



MUSIC

## A Written History of Abilene's **UNSUNG MUSIC SCENE** in the 21st Century

The 20th century saw Abilenians like Lee Roy Parnell ("What Kind of Fool Do You Think I Am"), Jeannie C. Riley ("Harper Valley PTA"), Tommy Overstreet ("Ann (Don't Go Runnin')"), Carol Hall (The Best Little Whorehouse In Texas), and Slim Willet ("Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes") find enough success in the music industry to meet Wikipedia's "notable person" guidelines and earn a page in the internet's encyclopedia.

In the twenty years since the turn of the 21st century, the city has produced seven more music artists to add to the list: The Earlies, Micah P. Hinson, The Rocketboys, Close Your Eyes, Plato III, Zane Williams, and Aaron Watson.

The country music scene surrounding Watson and Williams has been covered by local media, so in an effort to retroactively capture the lost history of the music scenes that birthed these other five artists, I have conducted dozens of interviews with musicians, owners, producers, engineers, booking managers, and fans to tell the untold stories of Abilene's overlooked musical output across the last two decades.

# THE EARLIES DAYS



To this day, there have only been two Abilene artists to ever receive a highly-coveted album review from Pitchfork, the influential Conde Nast-owned online music magazine. Those two artists are: The Earlies (made up of Abilenians John-Mark Lapham & Brandon Carr, as well as Englishmen Christian Madden & Giles Hatton) and Micah P. Hinson.

On August 15, 2004, The Earlies' debut album *These Were The Earlies* received an impressive 7.9 (out of 10) from the notoriously tough critics at Pitchfork. Less than a year later, on April 19, 2005, Micah P. Hinson received a nearly identical 7.6 for his debut album *Micah P. Hinson and the Gospel of Progress*. Pitchfork described the sound of The Earlies as "indie psych-pop" and compared them to UK chart-toppers Mercury Rev, while Hinson's alternative country stylings earned favorable comparisons to music legend Willie Nelson.

Despite the difference in genre, Hinson and The Earlies were actually close collaborators who together helped to put Abilene music on the map in the early 2000s.



TOPIC

# THESE WERE THE EARLIES

John-Mark Lapham recalls going on family trips to Lubbock for Buddy Holly conventions as a youth. Not for leisure, but for business. As a member of The Picks, John-Mark's father Bob Lapham was part of a vocal quartet that backed Buddy Holly on nine studio recordings that include the classics "Oh, Boy!" and "Maybe Baby". After singing with the Rock & Roll Hall of Famer, Bob moved to Abilene and became the editor of the Abilene Reporter-News. Other than the occasional two and a half hour trip down memory lane, John-Mark revealed, "It wasn't a super musical household." Still, John-Mark became obsessed with remixes as a teen and began DJing at the UpStairs Club. After high school, DJing led him to Austin for a few years before he decided to move to Manchester, England and take a one-year course at The School of Sound Recording. It was there in Manchester where he received his certificate for sound recording, but it was the job he got at the school's studio that really provided him with an education. "I basically would work at night then stay late, learn the studio, and create demos and things. That's how I got a feel for what I would do in the future."

One night at the studio, he came across two blokes (that's British for "dudes") by the names of Christian Madden and Giles Hatton. They hit it off and continued to collaborate even after John-Mark's travel visa expired, forcing him to return to Abilene. Despite the logistical obstacles, the three of them started to make progress. "We started getting some compositions to come together between the three of us and began thinking we should start pursuing this as a band. We didn't even know if we would have a singer or what kind of band we would have," admitted John-Mark.

Enter: Brandon Carr. Brandon grew up in Dallas and played shows around town as the lead singer of a band known as The Danes. Upon graduating high school, Brandon and The Danes moved to Abilene to attend ACU in 1997. Thanks to their Dallas connections, anytime a Dallas band would come through Abilene to play at venues like Harmonica Bobs or Green Frog, The Danes would open for them. While in school, Brandon started working at CD Warehouse, a store that sold music. If that's a tough concept for you to grasp, imagine an iTunes that you can walk inside of. Brandon started to notice that one shopper

kept coming in "to get all the cool stuff." "We were selling a lot of Toby Keith CDs and a bunch of top 40 stuff. No one was buying anything too terribly interesting. Like-minded people in this town can be hard to come by. [They] really jump out at you." That shopper was John-Mark Lapham. "John-Mark was looking for someone to sing on the stuff and he liked my voice from The Danes. So I would just sing on stuff," Brandon recounted.

