

Texas Dance Halls

■ *A Personal Journey*

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Photographs by J. Marcus Weekley

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The Fun Everybody Wants to Have

■ *Luckenbach Dance Hall*

At Luckenbach Dance Hall, east of Austin and west toward the foothills of the Hill Country, the band Two Tons of Steel breaks into a rockabilly song. Kevin Geil holds a guitar at his hips and a microphone to his lips, driving eager pairs to the dance floor. I sit on a bench at the back of the hall and watch the couples whirl in tight circles. Benches like mine line the sides, while tables of seated men and women fill the middle. Through the open sides of the dance hall, oak trees dance in the night breeze.

A man with dark hair walks toward two women dressed in matching light-blue tank tops, the “Everybody’s Somebody at Luckenbach” slogan written across them. The sound of the music, which rollicks in quick rhythms, drowns out the man’s words, but I can tell he’s asking one of the women to dance. She shakes her head and mumbles what looks like a “no thanks.” The man walks back to his friend, who gives him a sympathetic look. The jilted man with dark hair catches me watching him, so I give him an “I’m sorry” glance. He mouths back words that look like “Do you want to dance?”

Stashing my notebook and purse under the bench, I get up and follow

him toward the stage. He wears a t-shirt and jeans and is named Max. On the dance floor, my swing step is a little rusty and Max’s is a little drunken, but we sway together anyways in wide arcs under the stage, some of our circles dangerously close to the other dancers. I take off a bracelet and stick it into the pocket of my jean-skirt so it won’t break when Max grabs my wrist for the fast turns. In between spins, I glimpse the small stand where band t-shirts and CDs are for sale. Another spin, I spot Marcus, a big grin on his face, crouched on the floor behind his camera to capture the colorful boots of the dancers. By the end of the song, I end up facing the stage, where Two Tons concludes its song with a last twang. With barely a break for the audience to clap, they dive into their next song, which is just as fast and tight as the one before it.

Back in my seat on the bench, I tap my boots to the driving sounds of this San Antonio band’s first set. It’s easy to hear musical influences that include Elvis Presley, the Ramones, Chris Isaac, and Johnny Cash. The band members, who include lead singer Kevin Geil, Dennis Fallon on electric guitar, Ric



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Rameriz on upright bass, Chris Dodds on drums, and Danny Mathis on steel guitar, have been together since 1991. In 1997, they changed their name to Two Tons of Steel after the Crickets of Buddy Holly fame contacted them about possible confusion with Two Tons' then-name, the Dead Crickets.

"It was a good time to change the name," Kevin tells me in a conversation before the show. "When we were called the Dead Crickets, people thought we were a punk band. I'm glad it got taken care of early on. To change the name now would be very hard." The band's current name, Two Tons of Steel, refers to a 1956 hardtop Cadillac that Kevin owned and sold. He hasn't had much time to work on cars lately, given the band's touring schedule. "It was hard to let go of the Cadillac and the Belaire," he says. "I'll get back to the old cars in the next few years, I guarantee it – not to work on them, but to drive them."

Kevin, a slender man with sandy-red hair, describes the band's sound "countrybilly," a nod to both country music and rockabilly sounds. Their success over the past few years has expanded the locations where the band plays, from Texas honky-tonks to European concerts. Despite the more diverse venues, the band still feels at home in local dance halls like Luckenbach and further south at Gruene Hall, where the band started playing its first dance hall shows.

"We had tried to play there [Gruene Hall] for a while, with no success," Kevin says. This changed when Pat Molack, the owner of Gruene Hall, saw the band at a local club in the San Antonio area and asked if they would open at Gruene for the well-known western swing band Asleep at the Wheel. Their performance as an opening act cleared the way for occasional afternoon shows at Gruene, where

Two Tons of Steel played for tips. "We built up a pretty good following, and then started playing Friday and Saturday nights," Kevin says. Along with their weekend spot, the band secured Tuesday night shows that soon became known as "Two-Ton Tuesdays," which the band still plays each summer. The band recently made a live DVD and CD recording at Gruene Hall to capture this tradition.

"With Gruene, you have the river and the tourists – it's the perfect marriage. People want to have fun there, and that's what we want to do." Kevin looks across the wooden dance floor at Luckenbach; a breeze, Texas warm with a hint of autumn cold to come, whispers through the open sides of the hall. "With Luckenbach, it's the same thing," he says. "It's a historic dance hall – you can't get much better than playing here. The halls are legendary, and to be part of them on a regular basis is really good."

