a stage, instead relying on eager Greeks looking to play for a few bucks plus tips in front of their friends. "The Forty" would serve as a vital proving ground for a string of future Texas Country stars

including Ingram, Cory Morrow, Owen Temple, and South Austin Jug Band founder James Hyland.<sup>46</sup>

From the beginning of his performing career, Ingram was determined to play original material. "My first gig at Adair's I had 25 songs. One of them was mine, and I had 24 Jerry Jeff, Willie Nelson, I think I played 'Neon Moon,' I had a couple of things I thought were cool on the radio. ... The next week I had two of my own songs, 23 covers and two of my own songs. Next week I had 22 covers. I kind of built my own list by forcing myself to have a new song every week."<sup>47</sup> Ingram's guitar teacher, Reed Easterwood, of the Dallas band Powwow, was key in teaching Ingram the foundations of songwriting. He showed Ingram that a great song is still great stripped of all ornamentation down to just an acoustic guitar. Ingram explained, "All the ones I was learning were 1-4-5, so I knew it had to be all about melodies and words."<sup>48</sup>

Ingram claims he was not trying to be country; it just came out that way.<sup>49</sup> Musically, Ingram thought of himself as similar to the other Deep Ellum regulars. Coatney opined, "He was raised listening to something, and like a sponge that soaks something up, you might soak up a little red here, a little blue, a little green, but when you squeeze that sponge it doesn't come out like anything it looked like when you soaked it up."<sup>50</sup> Having leveraged his original songs into a loyal and growing fan base on what he called the "Southwest Conference Circuit," a reference to the college towns and cities of the now defunct athletic conference, in 1992 the 22-year-old Ingram decided it was time to make a record.<sup>51</sup>



Despite the 1970s Austin music scene's purported rejection of the Nashville establishment, virtually all the artists associated with that scene were signed to major labels. Not only were Nelson, Jennings, and Walker under contract. Michael Martin Murphey, Rusty Weir, Steve Fromholz, B. W. Stevenson, Guy Clark, and even Shiva's Headband all worked in the label system. This was necessary due to the extraordinary expense of the equipment required to record sound with enough fidelity to market as commercial music. Typically, like Keen, these artists had no other option than to retreat to the well-equipped studios in Nashville or Los Angeles to record their albums.

Ingram decided he needed music to sell at shows but worried about pursuing a label deal. "I just figured I'd put it out myself, so I wouldn't have to face the rejection of somebody telling me that they didn't want to put [my] record out," Ingram recalled.<sup>52</sup> Ingram befriended Carrie Pierce by playing at Pierce's open mic nights at the Rhythm Room and looked up to the more established act. "They were like three years older than me, and they had already sold a few thousand copies, which in the independent world was like going platinum."<sup>53</sup>

Ingram did not have the \$8,000 to record the album, so he applied what he had learned about business in college and went looking for investors. Ingram solicited friends and family, promising to pay back the initial investment with proceeds from sales and performances and offering 15 percent of album sales after the initial investment was paid off. Ingram's grandfather was the primary investor in this "mini-label deal." Within three months Ingram had sold enough CDs to pay back his investors.<sup>54</sup> Pierce directed Ingram to Terry Slemmons, the producer of Jackpierce's regional hit CD *Woman as Salvation*. Slemmons had capitalized on improvements in recording technology and falling prices of recording equipment to produce professional-quality recordings for local artists with the ability to pay out of pocket.<sup>55</sup> Slemmons's interest laid in pop and indie rock. "He didn't dig it, I could tell," Ingram recalls.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, Slemmons offered very little input into the sound of the finished product. This lack of producer input made *Jack Ingram* distinctly Ingram's own musical vision, a luxury rare even for independently produced debut albums. Ingram explains, "When you do the songs naturally your way without trying to do something you aren't capable of doing then the music changes because it goes through your own filter."<sup>57</sup>

*Jack Ingram* was released the week before Thanksgiving, 1992, coinciding with Ingram's 22nd birthday. "Beat Up Ford," the album's opening track and one of the first Ingram wrote, served as an anthem to a new generation of Texans. Stephen Harris recalled the song's impact in those early days. "Every time he played 'Beat Up Ford' the girls would just go nuts and then all the guys started buying his album. I don't know if Jack would

have had the impact if it wasn't for that damn song. ... That song in and of itself opened my eyes to Jack Ingram."<sup>58</sup>

The song, written in the third person, features two characters, "young man" and "old man." Using these generic, generationally-defined personas turns a personal song into something more archetypal and universally relatable. Ingram is tapping into country music's tradition of finding meaning by looking to the past and particularly parents and grandparents. This is different from rock and roll and hip-hop traditions, which are often presented as rejecting traditional values and being in opposition to older generations.

