

Ryan Bingham

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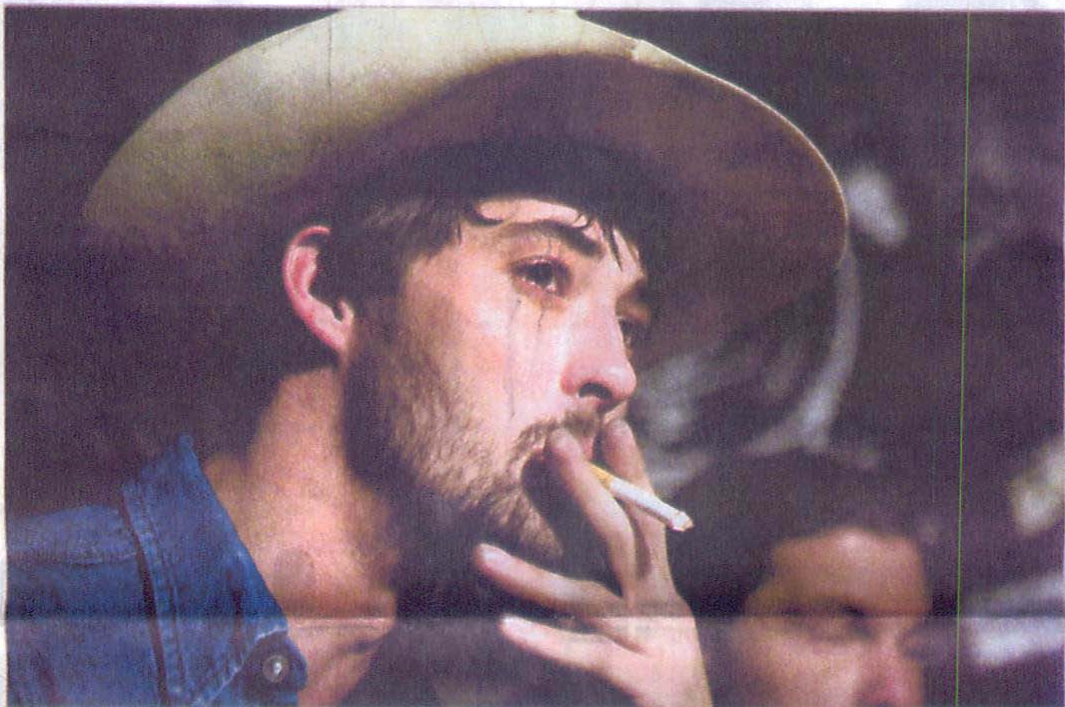
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*'I was lost. Broke.
Playing guitar was
my way out.'*

— RYAN BINGHAM,
singer



MICHAEL STRATTON FOR THE TIMES

POP: THE OUTSIDERS

raw and genuine

By SCOTT GOLD
Times Staff Writer

Houston

THERE are nights when Ryan Bingham sounds just like what he is, and there's no shame in that. ☞ He sounds like a kid. Twenty-six years old, on paper, but a kid, really, who can write a pretty song about truck stops and pawnshops but was still carrying around a chord book not all that long ago. A musician so raw that some prospective band members have thrown up their hands and bailed on him because his songs, all mismatched chords and misplaced bridges, don't make sense to people who know what they're doing. ☞ Then there are nights like this. ☞ It's a blustery, mischief-making night in Houston. Bingham is playing Fitzgerald's, a beer joint that ran out of letters for the marquee, so it says RYA BGAM on the side of the building. The graffiti over the toilet says "JESUS VOTES REPUBLICAN," and the ratty wooden floor in front of the stage rises and falls like a fat man's belly when the crowd gets going. It's his kind of place, and it's packed. ☞ Most in the audience are there to see Joe Ely, or at least they think they are. ☞ Ely is virtual nobility in the West Texas songwriting kingdom, which has produced, over the years, a startlingly deep bench of talent — Buddy Holly, Waylon Jennings, Terry Allen, Jimmie Dale Gilmore. Backstage, Ely suggests, graciously, that the show is a "co-bill," that it's coincidence that Bingham is going on first. [See Bingham, Page F10]

Finding a perfect mismatch

[Bingham, from Page F1] The truth is, Bingham's got less than an hour out there. It's all he needs. His belly full of pork chops and Lone Star beers, Bingham rips through a dizzying set of 13 songs, with elements of roadhouse rock, beach music, mariachi, new country and old.