Away from home, Two Tons of Steel has played in the famous Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, as well as cities throughout Europe, including Paris, Geneva, and Barcelona. "The European fans are intense," Kevin says, adding that because their music is sold, played, and promoted there, the fans come to the show familiar with the music and the lyrics. He smiles and looks down at his hands, which are folded on the table in front of him. "They think you're a big star when you go over. It was the same thing when we toured Cuba seven years ago." During trip, which inspired the song "Havana Moon" from the band's latest CD, Two Tons played for crowds of several thousand.

After playing their shows on the road, the band looks forward to their gigs at the Texas halls. "Our home base is the dance halls," Kevin says, glancing behind him as a pair of men onstage fiddle with the sound. In the pre-show



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setup, feedback squeals from a microphone. "Rock and roll," Kevin laughs.

"At least it's before the show," I say. Kevin nods his head and smiles. "The dance halls are the real deal and can't be duplicated," he says. "You come in and drink a beer, sweat, and enjoy."

Before the show, Marcus and I toured the grounds at Luckenbach. The small community, formed in 1849, continues in self-contained style to the present day, made famous by the likes of Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson with their song "Luckenbach, Texas" as well as Jerry Jeff Walker and the Lost Gonzo Band's 1973 live Luckenbach

recording of the popular album *Viva Terlingua*, which helped start the Texas Outlaw Music Movement. Willie Nelson's Fourth of July celebrations, which were held in Luckenbach during the mid-90s, added to the community's fame.

We walked through wooden buildings that included a country store and post office, to a separate eating shack and bar area adjacent to the 1887 dance hall. Neal Brown, Luckenbach Manager, told us that the blacksmith's shop and cotton gin, two of the oldest buildings in Luckenbach (circa 1873) were destroyed by a flood in 2002. On this Saturday afternoon, however, oak tree leaves shimmered in the day's last



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sun. Crowds from the women’s chili cook-off held that afternoon lingered to share beers and stories. Bikers wearing leather and dew rags lounged at a picnic table next to the dance hall, their chrome bikes glinting in the afternoon light. A woman with long dark hair and skinny boots walked her restless pit bull past the table.

Marcus and I followed the sounds of karaoke warbling from a tent set up near the parking lot. The group onstage, who we guessed were part of a chili cook-off team, swayed onstage and slurred the words of “Play that Funky Music” into the microphone. The lead singer of the group wore a baseball cap with horns that sprouted from either side of it. We watched for a moment before walking back to the dance hall.

I bought two cherry lime-aids at the food shack and followed Marcus inside the hall to find seats near the back that would give us a clear view of the stage. The crowd around us ranged from kids in Luckenbach t-shirts to couples in their sixties and seventies, all eager to hear the band start up. Kevin had

described their audience range as a “crazy age mix, from 12-72. College kids come see us, and then come back with their parents.” I watched a five-year-old girl with long dark hair who kept checking the fluffy cocker spaniel that lie at her feet.

A warm-up act, singer-songwriter duo Jed and Kelly, took the stage first. Several couples around us rose from their seats and walked arm in arm to the dance floor. Fans outside the hall leaned across the short walls of the building as if they were looking through windows. Behind me, I heard a man in a black hat and t-shirt murmur “Texas is the best place on earth.” I smiled and watched a pair of dancers, a man in tan pants dance and a girl in a green skirt, float across the floor.

At a table near my bench along the back wall, several friends in their twenties sat together in a group. The women wore matching red shirts and sandals – the men, jeans, boots, and black t-shirts. A man with dark bangs that fell around his face glanced at my notebook and leaned closer to look. “Are you keeping a journal?” he asked.

I told him about our dance hall project and learned that his name was Matt, that he came from Austin, and that he was a property developer. He nodded his approval at our coverage of Luckenbach. “This place is my break-up therapy,” he said. “My friends brought me out here tonight, and I’ve had the best time – it’s taken my mind off of everything.”

He turned to Marcus. “Can your camera take away these wrinkles?” he asked, pointing to his eyes and almost flirting.

“Not really,” Marcus said, without offering anything more.

Stacy, a lawyer from Austin and part

of Matt’s support group, leaned in closer. “From its history to its architecture, it’s a beautiful place,” she said. Her blonde hair stood out against the red background of her shirt. “It’s a reset button,” she added, looking at Matt, “no matter what’s going on in your life.”