The setting is a "dusty road way down in Texas." The singer's call is specifically to those who have either a real or spiritual connection to rural Texas, presumably the kind of Texan who grew up listening to their parents' Willie Nelson and Jerry Jeff Walker records. Ingram's old man imparts words of wisdom to the young man. Before the two meet, the young man is aimless and spends his time "chasing butterflies and rainbows." The older figure, representing a link to a Texas rural past, urges his young protégé to live a more authentic existence.

"The old man said, 'You gotta have a good imagination / If you're gonna live a life of old / You've got to drive that Ford like it's a stallion / And you've got to wear your heart just like a gun'"<sup>59</sup> In "Beat Up Ford," "living a life of old" is presented as an aspiration for the young man. This is an update of the 1970s progressive notion of a "return to the land." This admiration for an older generation is also found in earlier progressive country works such as Guy Clark's "Desperados Waiting for a Train" and "Let Him Roll" and Jerry Jeff Walker's "My Old Man," which Ingram covered on his second album, *Lonesome Questions*.

The Ford of the title refers to Ingram's own mode of transportation. "I wrote this when I was 21. I thought that driving an old truck and listening to country music could save the world. It saved mine; I'm still working on the rest of it."<sup>60</sup> Ingram's old truck became a symbol that represented a harkening back to an earlier time in Texas musical and cultural history. "Beat Up Ford" was Ingram's musical expression of his own discovery of that time. For Ingram, the "young lost soul" of his song found a meaningful existence "dreaming of wild times where old cowboys broke down cattle lines."<sup>61</sup>

The notion of wearing "your heart just like a gun" resonates with a line from one of the most admired songs to come out of Texas in the 1970s, Townes Van Zandt's "Pancho and Lefty" (1972). In 1983 two of Jack's idols, Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard, teamed up to take the Van Zandt song to number one on the country charts and a place in the pantheon of Texas music. In "Pancho and Lefty" the outlaw Pancho "wore his gun outside his pants for all the honest world to feel."<sup>62</sup>

This line establishes Pancho's honesty while at the same time casting him as an outlaw. For Ingram and Van Zandt, in the mythological Texas cowboy past, displaying your pistol in plain sight is a mark of openness and authenticity. This serves to link contemporary Texans' quest for a meaningful life to a romanticized rural Western past.

"Beat Up Ford" also foreshadows the scene that came to be called Texas Country as an expression of Ingram's reality as a suburban, affluent, college-educated Texan born in the 1970s. In "Beat Up Ford" and many of his other original compositions Ingram does not assume the narrative position of one from a rural background or a blue-collar worker as many mainstream country artists often do. Brendon Anthony appreciated Ingram's perspective. "He made a record on his own, came from a fraternity-based, college country background, and sang what he knew. It really resonated with people like me, Roger Creager, and a few others who I played with in College Station. It certainly seemed to with Cory [Morrow] and Pat [Green] as well."<sup>63</sup>

In *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, Nadine Hubbs argues that working class culture, specifically music, reflects working class values. Using cultural anthropologists Adrie Kusserow's study of working-, middle- and upper-class child-rearing in New York, Hubbs concludes working class culture promotes a class defensiveness that focuses on toughening children for a world they see as threatening to their class interests and identity. Hubbs offers Johnny Cash's Shel Silverstein-penned 1969 country number one single "A Boy Named Sue" as an example of these attitudes.<sup>64</sup> Middle- and upper-class parents, according to Kusserow, prepare their children to find self-actualization through discovering their individuality. Children are protected from psychological harm in order to foster "autonomy, uniqueness, individuality and self-confidence."<sup>65</sup> On the surface "Beat Up Ford" employs working class signifiers. The road is dusty and the Ford is beat up, after all. But thematically the song is the story of a dreamy youth fixated on "butterflies and rainbows" finding a path to self-realization in "words of a young man who turned old." The key, the young man learns, is to use your imagination and be honest and emotionally engaged, which is represented by "driving that Ford like it's a stallion." In doing these things the young man can "live a life of old" or return to the mythological, pastoral Texan past. Ingram and those who followed in the progressive country revival typically employed this middle-class perspective Hubbs describes as "seek[ing] to express their purportedly unique inner qualities and thereby change the world" as opposed to much of mainstream country, which promotes working class ideas of "striv[ing] to withstand the world's pressures without *themselves* changing to

