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THE NEW BAND BOYS OF COUNTRY MUSIC



# MEET THE OUTLAW ROCKERS IN TEXAS PUTTING NASHVILLE'S COWBOYS TO SHAME



**S**tomp your boots!" yells Dirty River Boys singer Marco Gutierrez into his mike. "Stomp your boots on this hardwood floor!" His band is playing Gruene Hall, a 137-year-old honky-tonk in a thick, green, swampy town near the southern tip of Texas called New Braunfels.

Gutierrez whips the crowd into a semiballistic fury as he launches into a song. The heavily tattooed drummer, Travis Stearns, alternates between playing the drum set in front of him and pummeling the box on which he's sitting with his bare hands. The upright bass player's instrument is stamped with the words *DITCH THE BITCH, LET'S GO RODEO*. The raucous, beer-fueled crowd laps up every second of it, shouting the band's name at the top of their lungs.

"They're just a bunch of hell-raisers," says country singer-songwriter Ray Wylie Hubbard. "They're these wild young roots-rock hellions singing songs that come from a higher place only true poets know. I don't see anyone else in Texas doing what they're doing."

Ricocheting seamlessly between country, bluegrass and rock, the Dirty River Boys—along with up-and-comers Whiskey Myers and Turnpike Troubadours—are wrenching country music out of a staid rut and turning it into something else entirely. Just as music out of Nashville has taken a turn toward overproduced sounds made by truck-worshipping, back-slapping rhinestone cowboys, these three bands in the barren Southwest are tearing through honky-tonks, ripping up dive bars and forging a gritty, raw new iteration of the genre.

"These days country music is all pseudo cowboys wearing cowboy hats and singing about things they don't know about," says Dirty River Boys bassist Colton James. "It makes me ill. It's not country. It's not authentic."

The band's musical influences run the gamut. "Some nights we get more punk, and some nights we get a little more country," says Stearns. "Some nights we hush it down and get seriously singer-songwriter. We just try to sound like ourselves."

Turnpike Troubadours have knocked Texas on its sizable ass by selling out shows across the state. Their music can best be described as Townes Van Zandt meets Bob Dylan meets William S. Burroughs. "Turnpike Troubadours came out of nowhere and freaked people out," says Fort Worth radio DJ Shayne Hollinger, referring to the band's hometown of Stillwater, Oklahoma. "They're on some next-level shit."

And then there's Whiskey Myers, a six-man outfit hailing from tiny towns in east Texas. Their music is a Zeppelin-inspired, Skynyrd-loving backdrop of sexy slow guitars with a motorcycle-racing edge. If the lyrically minded Dirty River Boys are the state's burgeoning poet laureates, Whiskey Myers are the raucous backwoods boys raised on Southern rock, porch swings and hand-me-down rifles. "Lightning," a song off their most recent album, details running around drunk with "every pretty little whore" in town.

"I was pretty fucked up when I wrote that song," admits lead singer Cody Cannon, "but our songs are fucking honest. We don't cover up. It won't sell as many copies, but fuck it."

But honesty is what audiences want: *Early Morning Shakes*, Whiskey Myers's latest album, debuted at number one on the iTunes country chart. The Dirty River Boys and

Turnpike Troubadours have experienced similar success, and they're doing it without record deals or national radio airplay. At a time when Top 40 country music has been spit-shined, polished, perfumed and commodified, America's heartland is thirsty for a new sound. These rough-neck raconteurs are ready to deliver.







◀ “Our original intent was to play 250-person bars. Just play the hell out of it, drink beer and ride around the country in a van,” says lead singer Evan Felker (far right). But after their second album, 2012’s *Good-bye Normal Street*, everything changed. Radio stations picked them up, they toured outside Texas, and they made enough to graduate out of a van. “What’s that line from *Almost Famous*?” asks bassist R.C. Edwards (second from right). “‘Make us look cool’? We’re not cool. We’ve been working our whole lives to get here.” Despite their success, the Troubadours remain unsigned.



◀ The Troubadours probe their emotions and poke where it hurts most. In the bluesy acoustic “Empty as a Drum,” Felker croons about the quiet, uncertain loneliness of waiting in a bar. “You look at Jerry Jeff Walker, and his songs aren’t about popular topics,” says Felker of his idol. “He’s writing a story. That’s where I try to be. Write what you know.”

▼ Kyle Nix’s soaring fiddle catches Felker’s tenor, and together they dance a line between mournful and hopeful. “They’re not talking about going down by the river with their big truck and their lady looking good,” says record producer Mike McClure. “It’s an emphasis on great songwriting; it’s a breath of fresh air.”

## TURNPIKE TROUBADOURS

*“Could  
you  
spare a  
cigarette;  
I hate to  
be a bum.  
But here’s  
to hopin’  
she’ll still  
come;  
I’m too old  
to be this  
dumb.”*

—“Empty as a Drum”

