

# COOK LIKE A TEXAN

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April 2011

# Texas Monthly

Goodbye to a  
**SHUTTLE**

BY AL REINERT AND DAN WINTERS

★  
Everyone knows  
Tom Perini  
for his steaks, but  
he makes some  
mean fried chicken  
and biscuits.  
(SEE PAGE 117)

**RICK PERRY'S  
WAR ON HIGHER ED**

BY PAUL BURKA

**THE WORST SERIAL KILLER  
YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF**

BY SKIP HOLLANDSWORTH

**IN SEARCH OF THE  
TEXAS MAMMOTH**

BY STEPHEN HARRIGAN

**INSIDE MEXICO'S  
TERRORIZED NEWSROOM**

BY JOHN BURNETT

**REAL COWBOYS  
DON'T TWEET**

BY KINKY FRIEDMAN

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## Tracie Ferguson, 49 Booking Agent



Ferguson, who grew up in San Antonio, has been booking bands for almost thirty years. Since 2000, she has worked exclusively for Gruene Hall, near New Braunfels, the oldest continuously running dance hall in Texas.

**In college my friend** Denice Franke hooked up with three guys and formed the Beacon City Band. Back then it was the folk circuit. They met Lyle Lovett when he first started out, playing around Austin and San Marcos in the seventies, and they invited him to do a guest set with them at Gruene Hall. That's how I met him and Robert Earl Keen and Nanci Griffith. Even Townes Van Zandt did the same circuit. I was around so much that I finally started working for the Beacon City Band. I would tape-record them every time they played, and I would go out and search for gigs in Austin. Whatever needed to be done. Nobody was making money, and I didn't call myself a manager, but that was my beginning. I loved the music.

The first time I went to Gruene Hall was with the Beacon City Band. There was an old cowboy with a big, scarred nose and a torn-up cowboy hat sitting at one table. That was Frank Schlather, the token mayor of Gruene. He was there so often that they lowered the price of his beer to, like, 10 cents. There was also a Hispanic lady sitting at one end selling tacos, and she had a man with her who tried to drink as much beer as he could. The place had so much character. There has never been a time that I've walked into Gruene Hall and didn't feel a good vibe. That's what keeps me going.

When BCB broke up, I busked around Europe with two of the members. The other one was booking bands at Gruene

Hall, but he didn't like it. When I came back, I took over the gig and was hired at \$50 a month. Pat Molak, one of the owners, never set any limitations. He let me book whoever I wanted to. The first people were Lyle Lovett, Robert Earl Keen, Darden Smith, and different members of Uncle Walt's Band. We started getting really great musicians on Sundays, and people started talking. It grew from there. For the first seven or eight years, I just booked Sundays, and then I started booking Fridays and Thursdays and a little bit of everything. Pat still maintains Saturday nights. I book the rest of the week and special events.

During the first years I didn't have a business card. The bartenders would write my name and number down on a piece of paper for people. One night I got a phone call at two in the morning from this irate woman who had been going through her boyfriend's wallet and found that scrap of paper. She was going to come over and kick my butt, because she thought he was making a date with me. I talked to her and laughed, but, boy, she never really believed me.

Another two a.m. call I got was from Lucinda Williams. She was supposed to play the next afternoon, but she had laryngitis and was calling to cancel her gig. She had just finished playing at the Cactus Cafe, and she kept me on the phone for two hours, even with her hoarse voice, just talking. She ended up coming on Sunday, though of course she still couldn't sing.

Some musicians make heroic efforts to finish their shows. About four or five years ago, Billy Joe Shaver dropped to his knees in the middle of a set and took something out of his shirt. He put it under his tongue and sat there for a few minutes before he stood up and finished playing. Then he went straight to the hospital. He had suffered chest pains onstage, and he had taken a nitroglycerin tablet. He had



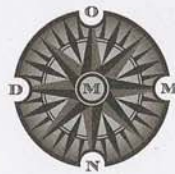
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First Tier Ranking  
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open-heart surgery soon afterward.

I still get nervous around some of the major acts. They've been my heroes all my life. When I first started, George Strait was at the hall filming a spot for Bud Light. I overheard him say something like, "I'll take eight Lone Stars." Cool as I could be, I opened up eight Lone Stars and put them in front of him. He looked at me like I was crazy and said, "I was just telling a story. I don't want these." I was so embarrassed. The Lone Stars went back in the beer box, but I'm pretty sure I drank all of them before I left that day.

Now I only go to one or two shows a week, but I listen to music all day long, checking out new people. I used to have to seek out musicians. I'd hit clubs and the Kerrville Folk Festival and some out-of-state festivals. But there was a big music boom in this area starting in '96, and then George Strait put Gruene Hall on his album cover, and in February we had a commercial in the Super Bowl. All of a sudden my e-mail inbox is exploding with messages. I spend most of my day listening to sound clips. I've gotten 250 e-mails since January 1 from bands I've never heard of. I don't lie very well, and I still work on how to let somebody down. I realize it's not the end of their life—even if they're crushed, they'll get over it—but I've had to develop a thick skin.

I've had a couple musicians over the years offer to pay me to book them, so I've marked them off my list. That's not how you do it. I listen, I read reviews, and I rely heavily on recommendations. The first thing I look for are the vocals. Because I was associated with Lyle and Robert, who write their own songs, I've always booked original music. I also look for skill with the instruments and overall stage presence. Our gigs are three sets over four-hour time periods, and you have to engage the audience.

Right away, I can tell who's in it for the money and who's in it because they're passionate. If you book someone who's out for the fame, they usually have a big ego and are hard to work with. When you book people who are passionate about their music, they're willing to work at it. Not everybody wants to be famous either, which is nice.

There's so many musicians moving to New Braunfels. It's almost like Austin in the seventies. The singer-songwriter Americana thing is really big. We booked Ryan Bingham before anybody had ever heard of him, and now we can hardly afford him. I never look at somebody and think, "This guy's gonna be big-time, I wanna book him." I just think, "This guy's good, I wanna book him." ➔

AS TOLD TO MEGAN GILLER ON  
FEBRUARY 28, 2011