compromise their integrity."<sup>66</sup>

"Beat Up Ford" was but one of the signposts pointing to a new musical direction. The upbeat "Flutter," written by fellow Deep Ellum scenester Colin Boyd, gained some local radio play in Dallas and became Ingram's closer in his early live shows. But it was the three covers that helped limn the contours of the genre Ingram inspired. Merle Haggard's "Mama Tried" put Ingram firmly in outlaw country territory and, by itself, suggested a significant departure from the jangle pop of bands such as Jackpierce. "Pick Up the Tempo" was a Willie Nelson song that made it on to a Waylon Jennings album and become a staple for Jerry Jeff Walker. The last track of the album is a cover of Robert Earl Keen's not yet widely heard "The Road Goes on Forever." Ingram's recording of the track is the first cover of Keen's 1989 epic tale, predating Joe Ely's 1993 and country supergroup the Highwaymen's 1995 versions. In Ingram's hands the song is slower than Keen's and feels more reflective. Keen would later worry his younger fans missed the ironic implications of Sonny and Sherry's wayward lives juxtaposed with Keen's anthemic chorus. Ingram clearly does not. The song is bare in instrumentation and lacks any element of beer-swilling rowdiness that would come to be associated with Keen's live shows. For young Texas suburbanites newly rediscovering their parents' music, Ingram's inclusion of Haggard, Nelson, and, indirectly, Walker helped to define the parameters of the Texas country music revival of the 1990s. The inclusion of Keen, helped immensely by his outstanding writing, helped to introduce Keen to a younger crowd that would eventually make him the scene's biggest star.

Ingram's brooding love song "Drive On" forges one more link to Texans' continual struggle to reconcile their rural past, be it real or imagined, with their post-industrial present. "Drive On" offers a small-town vignette featuring a young man driving with his girl and dreaming of bigger things while a storm beats down on them. Despite himself being a young man in love, Ingram sees the young lovers as unprepared for what comes next, describing them as "two young believers, too young to know."<sup>67</sup> The knowing lyric is given even more emotional heft by a mournful fiddle countered by a light mandolin. The contrasting sounds serve to convey the optimism of the young lovers juxtaposed against the impending storm that represents life beyond the simplicity of youth and the safety of the small town.

Ingram was inspired to write the song after his older brother took him to see a revival of the film *The Last Picture Show*, the Oscar-winning 1971 film based on a novel by Texan Larry McMurtry.<sup>68</sup> The film and novel deal with the reality of growing up in small-town Texas as the state evolves from a rural agrarian economy to the increasingly urbanized, oil-

driven Texas of the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>69</sup> In “Drive On” and much of the rest of *Jack Ingram*, Ingram introduces a rising generation of Texan fans to a key theme of modern Texas literature and music: how to embrace and honor Texas’s rich cultural legacy in a rapidly changing and homogenizing world.

Within a month, Ingram sold 250 copies from the stage at his performances. The early fans often copied the CDs for friends, spreading Ingram’s message of a progressive country revival to university towns like Austin, College Station, and Lubbock. Ingram compares this rampant bootlegging to file sharing.<sup>70</sup> In this way, without record store distribution and by growing his fan base one burnt CD or cassette copy at a time, Ingram built the young, rowdy, passionate fan base that would soon embrace Robert Earl Keen and the artists, like Morrow and Green, that Ingram and Keen inspired.

this guy Pat with him, who we all thought was a big dork. They would come down and go see shows. They were road tripping fools. David started bringing Cory Morrow and Pat Green down back when they were just playing on barstools for tips.”<sup>73</sup> David’s little brother Robert was impressed with Green. “Pat came to visit with my brother because they were at Tech. We got drunk—so Pat came to visit and he pulled out Stephen Harris’s guitar and we were like, ‘Holy shit, this guy’s pretty good.’ Immediately we hired him to play the next day at the Phi Delt house for a hundred bucks. And he was like, ‘Holy shit, a hundred bucks.’”<sup>74</sup> The next week Robert and Harris talked Chris Wall into letting Green open for the veteran songwriter at Dallas’s Three Teardrops venue. Green assembled his first band for the gig.<sup>75</sup> Back in Lubbock, David Henry applied Ingram’s DIY approach to fund Green and Morrow’s first recording.<sup>76</sup> Soon after seeing Ingram’s Adair’s

Jack Ingram was not trying to create a new musical movement with his debut album. He also did not believe he was capable of inspiring a rebirth of his beloved 1970s Texas country scene. . . . Intentions aside, it is hard to imagine Ingram could have laid a clearer blueprint for the music scene to follow.