By the time he's done, his voice is so throaty he sounds like a dying man's last wish. When he puts down his guitar and strides offstage, people in the front row are banging their fists on the stage and chanting "Bing-ham! Bing-ham!" and it's so absurdly over the top you'd think they've been healed at an old-timer revival.

Bingham seems a little taken aback himself. Backstage, he stands in a corner, drops his cowboy hat between the toes of his boots and bends over with his hands on his knees. Sweat drips from his nose, and he says nothing until he notices a visitor.

"Hey, man," he draws. "You havin' a good night?"

Rough beginnings

JUST about everybody who hears Bingham for the first time assumes it's all a put-on, that no one his age could have this many miles and hardships behind him.

He hasn't received much press, despite the release last fall of his first major-label album, "Mescalito." Some of the attention has been leech with skepticism; one alternative publication said he had fallen victim to "absurd self-mythologizing."

That's what Ely figured too, after someone handed him a Bingham tape a few years back. It seemed a little silly for a then-24-year-old to be singing about "being a desperado in West Texas for so long," about being "lost on them back roads so many times I've gone blind."

But Ely, like most who have come across Bingham, learned quickly not to underestimate him. The more Bingham unspools, the more it becomes clear he is authentically wayworn and wounded, that his life has, as his songs contend, burlled between cursed and charmed.

"That's a rough-and-tumble world out there in West Texas," said Ely, who grew up in Amarillo and Lubbock. "It's not a very easy place, even if things are going good. There comes a time when you might either wind up in the pen or you can pick up your guitar and sing your way out. That's what Ryan did. I could relate to it."

He was born just across the New Mexico border, in the boom-and-bust oil town Hobbs. His grandfather was a cattle rancher and owned 72 square miles, each more stark than the last, between Hobbs and Carlsbad.

Bingham's family lost the ranch amid a money dispute and would soon see more bust than boom. His father became a roughneck, an old-fashioned oil field worker who chased his work, first to Bakersfield, Calif., then to Texas — to Midland, Odessa, Laredo. They never stayed anywhere long; Bingham eventually stopped unpacking, then reduced his belongings to a cardboard box that he carried from town to town.

His parents, he said, "were not mean people. They just couldn't get it together." Trouble came in heaps: "Fights. Pills. Alcohol." One day, he came home and slumped on the

couch. The TV wasn't working but something underneath the set caught his eye. It was a mirror topped with a pile of cocaine.

"I thought: 'Well, no wonder the electricity got turned off again,'" he said.

Before his 17th birthday, he'd dropped out of school, where he'd grown tired of being the new kid in a small town, and left home for good.

"It just wasn't working out," he said quietly.

He was befriended by a group of Mexican boys who introduced him to jackpot bullrides. His uncle had ridden bulls professionally and had imparted a few tricks of the trade, including the ability to sense how close he could get to the edge before he had to jump free of an animal.

Until then, Bingham had ridden only smaller steers in the bull-riding equivalent of Little League. Now he was graduating to the real thing, bulls that could easily weigh more than 2,000 pounds — "beasts," Bingham said with a smile, "who will stalk you down."

In the next few years, he would ride hundreds of bulls in Mexico and Texas. He broke both legs, one wrist and the big toe on his right foot three times. He broke his right hand at least once just hanging onto the rope, leaving him with a permanent growth on the back of his hand.

One night in Weatherford, Texas, a menacing black angus named Spanky reared his head viciously and crushed Bingham in the face, leaving his top lip hanging from his face and knocking out most of his upper teeth, now replaced with fakes.

Bingham's friends — particularly his prom date, as he had put himself back in high school and the dance was just a few days after the incident — nearly fainted when they saw his face. He got a kick out of the whole thing.

"It gave me a purpose — something," Bingham said. "Something to drive for."

Music as refuge

STILL, he was often homeless, working odd jobs — shoeing horses, pouring concrete — and sleeping on friend's couches and in the bed of his truck. His only constant companion was a guitar he could barely play.

