

Charlie & Bruce Robison - Different Sons, The Same Mother

For Christmas 1994 an American friend sent me a cassette tape featuring a self-titled album, "**Bruce Robison**" and another by his older brother, Charlie Robison, titled "**Bandera**." From what I could figure out at the time, one of the songs appeared to have been taped twice - *we'll return to that curiosity*, further down the road. Each album possessed a definite retro country-rock feel, with Charlie's songs possessing the harder edge musically. If Robert Earl Keen, an adopted resident of Bandera for the last fifteen years, can be likened in a historical sense to John the Baptist - then seven years ago, the Robison boys were in the vanguard of a burgeoning West Texas dynasty of young country musicians.

The Robison boys were born in Houston during the mid-sixties and their parents relocated to the West Texas Hill Country town of Bandera, while the brothers were still fairly young. Affectionately referred to as *the cowboy capital of the world*, the area around Bandera plays host to a large number of dude ranches. Mr Robison was a High School sports coach [these days he's a rancher], while Mrs. Robison ran a local café. Eventually the couple split up. During his teenage years, Charlie worked on those local ranches playing music. His maternal grandmother, Julia Storms, initiated his interest in music when she bought him a drum kit. He eventually graduated to the guitar. In fact, both brothers displayed a flair for playing music during their teenage years. By the late eighties, they each quit College scholarships and moved to Austin, the self-styled *music capital of the world*, to pursue a career in music.

When they arrived in town, Monte Warden's tenure with The Wagoneers and the A&M label was coming to an end. Kelly Willis was about to release the first of her trio of solo albums for MCA.. Other country pickers around town at that time included, the Delta Rays [which featuring the future Nanci Griffith backing vocalist and subsequent, Mrs. Pete Kennedy, Maura Boudreau], Libbi Dwyer and Chris Wall. When Kelly Willis cut her final, self-titled MCA album in 1993, her road band drummer, and then husband, Mas Palermo, collaborated with Charlie on the song "One More Night," and with Bruce on "Take It All Out On You" the opening cut of the latter's 1995 debut solo album. Monte Warden's self-titled, debut set for the Austin based Watermelon label, appeared around the same time and included "The Only One" co-written with Bruce. Confirming that Austin's music community is thoroughly integrated, Kelly and Monte performed the latter cut as a duet.

We've skipped a few years ahead however. Back in the late eighties, Bruce initially formed his own band, while Charlie joined Ricky Broussard's rockabilly combo, Two Hoots and a Holler. One year on, Charlie became a member of the country band, Chaparral, as did his brother eventually. A spin-off from the latter aggregation, The Weepers, specialised in acoustic harmony versions of the brothers' songs. Charlie went on to form the Millionaire Playboys, while Bruce flirted with becoming a Nashville based staff writer for MCA. Having successfully auditioned for producer and label president, Tony Brown, Bruce decided there were too many format restrictions attached to writing mainstream country songs and moved back to Austin.

Segue to the latter half of 1994, and within a matter of months, the Robison boys each set up camp at Cedar Creek Studio in Austin. Over a period of five months, with Lloyd Maines as his co-producer, Charlie's "**Bandera**" album took shape. Meantime, Rudolph P. Schmidt produced Bruce's self-titled disc. The list of supporting players, many of whom played on both recordings, read like a Who's Who of Austin musicians.

In April 1995 John T. Davis penned an article about the *Bandera Boys* titled, "**Honky Tonk Revival - Fraternal Fusion**" for the influential Austin American-Statesman. Paraphrasing Davis, "*Bruce is the guy who will sit down with you and tell you about the latest book he's been reading. Charlie will call you up to meet him at Deep Eddy [a local watering hole] for a couple of beers and to listen to the jukebox.*" One month earlier, during the annual South by Southwest Music Seminar in Austin, Mike Niland had launched his new independent label, Vireo. The initial batch of five releases included "**Bruce Robison**" and "**Bandera**." Although the albums were praised by reviewers, the Vireo label, like many independent labels [before and since], faltered one year on and closed down.

Charlie Robison's singing voice could be characterised as *lived-in* and apart from the traditional "I Am A

Pilgrim" his lyrics on "**Bandera**" focused upon bright lights and booze, and the blues which result from the foregoing cocktail. There were tales about bank robbers, the lovelorn and *good neighbours*. Even when Charlie rocked out, there was an atypical Texas bent to his writing. Both Vireo albums featured interpretations of Bruce's up-tempo, "Red Letter Day," which neatly resolves the *little curiosity* I mentioned in the opening paragraph. It is, in my opinion, a predestined hit song. As for Bruce's other songs, seams of that precious element, introspection, occasionally surfaced in his lyrics. "Travellin' Soldier" and "Match Made in Heaven," being typical examples. In commenting about the siblings independent and individual approach to the country genre, John T. was *on the money*.