At last, John-Mark knew what kind of band The Earlies would be. As he remembers it, "He came over where I was living and laid down some guitar and some vocals. A week or two later, he laid down some more and it really took off from there. He was the last piece of the puzzle." As the songs came together, there was only one problem. How to collaborate across the Atlantic Ocean with the other half of the band in a pre-internet world? According to Brandon, "We would record stuff on daft tapes and send them through the mail and collaborate that way." John-Mark added, "We always had to wait a week before they got it."

When Brandon graduated from ACU, he got married and moved to Seattle leaving both his bands behind. Meanwhile, John-Mark was traveling back and forth from Manchester to continue working on music whenever his travel visa would permit. It was looking like things were over for The Earlies before they even began, until one day Brandon got a call out of the blue, "While I was in Seattle, I get a phone call from John Mark saying this record label wants to put out one of our songs as a single." Although the band hadn't been recording, they had been pressing their own seven-inch singles and had caught the attention of one of the most influential record shops in the UK, Rough Trade. Little did they know, the employee who took a liking to them was an A&R for a label at Warner Bros. Records. When the label eventually offered to release The Earlies' debut album in the UK, Brandon had to fly to Manchester to sign the contract... and meet the other two members of his band for the first time. "We had never been in the same room together. I had never met them. We met just to sign our record contract so that was weird," Brandon said, laughing. "The next thing was how are we going to pull this off live."

"It wasn't just guitar and drums, there was a lot of swirling crap going around. We had harmonies on harmonies and we didn't want to have to use backing tracks. We thought that would be

cheating... We put together an 11-piece band which was awesome to play in. It's not a good idea if you want to make any money, but it was cool," Brandon admitted.

By the time The Earlies played their first show, there was a sold out crowd waiting to see them. Their debut album had made waves in the press and culminated with Britain's best-selling music magazine NME likening the band to The Beach Boys. "Our first show was in The Arts Cafe in London... That was my first live show I had ever done. I didn't know what to expect. It was surreal," said John-Mark. The band eventually made its way back to America for a tour that landed them a gig playing South by Southwest in 2005. After the show, the band was approached by music label Secretly Canadian, who offered to distribute their album in the US. Everything had come full circle. The debut album from this half-American, half-British band was now all over America and the UK. The problem -- so was the band. "We were touring every other month, and I would come back with like \$500. I can't get a job because who wants to hire somebody who has to leave every other month?" said Brandon.

John-Mark was starting to feel the same way, "Being on the road was starting to wear on me... I had been going back and forth from England to Texas and was feeling depressed. We couldn't afford any luxurious moments on tour. We were sleeping on a bus or we would sleep on people's floors, and I realized there was no way I had the fortitude to continue like that. It was really starting to get to me. I soon realized that I preferred being in the studio."

Not long after the release of the first album and the subsequent tour, John-Mark started a new band called The Late Cord with The Earlies' opening act at the time, Micah P. Hinson. The Late Cord quickly signed an album deal with esteemed British record label 4AD (whose artists include the likes of Pixies, Cocteau Twins, Bauhaus, Bon Iver, etc.), and John-Mark subsequently backed out of The Earlies' touring schedule to get back in the studio. Brandon continued to tour with the band as their popularity grew. Around the release of their second album The Enemy Chorus they were asked to play the main stage at Glastonbury Festival; a stage that drew a crowd of 300,000 in 1994. It was a watershed moment for him.

"I remember the last time we were at

Glastonbury, I was standing in a field watching The Manic Street Preachers. It was raining like it does in England. I felt so alone standing in a field of thousands of people and very depressed. But I remember thinking to myself, 'But I'm here. I remember all these bands I played with and looked up to, but I'm the one at Glastonbury playing the main stage,'" Brandon said, conflicted. "I was on top of the world, but I felt so alone. My wife was halfway across the world. I knew I was going to miss her birthday again."

