

Billy Joe Shaver

*“Fenced yards ain't hole cards and like as not never will be
Reason for rhymers and old five and dimers like me”*

Billy Joe Shaver

The story goes that Waylon Jennings was so blown away by Billy Joe Shaver after hearing him sing his composition “Willy the Wandering Gypsy and Me” at the 1972 Dripping Springs Reunion down in the Texas hill country outside Austin that he invited him to Nashville to record an album of his original material.

Of course, the story continues, by the time Shaver hit Music City, not only did it take him months to gain an audience with Waylon but when he finally did, Waylon didn't remember either him or the invite. Shaver, as it turned out, however, had an antidote for just such a rebuke.

He immediately informed Jennings that he would kick his ass if he didn't listen to his songs. Waylon, recognizing an opportunity to survive another day, was all ears from then on and would go on to record an album of his own featuring nine-out-of-ten songs written by the previously unheralded Billy Joe Shaver.

In retrospect, as much as any other recording of the period, that album, the iconic *Honky Tonk Heroes*, jumpstarted the entire “Outlaw Country” music genre. An ethic of freedom whereby country performers with sufficient clout could take their own bands into the recording studio and record what they wanted when they wanted was a notion whose time had come.

When *Honky Tonk Heroes* arrived by mail at KMOR radio in beautiful downtown Murray, Utah during mid-summer of 1973, it became immediately apparent to us low-on-the-food-chain disk jockeys that a change was afoot. Gathering in a circle and making short work of the cellophane wrapping, we slapped the new arrival down on a turntable in the production room and went about deciphering the cover.

It wasn't only the creatively-constructed progressive-country music imbedded into the vinyl that got our attention, you see, but, also, the somewhat garish album cover graphics of a bunch of renegade musicians obviously enjoying themselves within the friendly confines of a saloon.

Flaunting all the trappings of a victory party, the photo featured what probably appeared to the uninitiated to be an after-hours gathering of renegade pickers and singers who, for whatever reasons, just couldn't wipe the grins off their faces. Actually, Waylon and many of the Wylors, his touring band, had adjourned to a local honky tonk for the album cover photo shoot and decided to have their way with the beer kegs.

Having not caught Waylon *live* at that juncture, we couldn't yet really identify his sidekicks. Although looking back on the cover now, it's easy to pick out Waylon's longtime drummer and music director Richie Albright along with the steel guitar virtuoso Ralph Mooney and a few others, including the now legendary Billy Joe Shaver, himself – the man of the hour.

Shortly thereafter, when Billy Joe's first LP, *Old Five and Dimers Like Me*, came out, we were treated to the prime source of all these remarkable tunes. It was not unlike when we finally got the chance to hear Kris Kristofferson for the first time after hearing

all his songs sung by others. It wasn't long before "*I Been To Georgia On a Fast Train*" became the first of our many Billy Joe Shaver anthems.

With back problems and assorted other maladies interrupting scheduled tour stops in Salt Lake over the years, it would be quite a spell before I would finally catch Billy Joe in person down at the Otto Mileti's great old Zephyr Club. Just making eye contact with this man who had lost a mother, wife, and son in the course of one year, gave you the shivers. By the time I headed back up the canyon, I felt like I'd received a Papal blessing.

Then, much more recently, when Bob Dylan sang the lyric "*I'm listening to Billy Joe Shaver/And I'm reading James Joyce/Some people they tell me/I got the blood of the land in my voice*" from "I Feel a Change Comin' On" on 2009's *Together Through Life*, you wanted to stand up and cheer. A neighborhood within a wheelhouse that features an intersection of Billy Joe Shaver and James Joyce must be just about as eclectic as it gets.

Well, the man from Corsicana, Texas is coming back to Salt Lake this upcoming Saturday night for a show down at *The Stateroom* and I can't wait to spend a few more hours in his beautifully haunting aura. Billy Joe has pretty much seen it all and remains, to all odds, as life affirming as one would expect from a surviving honky-tonk hero and old-five-and-dimer like him.