His mother, who died recently, had given it to him for his 10th birthday. It was a little classical guitar with gut strings. Bingham knew one song, taught to him by a crackhead who lived next door at a seedy apartment complex in Laredo. It was a mariachi-style folk song called "La Malagueña." "Que bonitos ojos tienes... Ellos me quieren mirar."

"What pretty eyes you have... They want to look at me."

Bored, Bingham got himself a chord book. Untrained, he could not pick up the keys or the chord progressions of other people's songs. So, unlike most musicians, the first songs he learned to play — other than "La Malagueña" — were his own. (That's why he plays few cover songs in concert, other than the occasional Freddie King number.)

About seven years ago, while living in a trailer outside Fort Worth, he sat on the couch one day and began to play. Out came "Southside of Heaven," the song that is perhaps best known today within his small but fervent following.

The song was born of anger and abandonment and solitude — the very authenticity that those who don't know better have called into question. It was uncommonly revealing and personal: "Money can't buy my soul, cause it comes from a hard-earned place... Losing faith in my family has driven me out of my damn mind."

"I couldn't sing, I couldn't play guitar," he said. "But that day, it damn near made me cry."

Bingham, still riding bulls, recorded some of his songs in a friend's garage and began hawking recordings

while playing on tailgates before rodeos. Soon, he was booking himself at roadhouses and beer halls, wherever the rodeo circuit took him. He developed a small local following; a couple of his songs even made it on the radio.

Then came a fateful night five years ago, when he mistakenly booked a rodeo in Brownwood and a bar in Dallas — almost 200 miles apart. The choice, he said, was evident.

"I was lost, Broke. Playing guitar was my way out," he said. "When I wrote these songs, I was just venting... And then when I played and people liked it? And wanted to pay me money to do it? Well... He threw his head back and laughed."

Bingham dove into his music, studying his guitar, playing small clubs across the West, busking for tips and recording several versions of his songs. He scraped together enough money to record a fairly polished album in Nashville — a little too polished, though a small label began to distribute it in 2006. Bingham hated the recording. So did his band.

"It didn't sound like Ryan," said Matthew Smith, his drummer. "It sounded like what somebody thought Ryan should sound like."

Some breaks

BUT the stars were about to align. Around then, Bingham had been invited to play in Marfa, Texas, at a large anniversary party thrown every few years by musician Terry Allen and his wife, Jo Harvey. Allen had invited Bingham after catching his act at a local club.

It was no ordinary party; it was more like a Cabinet meeting of the West Texas songwriters. Among those in attendance: Ely, Guy Clark, Butch Hancock, Gilmore and Robert Earl Keen, David Byrne of the Talking Heads, who'd begun collaborating with Ely, was there too. Everybody had a guitar, and they played until al-

most 8 the next morning. Bingham kept pace, and more; it was all the Cabinet needed to see.

"It's a pretty serious lineup, and he just kept right up," Ely said. "That night, we accepted him into the Texas Songwriters' Never-Do-Wells — an exclusive club."

Ely, Allen and others took Bingham under their wing, letting him sleep in their guest rooms when he was in town and lobbying for him in the industry. Last Highway Records, a Universal Music subsidiary, came calling for Bingham a few months later. The first thing Bingham did was buy a new van for his band; the old one had conked out as they had driven into Nashville to sign the contract.

At about the same time, Marc Ford, an elite guitarist best known for his work with the Black Crowes and Ben Harper, walked late one night into the King King, a Hollywood Boulevard club. Bingham was on stage.

"I was floored," Ford said. "I believed every single word that he said."

When Bingham walked off stage, Ford was waiting. He effectively demanded to take over Bingham's recording. Bingham agreed at once, and together they took up residence at the Compound, a recording studio in Long Beach whose sound is gaining an increasing reputation among Southern California musicians.

To that point, Bingham's recordings were "Nashvilled out," Ford said. "By trying to make it better for radio, they were taking something away from it," he said.

Ford stripped them down as if they were rebuilding an old house. They eliminated many of the fancy trappings, such as a pedal steel guitar part that had been added on "Southside of Heaven." A machine had been used to automatically put Bingham's voice in tune; Ford did away with it, recognizing that it eroded the raw, untutored sound that had struck him that night at the King King.

"It needed to be bones — its natural state," Ford said.