Standing front and center in cream-colored shirt, jeans, and a cowboy hat, lead singer Kevin keeps the energy level onstage high. Ric’s thick black glasses focus on his hands as he slaps the bass, while the guitar player’s aqua-colored Fender guitar twangs, giving the song even more of a surfer feel. The band



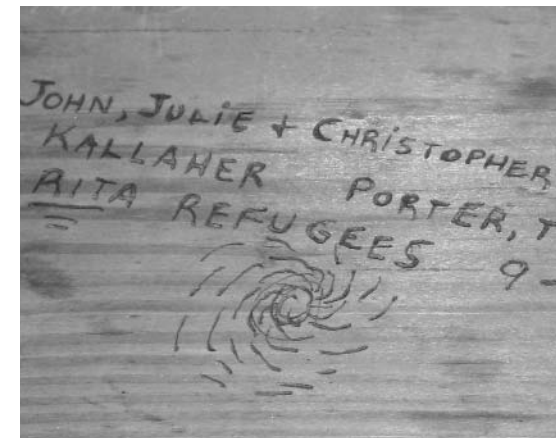
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segues into a song called “Vegas,” the title track of their new CD. Kevin, who writes the band’s songs, says that his wife Elena is his number one inspiration. “She likes Las Vegas, and she likes to drive, so it just got in my head,” he says. Kevin writes the melodies of his songs first – the words come later. The CD Vegas is number 4 on the Texas charts and number 5 on the roots music charts.

“I had planned to retire about three years ago,” says Kevin, who is in his early forties; he and Elena also have

two daughters. The other band members are in their thirties. “But it just gets bigger every year,” he says. “Being with Palo Duro [Records] has been good for us,” he says. “We’ve played in New York, and played in L.A. We can’t stop now.”

From the back of the hall, I watch the girl with long dark hair, the one with the cocker spaniel, slump across her father’s back. Her hair spills down his shirt in chocolate waves. Marcus still crouches at his place near the stage to catch both musicians and dancers on





camera. While I'm mesmerized by the dancers, a tall man in a cowboy hat and white t-shirt leans across the wall from the outside and asks me if I'd like to dance.

The man, who I learn is named Donny, leads me toward the dance floor. Two Tons of Steel plays a fast song that's a good example of their countrybilly sound. Donny hesitates before taking my hand. "Not sure how we'll dance to this one," he says. While some couples two-step, others jitter bug. We choose the two-step, navigating between the faster dancers twirling in frantic circles around us. With every slow spin, I catch a glimpse of the band onstage, the t-shirt table with its display of new CDs, or Marcus taking more pictures.

When the song ends, Donny turns my hand over to Uncle Rob, a man in his fifties with a baby-blue colored shirt. He wears a hat that looks like a cross between a cowboy hat and a fedora. I'm not sure if Uncle Rob is related to Donny, or it's just a nickname, so I smile and keep dancing. Uncle Rob's eyes stay wide open in a look of half-surprise. I two-step half the song, then jitterbug the rest. People on the sidelines, who must be Uncle Rob's friends, laugh and give my dance partner friendly slaps on the arm as we pass by. Later in the song, I take the lead, cuing Uncle Rob when I want to spin or avoid another pair of dancers. At the end of the song, I thank Uncle Rob for the dance; he bows in return.

Uncle Rob doesn't really dance, Donny tells me later. "He's just crazy and trouble."

"Is he really your uncle?" I ask.

Donny shrugs without committing himself. "He's the fun everybody wants to have."

The band starts up a track from the new CD, a song called "Havana Moon." The dancing floor fills with

couples ready for a breather with this slow-dance number. Though Two Tons regularly fills the dance floor on this night, Kevin doesn't necessarily write the band's music with the dance halls in mind.

"The halls don't influence our music [directly]," he explains. "But if you're playing dance halls, it usually means you're playing more traditional music, with acoustic bass, steel guitar, and acoustic guitar." Two Tons uses all these instruments as part of its country sound, while their high energy leads to danceable, jitterbug rhythms. In terms of writing the music and lyrics, Kevin stays true to the band's blended countrybilly style without analyzing it too much. "I know what I like," he says.

Kevin grew up the youngest in a family with four brothers and one sister, almost all of them playing the guitar. "There's music that runs through our family, but we're not a big musical family," he says. His great-great-grandfather was a violinist in St. Louis Symphony in 1862. "Along with my first guitars, I have the violin," Kevin says, "and my brother's accordion." Kevin never studied music or took lessons, letting it come natural instead. "My dad played my great-great grandfather's old violin when he was young, until everyone figured out the violin was valuable. After that, it got taken away from him and put away in the attic." When Kevin's dad passed away, Kevin inherited the violin.

