

By John Moesch

It sounds best played in a whiskey-soaked honky tonk. It has the ability to move people like no other. It can only be sung effectively by those who feel it to their core.

It's traditional country music, and this is Jeff Griffith's calling card.

The Santa Fe native (where Urban Cowboy Johnny Lee went to school) has been making a name for himself by sticking to the "no nonsense," true country music made famous by George Jones, Merle Haggard and Gary Stewart.

"It's who I am. I grew up with [traditional country] and it's my love, my passion," says Griffith. "I don't think I could sing any other way."

As Griffith tours Texas and Louisiana, he strikes a chord with audiences thirsty for his traditional style. With his country roots approach, he's in the minority in the Texas Country genre as it exists today when a lot of singers and bands lean rock.

"It's good ole two-stepping, beer-drinkin', honky tonk music", explains Griffith with a smile. People compliment his choice of songs exclaiming that they can "really drink beer to this music," and Jeff lets loose with his favorite zinger, "Well I told ya'll I drive people to drink when I sing!" That's always delivered with a warm laugh.

The centerpiece of the sound is Jeff's choice of instruments. "We do have fiddle and steel guitar in our band. Shoot, you can't be a country band without a steel guitar," Griffith says. "I just stand up for country music; and if that's what they want, I am going to give it to 'em".

Griffith grew up on a dairy farm. His childhood consisted of helping on the farm and taking care of horses, cows, chickens and pigs. "It was a very simple time, a time that I really tried to run away from when I was young, and now want to get back to it," he reflects.

JEFF GRIFFITH:



Keeping It Real

He accomplished that "going back" eight years ago when he purchased 24 acres of his own in Spring Branch. It's a place where he has been able to share what "that simple time" was like with his wife and three kids.

Jeff figured out early in life that country music was going to play a major role in his life. He got his first guitar at age 7. By fourteen he was playing in those whiskey-soaked honky tonks.

He married his high school sweetheart and their first child arrived when he was just 17. That put the brakes on a regular touring career, although Jeff still kept his skills sharp playing private functions while running a successful construction business.

Griffith was committed to raising his family and not taking time away from them by being on the road. He and his wife talked about a scenario

where, after the last child graduated, he would make a concentrated effort to jump into country music and see where it would take him.

Eighteen years in the construction business put him in touch with the man that would help Jeff realize a dream of being a country singer full time—developer Charlie Patterson.

Patterson and country legend Joe Stampley went to school together and remain close friends. At Patterson's urging, Jeff went to Nashville to play for Stampley. After only two songs, Joe signed him to his own Arrowhead Records.

I was curious to know what two songs Jeff was willing to bet his future on?

One was "Drinkin' Thing," the old Gary Stewart song. The other was "Almost Home" by Craig Morgan.

His choice of "Drinkin' Thing" was quite personal for Jeff: He knew Gary Stewart and cut the song as a tribute to him, not really caring if it became a big hit. (It did, though, charting at #9 on the Texas Music Chart after appearing on Jeff's CD *If It Ain't One Thing It's Another*.)

The only thing that would make Griffith's version of "Drinkin' Thing" a more perfect cover, Jeff admits, is if Stewart were still alive to enjoy it.

If It Ain't One Thing It's Another also spawned the hits "I'm Your Radio"; the title track; and Jeff's current single, "Holed Up In Some Honky Tonk," which is beginning to climb the Chart.

Jeff is one of a select group of singers who work to keep country's traditions alive. He's helping "save the honky tonk" as do artists like Mark Chesnutt, Merle Haggard and George Jones.

Introducing young fans to songs like "Drinkin' Thing" and "He Stopped Loving Her Today" is a real treat for Jeff. "Young people come up after a show and ask, 'Did you write that song?' And I think, man, there are lot of these young people that don't know who Gary Stewart was, and I am introducing them to his music. That just goes to show you that what I am doing is working."

Somewhere, Gary Stewart is smiling. ★

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