The result was "Mescalito," Bingham's first album for Last Highway. Bingham, Ford and the band — also including guitarist-mandolinist Corby Schaub and bassist Elijah Ford, Marc Ford's son — are back at the Compound today; they will remain there for the next 10 days or so recording Bingham's next album.

They're a loose, tight-knit group; they spend much of their time smoking cigarettes, drinking beer and telling Texas tales — about how they're going to have to rename themselves "The Dirty Underwear Gang" if they don't get off the road soon, about the time a rooster stole a chicken from some backwoods beer hall.

None of it masks the sense of possibility that follows them around these days. Bingham is a practical man; he knows that he will probably either make it or not in the next couple of years. At the same time, he figures that it took him this long to convince the skeptics that he's real. There's no sense in doing anything different now.

"If it's not the best record in the world, well, then that's as good as we are right now," he said. "It's not going to be anything that it's not. That's the way it should be. Always."

scott.gold@latimes.com



SAFER WORK: Bingham, left, with bass player Elijah Ford, center, and Marc Ford, performs at Fitzgerald's in Houston. A former bullrider, Bingham has broken both legs, one wrist and his right big toe, among other injuries.

On the Web

More photos, and Ryan Bingham's music, at latimes.com/entertainment.

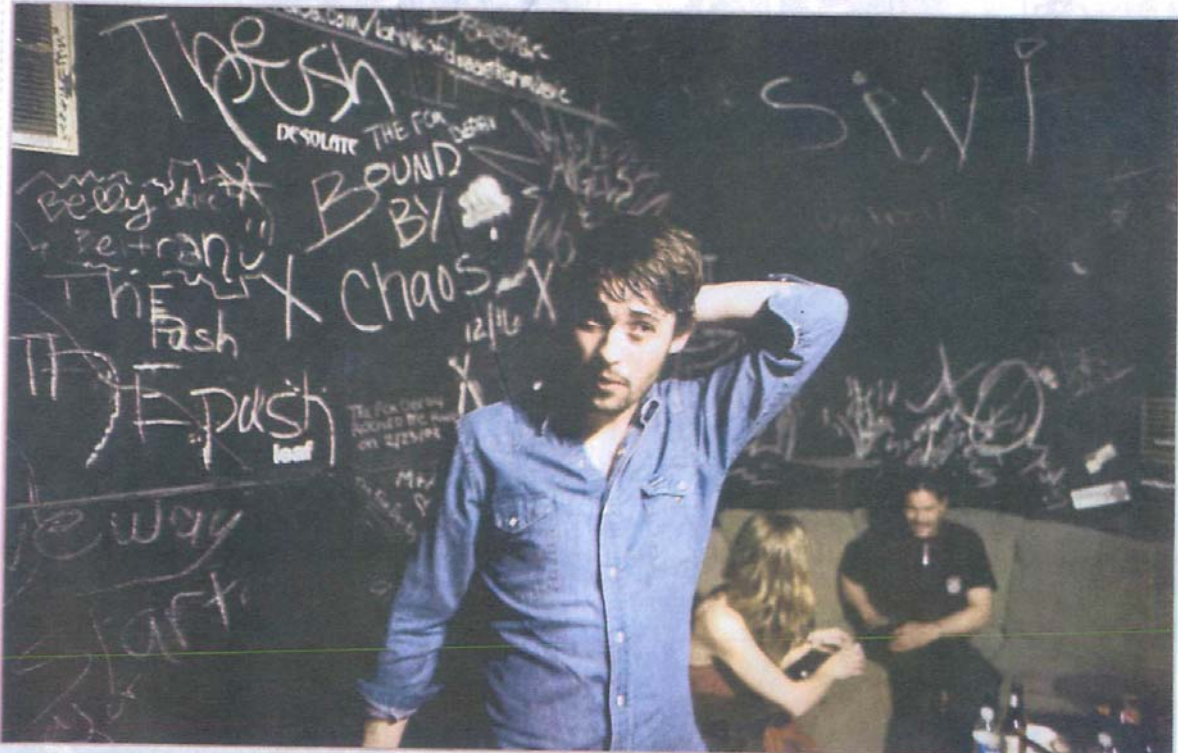
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A COUNTRY SETTING: Bingham, backstage after a show in Houston on March 8. A self-taught musician, his rough background comes through in his songs. "Mescalito" is his major-label debut. Photographs by MICHAEL STRANATO For The Times