Brandon didn't tour for much longer after that, and eventually returned to Abilene where he began to teach information technology. After a bit of a hiatus from music, Brandon teamed up with John Dufilho of The Deathray Davies to form Corner Suns and to release a self-titled album in 2016.

John-Mark eventually returned to Abilene as well, after a stint in NY. He went on to release a five-song EP with The Late Cord entitled Lights From the Wheelhouse in 2006. In 2014, he released the album Scorpio Little Devil with DM Stith under the name The Revival Hour. He followed that collaboration up with his first solo release Songs From the Haunted South in 2016 under the moniker Old Fire. This project was a labor of love that John-Mark worked to perfect for over a decade. John-Mark is also currently in the supergroup MIEN which contains members from the Black Angels, the Horrors, and Elephant Stone. They released their self-titled debut in 2018.

But what about The Earlies? When John-Mark moved back to Abilene, the guys started hanging

out again. As 2014 approached, the band decided to do a UK reunion tour with the entire eleven-piece band to celebrate the 10th anniversary These Were The Earlies. "It was a ton of fun," said Brandon about the experience. John-Mark added, "That was a revelation for Brandon and I both. We had gotten burnt out and got frustrated for those first couple of tours. None of that this time around. We were all just there for the love and fun of it. It was nice revisiting the songs. Especially in Manchester in London. We have a little cult following, so it was nice to get people out to the shows and see them being so excited about hearing the songs."

It was a feather in the cap for two Abilenians who got to see the world thanks to music. Or at least parts of it... "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. I got to chase my dream to the fullest extent and most people don't even get to do that," Brandon acknowledged humbly. "But people ask me all the time, 'You've been to France? What does the Eiffel Tower look like?' I tell them, 'I don't know, but I can tell you what the inside of a club looks like.'"



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## Micah P. Hinson's Gospel



Before he was boarding planes to open for The Earlies in Europe, Micah P. Hinson was boarding... boards. "Micah was always in the parking lot by my ACU dorm on his skateboard doing skateboard stuff," Brandon Carr of The Earlies recalled. As the two of them discovered a common interest in music, they began recording a collection of songs that would later be known as *The Baby & The Satellite EP*. These demos would eventually help Hinson secure his first record deal, as well as tend to an even more pressing need -- paying off warrants for his arrest.

Hinson moved to Abilene around the age of four when his father, Waymon, secured a professorship at Abilene Christian University. As early as the age of seven, he remembers taking a liking to a Casio keyboard he had that played Disney songs and would light up to show the correct keys to play. Motivated by sibling rivalry, he later transitioned to the guitar after he noticed his brother was starting to get pretty good. Hinson soon began writing original songs in his early teens. He was 14 when he wrote "Close Your Eyes", a song that appeared on his debut album almost ten years later in 2005. The same goes for "Drift Off To Sleep", a song he wrote when he was 15, but didn't release until his second album in 2006. "I was writing a bunch of songs... I didn't know what I was talking about. I'm not sure if it was how I felt or if it was just because I was listening to The Cure," Hinson quipped. Hinson's years as a wunderkind paid off. By the time he came across Brandon Carr, he already had dozens of songs written and ready to record. "Brandon had a band called The Danes that was an amazing band. Even now, everytime I go to used cds stores in Dallas, I'm trying to find their cd... For whatever reason, he asked to work with me."

After crossing paths with Brandon and his band, Micah started playing shows with The Dreaming, a collection of players made up of Brandon's band. He admitted, "I basically stole The Danes from Brandon." The Dreaming's first show was The Bean at ACU. Hinson recalled opening up for a bunch of Christian bands including The Lassie Foundation and Starflyer 59. The band moved to Denton for a little while before fizzling out after Hinson hit a rough patch. "I was essentially homeless, but I was living with