Jack Ingram was not trying to create a new musical movement with his debut album. He also did not believe he was capable of inspiring a rebirth of his beloved 1970s Texas country scene. “I really thought I sucked,” Ingram said almost a quarter century later.<sup>71</sup> Intentions aside, it is hard to imagine Ingram could have laid a clearer blueprint for the music scene to follow if that had been the 21-year-old’s intention.

While Robert Henry and Stephen Harris were witnessing Ingram’s origins at Adair’s, David Henry and Brian Zintgraff were making their own discoveries at Texas Tech. David and his roommate Paige Blanton had a fraternity brother from Houston, Cory Morrow, who could play guitar and sing. About that same time David met another aspiring musician at Tech by way of Waco, Pat Green. Henry and Blanton introduced the two and invited them to guitar pulls at their apartment on Wednesday nights where they impressed partygoers.

After hearing Ingram’s album, seeing the performer in person was a revelation for Green. By 1993, Henry, Blanton, Green, and Morrow would occasionally drive the 350 miles to catch shows in Dallas, including Ingram at Adair’s.<sup>72</sup> Harris remembers the beginning of his long friendship with Green. “David Henry would come down from Tech and bring

show, Green, Morrow, and their friends convinced a Lubbock bar to allow the pair to play for tips on the promise the Greek community would turn out. Green and Morrow’s first public performance at Bash Riprock’s was successful enough to convince Morrow to drop out of Texas Tech and move to Austin to advance his musical career.<sup>77</sup>

After earning his degree from Texas Tech, David Henry moved to Austin and handled Green’s merchandise sales, overseeing an early online ordering model with same-day shipping. Robert Henry spent a year teaching in Japan, returning to find the Texas Country scene in full bloom. “When I got back everybody was famous!” he recalled.<sup>78</sup> Henry formed his own band with his friend Graham Somes. The two performed as the B-Team for several years, a reference to Henry only being allowed to play at his brother’s apartment after Pat and Cory had finished.

Stephen Harris was also inspired to begin performing in public by Ingram. “My fraternity hired Jack Ingram to play at a party . . . and I remember my girlfriend and date at the time wouldn’t give me the time of day and I remember all the girls, all they wanted to do was go watch Jack play at this fraternity party. I remember specifically making the comment



Pat Green and Cory Morrow in David Henry and Paige Blanton's Lubbock apartment, ca. 1993. Photo by and courtesy of David Henry.

... 'Man, I could do this.'<sup>79</sup> Harris moved to Wyoming after graduation to work as a cowboy where he met fellow Texan Chris Ryden and began singing cowboy songs built on complicated harmonies inspired by Jackpierce. In 2000 the duo would move back to Texas, form a band, and join the Texas Country scene as Harris and Ryden.

In 1996 Harris stopped by on the way from Jackson Hole to San Antonio to see Green open for Ingram at Melody Ranch in Green's hometown of Waco. "Pat idolized Jack. That's what really got Pat going. He was always infatuated with Jack."<sup>80</sup> On Green's debut CD, *Dancehall Dreamer*, Green convinced Ingram and Chris Wall to appear as guests by telling each the other had agreed to appear before either had accepted the request.<sup>81</sup> Greg Henry, a relentless entrepreneur who worked tirelessly to book and promote Green from the artist's earliest days, used Ingram and Keen's postcard mailers listing tour dates to map out shows for Green. At the end of each night Green's head count would be compared to Ingram's as a way to measure Pat's progress on the road to stardom.<sup>82</sup>

In Austin, Morrow played regularly at the Back Forty, as Ingram had, before landing a weekly Tuesday night slot at Pete's Peanut Bar and Piano Emporium on Sixth Street playing acoustic guitar and accompanied on bass by Ryan Lynch. By 1996 John Dickson and Mark Schaberg were two established concert promoters looking for opportunities. Their experience booking Keen and Ingram had convinced them that the long-suffering market for local country music was on the rise. Dickson recalls being shocked at how inexpensive it

had become to book artists such as Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard. Gambling that college students were ready to return to the country music of the 1970s, the partners booked a series of shows at Hang Em High, a saloon-themed venue next to Pete's. They found a host and regular opening act for the event one bar over in Morrow. In 1996 Outlaw Thursdays paired shot specials and Cory Morrow with headliners including Merle Haggard, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Gary P. Nunn, Chris Wall, and Jack Ingram. These shows helped to solidify the burgeoning Texas Country scene in Austin and propel Morrow to its forefront.<sup>83</sup>