Hot on the heels of the two solo releases and much in the vein of the trio of mid eighties/early nineties Californian *new country* compilations, "**A Town South of Bakersfield**," "**Austin Country Nights**" appeared on Watermelon while Freedom another new local label issued "**True Sounds of the New West**." Bruce Robison appeared on both discs, while Chaparral reunited for the "**ACN**" collection.

Bruce subsequently signed a writing deal with Nashville based, Carnival Music which guaranteed him an income and allowed him to cut his 1997 sophomore album "**Wrapped**" for his own label, Boar's Nest Records. Concurrently, Charlie was signed to a solo recording deal by Warner Bros., cut a Josh Leo produced disc, but the contract faltered when he refused to be marketed as another Nashville *hat act*. Blake Chancey, who helped launch the Dixie Chicks nationally [and internationally], decided to take a chance on the brothers and had them sign individual recording deals. Bruce's "**Wrapped**," produced by Lloyd Maines, was revamped and appeared in May 1998. On the Lucky Dog release, two of the original tracks were dropped and three new cuts were added.

Charlie Robison's Lucky Dog debut, "**Life Of The Party**," co-produced with Maines proved to be something of a sleeper. Radio stations took little notice of the recording initially. Gradually cuts such as "Sunset Boulevard," "My Hometown" and "You're Not The Best" were added to radio station play lists. Nearly one year after its September 1998 release and following regular rotation of the "My Hometown" video on CMT, with daily play lists additions, it entered the Country Music Album Chart. What few listeners or music industry insiders realised, is that the newcomer was the same Charlie Robison who, a few months earlier, had married Emily Erwin, the banjo player in the Dixie Chicks.

Bruce's second disc for Lucky Dog, "**Long Way Home From Anywhere**" [1999], was followed last year by a *live* album cut at the famous New Braunfels, Texas venue – Gruene Hall. The precise place where Charlie and Emily first met in late 1998. In fact "**Unleashed Live**" also featured Charlie, and Houston born Jack Ingram, now a Dallas resident and each participant contributed four cuts.

Released in the summer of 2000, Bruce's "Lonely Too" was included on Lee Ann Womack's double platinum # 1 hit Country album "**I Hope You Dance**." A month ago Tim McGraw's topped the Country Singles Chart with another Bruce composition, "Angry All The Time." Having first appeared on "**Bruce Robison**" the latter song was cut again, with Kelly Willis on backing vocals, for the Lucky Dog version of "**Wrapped**." At the beginning of this year Bruce asked to be released from his Lucky Dog recording deal to concentrate on songwriting. Strange to relate, Sony agreed to his request. Concurrently, he and Kelly celebrated the birth of their first child, a son, Daryl Otis aka Dodie. Reviving his Boar's Nest imprint, Bruce released "**Country Sunshine**" as the fall of the current year set in. Self-produced and recorded at the Cowboy Arms Hotel And Recording Spa in Nashville, the collection included material co-written with Alison Moorer - "Can't Get There From Here," his sister-in-law Marty *Dixie Chick* Siedel - "Anyone But Me" and Kelly - "Friendless Marriage," plus seven of his own tunes.

Founded on the success of "**Life Of The Party**," Charlie was upgraded from Lucky Dog to the main Sony/Columbia imprint for "**Step Right Up**." Co-produced with Blake Chancey and including a couple of songs co-written with his brother, the disc was released in April this year. So far, the album has peaked at # 27 on the Country Album Chart, while the first single "I Want You Bad," one of two old NRBQ songs on the album, reached # 37. As if to confirm that he possesses a wicked sense of humour, Charlie composed the closing cut, "Life Of The Party," specially for his new album. The elder Robison is scheduled to make his

debut on **Austin City Limits** on Saturday 29th December 2001. While Natalie Maines performed "The Wedding Song" as a duet on his new album, Charlie's sister-in-law Kelly Willis will provide the female vocal on the television show. I should have mentioned that earlier, Kelly and Bruce got married a few years back. In late January 2002, Bruce will take to the road with Charlie on the "My Brother and Me Tour." The first shows are scheduled for Texas with more dates to be announced.

It seems like *the day of Robison dynasty* has finally arrived. Any yes, I continue to believe that "Red Letter Day" will, one day, be a chart hit. After all, look what just happened to that other *oldie* "Angry All The Time."

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 9/95 and 12/01

[1650 words]