a ballerina," Hinson revealed. As Hinson spiraled, or should I say, pirouetted downward, John-Mark Lapham of The Earlies was playing Hinson's demos all over the UK. "The Earlies had been asked to do a BBC radio mix... I had loads of Micah's stuff with me. In the DJ mix, I put one of his songs," John-Mark said. Sketchbook Records, a music label who represented The Magnetic Fields and Daniel Johnston at the time, got in touch with John-Mark and asked him about one of the dozens of songs that he played in his DJ set. It was Micah's song, and the label wanted to sign him. "When I got signed, I had been unemployed for a very long time. I didn't own a guitar. I wasn't writing songs. I wasn't playing shows. I was just existing and not existing very well. When I got signed, I told them, first off you have to pay off warrants for my arrests, then a passport, then a ticket, then money to get me over there. A month later, I was gone, and I was having a pint at 7:45 in the morning at a London airport," said Hinson, fondly. Hinson's story isn't one of perseverance, as much as it is one of delayed recognition, "It didn't matter at the time that I wasn't doing anything with my life, because I had already done things," Hinson pointed out.

After Hinson signed his record deal, he settled into the role of a transient, living in hotels all across the world from Austin to Manchester to Spain to London as he toured the world. One moment in particular sticks out to Hinson from his adventures as a troubadour. "I'm in Spain and I'm playing Festival Internacional de Benicàssim. To my right, I can hear Ben Gibbard singing from his diary and on my left I can hear Leonard Cohen. The Death Cab show ends and then the Leonard Cohen show ends, and all the people come to my performance and are singing the words. Now they have all convened to listen to me and know the words to my songs. That was a really weird thing," Hinson shared. Actually, how about another highlight for good measure. "I was on tour with KT Tunstall. I remember standing on the stage at The Fillmore in San Francisco. The same place that Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison played. We sold out that show, and if they sell it out, you have your poster put on the wall. I'm seeing The Grateful Dead, Weezer, Bad Religion, The Rolling Stones, and I see my name up there," said Hinson.

After nearly two decades of traveling, eleven albums and a slew of EPs including The

Late Cord project (his collaboration with John-Mark Lapham), Hinson has settled into a new chapter of his life in a town called Denison about an hour north of Dallas. Hinson is Chickasaw Native American and the Chickasaw nation is a recognized presence in the city of Denison. The nation provides Hinson and his family free healthcare and a community of support. "I'm blessed to be a socialist that gets funded by capitalism," Hinson said. "It's been really nice to be up here and finally summon what it is to be Native and speak the language." Denison has had a major impact on Hinson and he will be profiled in an upcoming documentary by Sterlin Harjo titled "Love & Fury" that follows the journeys of twelve Native artists.

As far as the impact that Abilene had on him, Hinson said, "Abilene is such an interesting place because you have all the churches. I don't know if we still have this crown... We had more churches than any other city per capita. Spirituality in my music and my life has always been very important. I'll talk to fans or listen to reviews of "The Day Texas Sank to the Bottom of the Sea" and they'll say, 'Oh, you were talking to this girl or this relationship.' I don't want to correct them. But in that particular song, I was talking to God. A lot of my songs that people think are relationship songs have to do more with God than common mortal things."



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In 2002, Jennifer Fuentes Harmel (just Jennifer Fuentes at the time) was a freshman at ACU. She had just graduated from Abilene High, where she had been in a band called The Joie De Vivre that had won the school's talent show that year. The band played shows consistently at venues all around town. At the time, that was Java City, Play Faire Park, Jacob's Well, The Corner, The Bean Counter, Mezamiz's second location, Rose Park amphitheater, and Oscar's Mexican Restaurant. Then, she said, "I entered college and all the venues shut down." So what does someone with a zest for life (or a joie de vivre) do? "I decided to create Jamfest, because I missed playing. That was my passion. That was my blood," Jennifer shared.

She was tasked with creating this event from the ground up. She found Omar's Sound and Music by flipping through the phone book. To this day, ACU still goes to Omar's family for their sound needs. So she had sound, now she needed bands. "The idea at the time was to bring together students from different universities. I created the auditions and hosted them in some bible room. It was ministry based, bringing a lot of people together and having a set and a lineup," Jennifer said about the event's origins.

Jamfest became a major success that continued to grow each year until Jennifer graduated and it quickly declined. Under her leadership, the event moved from Bean Sprout, the small indoor coffee shop it started in, to an outside stage complete with speakers and even a light show. "Jamfest was such a good thing for the music community. All these college kids at ACU would see these bands and then start coming to shows," pointed out Eric Turner of pop punk outfit Kamikaze Pilots Manual and formerly local hardcore band BUG. "Without Jamfest and without venues in Abilene, I don't know if bands would have just been jamming in their garage," wondered Jennifer.