In College Station, Brendon Anthony met Roger Creager at an Ingram show, which led to the formation of a band that put Anthony, Creager, and drummer Justin Pollard on the path to Texas Country stardom. The fourth member of that band, Jeremy Elliott, would impact the scene in a very different way. Elliott recalled first seeing Ingram at Wolf Penn Creek Amphitheater in 1993 where the stage is separated from the audience by a moat. An infuriated Ingram screamed, "Stand up! Get up! Fuck this moat." He actually got two girls to jump in the moat. Then he jumped in it. ... I thought I was seeing a superstar. That was it for me." Desperate to find guitar tabs, Elliott discovered an internet bulletin board at Nevada.edu posting classic country chords. In early 1995 Elliott saw an early internet browser and decided it was the future. After meeting Kurt Lockhart, who was running a website for Todd Snider, Elliott made a fan site for Ingram that got significant traffic. He printed out the data and showed Coatney after a show, who passed on the information to Ingram. Elliott was hired as a proto-webmaster by an artist who barely knew what the web was. He would quickly add pages for Green and Morrow to the Ingram site and serve as a pioneer in creating music websites. Elliott moved into the role of road manager and spent five years on tour with Ingram.<sup>84</sup>



Jack Ingram (right), head shaved for military charity event, and Cory Morrow. Photo by and courtesy of David Henry.



Jack Ingram and Randy Rogers at the Center for Texas Music History's Roots of the Texas Country Scene event, April 2019.  
Photo by William Philpott.

Two more independent releases, *Lonesome Questions* (1994) and *Live at Adair's* (1996) followed Ingram's debut album.<sup>85</sup> Listening to the audience chatter from the live recording made Ingram yearn to escape Texas to find a broader audience.<sup>86</sup> Elliott becomes philosophical when considering Ingram's relationship with his early fans.

Artists take heat often for being too aloof.... That's because when you really get to know the people who like your music some of them like it for reasons that don't make you happy. They misinterpret your work. They adhere to it for some of the baser levels of it. But then ... you realize good works target all levels of intellect. Cerebrally, they appeal to the Shakespearean groundlings as well as to the intellectual aristocracy. ... Being able to appeal to all those fans and still be able to sleep at night. I think that's what drove Jack out of a Texas-only career. The search for that.<sup>87</sup>

Fan attitudes aside, selling 30,000 CDs without a label convinced Warner Music Group to sign Ingram to its Rising Tide label in 1996. Ingram spent much of that year paired with Todd Snider, a fellow singer-songwriter with Texas connections who had been inspired to perform by Jerry Jeff Walker. Snider helped Ingram grow as an artist, but the tour took him out of his Texas base. When the tour ended, Ingram went to Nashville to record his first label record, *Livin' or Dyin'* (1997), with Twang Trust, a partnership of legendary Texas songwriter Steve Earle and Ray Kennedy. Rising Tide folded soon after the release, crippling the album's label support but not before Ingram secured an *Austin City Limits* taping that he shared with Robert Earl Keen, who was enjoying his own first major label release. Ingram was then picked up by Sony's Lucky Dog imprint where he released *Hey You* (1999) and *Electric* (2002), two albums frequently cited as favorites by artists in my research.

While Ingram was touring and working outside of Texas for

much of 1996 and 1998, the Texas Country scene exploded, particularly Ingram's friends and early fans Pat Green and Cory Morrow. While much of the early audience was still around, the vast majority had only recently discovered Green, Morrow, and Keen, all of whom were touring Texas regularly. When Ingram reappeared, to many fans he seemed a newcomer to the scene or perhaps even a major label guy trying to break into their grassroots movement. Ingram appreciated the deference the current kings of Texas Country showed him but admits to feeling some jealousy. Green would, at times, insist Ingram be the headliner when they shared a bill despite Green being the bigger draw in Texas at the time. Green and Morrow would make clear Jack's role in inspiring their careers during banter between songs, but Ingram had set his sights on conquering Nashville and could not simply reclaim his place in the scene he helped create.<sup>88</sup>

His willingness to give his time and energy to charitable causes is legendary, best exemplified by his work with Mack, Jack, and McConaughey, which has raised over \$14 million since 2013 for children's causes.<sup>91</sup> He has become a mentor to many younger Texas Country artists, following the example of Guy Clark, one of Ingram's greatest heroes.

