

# JOEY McGEE

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When singer-songwriter Joey McGee categorizes his work as roots music, he's not just referring to the blend of soul, country, blues and rock commonly called Americana. He's talking about his own roots, cultivated in his native New Orleans, nurtured by a sojourn in San Antonio and a much longer one in Pittsburgh, and planted deeply in his current home of Bryan, Texas.

On his latest album, *El Camino Real* (Feb. 22, 2019) McGee draws on those roots for sustenance as he navigates the complex terrain of human emotions and experiences in nine original tracks and one cover (Guy Clark's "The Cape").

In songs such as "Sunday Blues" and "The Likes of You," McGee's warm baritone delivers lyrics that are incredibly personal and revealing. But in others, such as "Hurricane/Forty Two Hundred and Cigarettes," he inhabits the role of storyteller, weaving Springsteen-worthy narratives for characters who sound so real, they have to exist somewhere.

Regardless of whether he's laying bare his own psyche or examining others', his lyrics always come across as honest. Genuine. Maybe the word we want here is true. As in, they feel true. And speak truths.

The longing he expresses in "Pining," a country-leaning tune enhanced by Kim Deschamps' mournful pedal steel and producer David Percefull's Wurlitzer, is something nearly all of us have experienced. Most of us also know what it's like to struggle with feeling out of place, unmoored, as McGee describes in "Sunday Blues." And if we're lucky, we've experienced what it's like to find a place that feels so right, we know we're home at last. That's the subject of "Deep in the Heart," McGee's love letter to Texas.

Though he attended the University of New Orleans and the University of Texas at San Antonio, McGee wound up earning an English degree at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. Before he realized it, he'd spent more than a decade there, playing in rock bands while working a variety of jobs including youth counselor, church music director, salesman, baker, neon sign maker and construction laborer (and of course, rooting for the Steelers).

McGee met his wife in Pittsburgh, but eventually managed to lure her from those lush green hills — and often-gray skies — to the vast vistas of the Lone Star state.

He's still awed by the mountains and canyons of Texas' panhandle — and by the state's dramatic weather. "One of my favorite memories is crossing over into Texas for the first time," McGee reveals. "For 17 years, I had only traveled in Louisiana and Mississippi, and that first trek westward was enthralling."

The album's title comes from the 2,500-mile trail that once served as the main route from Mexico City to Natchitoches, Louisiana. Now a National Historic Trail, it's dotted with several Spanish missions, including the Alamo.

McGee's last studio album, 2017's *Terlingua Taproot*, was named after a friend's ranch that took its name from the former mining town perched on the edge of Big Bend National Park, the vast natural wonder straddling the U.S.-Mexico border.

Of course, Texas' varied musical influences have as much of an effect on McGee as its natural elements. In these parts, sincerity matters, and dedication counts. Artists quickly learn which masters to study: Mt. Rushmore includes Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark. If you're gonna record one of their tunes, you'd better bring it, and on "The Cape," McGee does.

"I love taking other people's stuff and making it my own," he says. The longtime Dylan acolyte currently finds himself attracted to the southern-seasoned grittiness of Chris Stapleton, Jason Isbell and his old band, Drive-by Truckers, alt-country forbears like Whiskeytown and fellow Texans James McMurtry, Gary Clark Jr., Jeff Plankenhorn and Patty Griffin.

"That's what's floatin' my boat these days: taking the time to learn from experienced and noteworthy songwriters and players," he says. He's also paying it forward by hosting a regular singer-songwriter night at the Village Café in Bryan.

"I've been doing it for about seven years now, and it's cool to see folks come through and share their first song or their first public performance," he says. "I've seen folks over the years who have really blossomed and come into their own."

McGee's done that, too, honing his craft and soaking up wisdom wherever he can. And sometimes, he'll impart it, too. He knows people sometimes wonder, but might be too shy to ask how "a black city dude got involved in folk and country music."

"The simple answer is, I like simplicity. I like a good story and I like playing guitar," he says. "The whole 'three chords and the truth' thing really resonates with me, and I find that in country and folk. It's in the blues and gospel, too, and I think blues and country are two sides of the same coin. I can dig 'em both if there's a good story to tell and a good groove to be had."

And furthermore, he adds, "It taps into the rootedness of who I am — a Southern, Creole-Cajun musician working through my hang-ups and trying to make the world a better place along the way."

The roots metaphor extends to *El Camino Real* itself.

"These songs feel like rich, warm, black earth in your hands," McGee says, and he's right.

Earthy, rich and warm. Just like the man who nurtures them.

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