During a break between songs, Kevin waves his arms above his head and calls out "Two Tons!" to the audience. The crowd answers with their own cry of "Two Tons!" Some fans wave their arms at him. "Two Tons is our chant," Kevin says. "I don't know where it came from, it's just part of the show." "Two Tons!" Kevin yells once more to the crowd. "Two Tons!" the crowd fires back. The band responds by



OVERLEAF:

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launching into another song with a punchy feel that crowds the floor with dancers. Marcus joins me at the back of the room, and together we watch couples scoot, spin, and slide across the floor.

"We'll take a break and we'll be right back," Kevin promises after the song ends. The band members leave their guitars in careful rows onstage and then step down to the dance floor. Behind the t-shirt counter, they sign CDs for waiting fans, me among them. I walk to the back of the dance hall and show Marcus my copy of the CD along with a band poster. He nods and untangles the camera from around his neck.

Donny saunters up behind to ask if

we need anything to drink, but I'm still nursing a Shiner Blonde and Marcus has a bottle of water. We watch the women in light-blue Luckenbach t-shirts laughing together. "You both need to get t-shirts," Donny says.

I consider the familiar design of this popular shirt. "I like it. But is it right to wear a t-shirt at the place where it's from?"

"Sure," Donny says, giving me a "why not?" look. With smile, he walks outside to get a fresh beer.

"When do you want to go?" Marcus asks.

"This might be a good time," I say, although my heart's not in it. Most of the dance hall crowd stays in the hall,

while a few others venture out to the beer stand with Donny. The food shack next to the dance floor still has a few customers who've worked up an appetite for burgers and fries.

"I've just gotten word it's last call for hamburgers," Kevin announces over the microphone. At midnight, Marcus and I wander outside the dance hall and sit on top of a picnic table, the same place bikers had sat together earlier. A few hogs are still parked in a shiny row close by.

"We can stay awhile," Marcus offers, setting down his tripod to prove it.

"A few songs," I say. My smile curls upward. The band members, some inside the dance hall and others on the grounds outside, mingle with the crowd. About twenty minutes after they end their first set, they're ready to perform again, bantering with the crowd over the microphone as they climb back on stage and listen to a few song requests.

"In a world where so many things are going on, it's good to know there are some things that haven't changed," Kevin told me earlier. "Americans change things, whether they need it or not. [With dance halls] a band can still roll in, set up on stage, and people will dance. It's good to know that that's still available."

Donny, who's been outside talking to one of the girls in the light-blue shirts, walks up to our picnic table, sets down a beer, and asks us how things are going.

"We're taking off pretty soon," I say.

He shakes his head and gives me a teasing look. "Not before you dirt dance," he says.

"What's that?" I peer into his mustached face, half-hidden under the cowboy hat.

"It's dancing outside, on the dirt."

Donny takes my right hand. I put my left hand on his shoulder, and we two-step in the mix of dirt and grass just outside the dance hall, matching the cadence of the dancers inside. Through the open sides of the dance hall we catch glimpses of the band playing "King of a One Horse Town," a song from an earlier CD. Marcus snaps a few photos of our cowboy boots in the dust.

With a final twirl at the song's end, I thank Donny and drift back to the picnic table and Marcus. Donny looks straight at Marcus. "You need to dance, too," he says.

Marcus laughs. "No, I don't."

But it's too late. Donny has already asked one of his friends, Debbie, to be Marcus' dance partner. Marcus and I both reach out to catch the tall brunette as she lists in a slow, drunken fall against our picnic table. Debbie recovers and stands up straight.

Without a word, she takes the camera from Marcus' neck, places it on the picnic table, and leads Marcus inside the hall. On the dance floor, they spin in slow circles, both smiling. I grab Marcus' camera to take a picture of their dance from outside the hall, but end up capturing a collection of beer bottles on the closest table instead.

We can't top these last dances, Marcus' inside the hall and mine in the dirt outside, and decide to head back to the place we're staying in Junction. After saying goodbye to Donny, who chats up another blue-shirted woman under an oak tree, we walk toward the field where we'd left the Beetle. Marcus takes a few more pictures of signs sprinkled around the property. Two Tons' music follows us through the open sides of the dance hall. I walk extra slow to the car, making the night last.

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