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Dallas Morning News, The (TX)

Voice of experiences

Real-life adventures fuel young songwriter's debut album

MARIO TARRADELL Staff Critic

Published: August 19, 2005

The term troubadour gets tossed around liberally, especially in Texas' vast Americana country scene. But Austin's **Stayton Bonner**, a 25-year-old singer-songwriter with a vivid imagination, qualifies as the authentic article.

One listen to his debut CD, Think I'm Gonna Move to Australia, proves it. Mr. **Bonner** tells stories set to spare, acoustic-based instrumentation. He sings of breaking out of a steamy Florida jail, playing the pubs in Ireland, relocating to a land down under, tending to his beloved poodle, traveling through Marfa and waxing about the "East Texas Wolfman."

Some of the stories come straight from his wandering mind, but many he's experienced. For instance, he really did spend six months in Ireland on a student work visa. It was early 2003 and Mr. **Bonner** had just graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with an English degree. What now? he wondered. So he decided to travel overseas. He started with Dublin but within a week had hitchhiked to Donegal on the northwest side of the country.

He snagged a job changing sheets at a hostel and hit the pub circuit at night. He befriended 60-year-old Erinon O'Reilly, and they played gigs together all over Ireland's west coast. Playing the pub music scene was an experience.

"You bring in the guitar and everybody's at the bar and there's a table at the bar that no one's sitting at," he says by phone from his home in Austin. "There's a pile of instruments. You put it there and you go to the bar and drink. Later, everybody congregates at this table. Everybody sits around and talks and plays music. They are all playing pretty traditional Irish songs, and when it came to my turn I would play them some Hank Williams or Kris Kristofferson. That was pretty popular with them cause they don't hear that that much."

By the time he had made it back home, Mr. **Bonner** felt creatively energized.

"I learned way more than I did in college. I went by myself and I wasn't even sure it was going to work out. That gave me a lot of confidence in myself to be able to go into strange foreign places and just play. If people dig it, cool; if not, all right. It gave me confidence to do my own thing and do it for different people."

A demo of "Me and My Poodle," which humorously but lovingly recounts the shenanigans of his pooch Willie, won him second place at last year's Merlefest songwriting contest. That was enough impetus to record Think I'm Gonna Move to Australia. He made the disc independently in Austin. The goal was to capture the stripped-down, lyric-intensive style of influential artists such as Butch Hancock and the late Townes Van Zandt.

Mr. **Bonner** also admires Willie Nelson's song-cycle masterpiece Red Headed Stranger.

"You can be pretty powerful with not too much extra stuff," he says. "That's the direction I wanted to go with my record. I wanted to make it really straightforward, keep it pretty simple and focus on the melodies and lyrics."

That simplicity no doubt comes from his childhood. Mr. **Bonner** was born and raised in Henderson, a small

East Texas town not far from Longview and Tyler. He grew up on a farm. Entertainment was limited, especially since there wasn't a single movie theater in all of Henderson.

"If we wanted to go to the movies, we drove over to Longview or Tyler," he remembers. "We'd go down to Main Street. I got my first bike at the Sears down there. They have a Wal-Mart Supercenter now."

Early on, Mr. **Bonner** toyed with the idea of becoming a commercial fisherman. But music was always at arm's length. He read voraciously and found it easy to put songs together. In fact, books inspired two tracks on the CD: "Cool Hand Blues" harks back to James Carlos Blake's novel *A World of Thieves*, and "Think I'm Gonna Move to Australia" comes from Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day, a children's book by Judith Viorst.

It's that literary bent and his penchant for putting his own adventures to music that separate Mr. **Bonner** from the usual pack of Texas Americana singer-songwriters.

"There are so many songs out there about missing your loved one, but I basically tried to think about stuff that hasn't been written about. I wanted to write something different."

To purchase *Think I'm Gonna Move to Australia*, go to Bill's Records, 8118 Spring Valley Road, or buy it online at [www.stayton bonner.com](http://www.staytonbonner.com).

Mr. **Bonner** will perform a free in-store show with Two Tons of Steel and others Saturday at 2 p.m. at Bill's Records. 972-234-1496.

Saturday night at 8:30, he'll open for Bodie Powell at the White Elephant Saloon, 106 E. Exchange Ave., Fort Worth. 817-624-8273. Cover \$5.

And he'll open for Eric Hisaw on Sunday at 7:30 p.m. at MacHenry's, 7618 Camp Bowie West, Fort Worth. 817-377-0202. No cover.

Short shot

Waco native and New Braunfels resident Wade Bowen brings his Texas-bred brand of roots rock to the Southern Junction stage Saturday. He'll play tunes from his three CDs, 2000's *Just for Fun*, 2002's *Try Not to Listen* and 2003's *Blue Light Live*. He may also toss in a few new songs. The show starts around 10 p.m., and admission is \$10. Southern Junction is at 5574 State Highway 276, east of Rockwall. For more information, call 972-771-2418.

E-mail mtarradell@dallasnews.com

PHOTO(S): 1. (TRENT SHEPHERD) "I learned way more than I did in college," **Stayton Bonner** says of playing pubs in Ireland. "It gave me confidence to do my own thing and do it for different people."

2. (New Texas Records) Wade Bowen will perform Saturday at Southern Junction.

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