As for his role in the creation of Texas Country, Ingram has long reflected on the genre's reputation. "Some people may think, 'That's that frat guy' and mention my name with other bands they don't respect. I've always felt that. But there's a lot of bands that I don't really like or respect and I can't make everybody like me. And yet, most of the people that I wanted to gain their respect and wanted them to come see a show have given me that respect."<sup>92</sup> *Dallas Observer* writer Robert Patterson notes, "[A]s one of the originators of the post-Robert Earl Keen syndrome, Ingram has definitely helped paved the

His willingness to give his time and energy to charitable causes is legendary, best exemplified by his work with Mack, Jack, and McConaughey, which has raised over \$14 million since 2013 for children's causes. He has become a mentor to many younger Texas Country artists, following the example of Guy Clark, one of Ingram's greatest heroes.

Elliott, who served as Ingram's road manager during this period, understood the complexity of Ingram's situation. On the one hand, having a strong fan base in Texas is a significant advantage. "The fertile grounds here give Texas artists an advantage in making the case for a broader appeal. They can take risks, they can do different things because they know that they always have a base here in Texas." But at the same time, signing a label deal and being pushed on top-40 radio "burned off some of Ingram's Texas following."<sup>89</sup> As Jack has said for years, "I wasn't trying to be the fucking King of Texas." He was aiming to save country music nationally as Willie Nelson had, in his mind.<sup>90</sup>

Between 1997 and 2006 Ingram released nine albums on four labels, reaching #4 with *This Is It* (2006). In 2008 the Academy of Country Music awarded him "Best New Artist." He has charted twelve singles, hitting #1 in 2005 with "Wherever You Are." In April 2019 Ingram followed up 2016's well received folk-rock *Midnight Motel* with *Riding High...Again*, an album of covers of progressive and Texas country recorded in the laid back, casual style of Walker's *Viva Terlingua*.

way for other good ol' young guys with guitars."<sup>93</sup>

Among those he inspired, Ingram stands as a benchmark to strive for. Randy Rogers feared handing Ingram his first CD. Rogers had heard when artists gave their music to the Beat Up Ford Band the ritual was to put it on in the Suburban and critique it. If it didn't pass muster, the offending disc would be placed on the antenna to see how long it took the highway winds to pull it off into oblivion. Ingram confirmed the story and assured Rogers he still has his CD. Elliott added context to the story. "A lot of us in the van would let our latent envy or jealousy get the better of us. We'd go by and get handed the latest effort by those guys and just poop on it. Jack would put on his headphones or say, 'Shut up. This is their work, and they're aimed at a different target than we're aiming at.'"<sup>94</sup>

Contemporary critics wrote Ingram off as a "college-frat-country-rocker" and denigrated him as a "solo hillbilly version of Jackpierce."<sup>95</sup> Most did not quite know what to do with Ingram because he was something new. Or, more accurately, a fresh take on something old. Jerry Jeff Walker, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Rusty Weir, and a host of older artists were all still

active and were treated with some reverence as originators of the regional Texas country scene. It was easy to understand where they fit into the Texas musical landscape. Keen, and others of his age such as Steve Earle, had all been active since before outlaw country faded from prominence in the mid-1980s. It would take many listeners time to understand Ingram's role as a revivalist of a more organic style of Texas country music and the attitude associated with it. Robert Wilonsky, a *Dallas Observer* music writer during the 1990s and 2000s, only slowly came to realize Ingram was “*No Depression* before the movement had a name or a tip sheet.”<sup>96</sup>

Ingram did not invent Texas country music—not even

close—but throughout most of the 1990s he was the most popular and influential artist of his generation, working to both revive and honor progressive and outlaw country. More importantly, the artists who followed him in the regional Texas country music scene were directly impacted by Ingram. Ingram's youth and precociousness would be a major inspiration for artists, such as Cory Morrow and Pat Green, who followed him in the progressive and outlaw revival of the late 1990s that is still going strong a quarter century after Ingram first took the stage. Elliott summed up Ingram's journey. “Jack was the pilot who showed everyone the way.”<sup>97</sup> ★

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