With Jamfest, Jennifer created a platform that became the jumping off point for two student-led bands who would go on to shape the Abilene music scene during the latter part of the 2000s: The Rocketboys and Close Your Eyes.





# WHEN MONKS WAS THE CENTER OF AN ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE

After producing video segments on Jamfest for ACU's student paper *The Optimist*, Dustin Reid began to get his own ideas on how he could contribute to Abilene's burgeoning music scene. "As far as Jamfest goes, I loved seeing live music in Abilene... I was listening to very different music, and it wasn't represented in Abilene as much. I thought I should try and bring that to town. I don't know how much of an audience there was, but in my friend circle I knew there was interest. And even if there wasn't interest, I was going to try and force that interest," Dustin said.

Dustin grew up in Rockwall, just east of Dallas. In high school, he created his own music publication called *Silence* magazine as a way to get into concerts for free. "I would email bands and managers and labels to get on the guest list. Then, publicists started sending me albums for reviews," he revealed. Despite his precocious entrepreneurial spirit, Dustin didn't get accepted into his college of choice, UT Austin. His parents then recommended ACU, where he had gone to wildcat camp as a child. "For me, I was thrilled just to get out of Rockwall," Dustin admitted. "Just to have some freedom, even if it was limited compared to other places I could have gone for school."

On his first day at ACU, he met Justin Wiseman, a student living across the hall that would go on to be a member of *The Rocketboys*. "I'm not skilled in a lot of ways, but if there's one gift I have, I can make connections with people pretty easily. Day 1, I met Justin across the hall and immediately bonded over an interest in music," Dustin said. Dustin got to know *The Rocketboys* through his relationship with Justin and was there for the band's earliest shows.

"The very first *Rocketboys* show was indeed at Jamfest in the fall of 2003. Back then we were called *Homer Hiccolm & the Rocketboys*. The lineup for that show was Daniel Wheeler (keys and djembe), Mitch Holt (guitar), Scott Deloney (Cello), and me (guitar and vocals)," said Brandon Kinder, the only remaining member from the original lineup. "I recognized they were great musicians and Brandon was an incredible singer. They grew up singing acapella in the church and had great voices and vocal tones," Dustin recalled.

As *The Rocketboys* continued to draw bigger crowds, Dustin was starting to see Abilene as a potential tour destination for travelling bands. He reached out to bands he met in high school while running *Silence Magazine* and found that there was real interest. "I'd ask where they were coming from, and they'd be like, 'I played in Arizona two days ago.' If they needed to stop somewhere between New Mexico or Arizona, they could at least stop in Abilene. We'll feed them and give them enough money to pay for

their gas and lodging. That was the genesis of it," Dustin said. Dustin then partnered up with Lance Yoakam, a Hardin-Simmons graduate who was running Spune, a production company that had been booking shows in Dallas, to bring bands to *Monks Coffee Shop* where the owner, Jerry Hendrix, was interested in hosting live music. Dustin remembers, "The first couple shows we did without the stage, but I wanted it to feel like a more legitimate concert experience." Dustin then reached out to his father who happened to be a general contractor and home builder. The stage was built not long after.

With a proper venue and a convenient tour stop between Texas and the southwest, artists from all over the continent started flooding into *Monks Coffee Shop*. Post-rock group *The Album Leaf* from San Diego, rapper *Cadence Weapon* from Canada, singer-songwriter *Phosphorescent* from Nashville, alternative hip hop artist *Astronautalis* from Florida, Academy Award-nominated Canadian pop artist *Final Fantasy*, the list goes on... "Dustin Reid put Abilene on the map for touring bands," according to Jennifer Fuentes Harmel. "I think it went about as well as I expected," Dustin said, proudly. Artists like *The Album Leaf* would normally be guaranteed \$1200 per show at the time, but lowered their guarantee to \$300, expecting a lower turnout in a smaller town like Abilene. That show made \$2000. At the peak of *Monks'* popularity in 2007, a future Grammy award winner was begging to come to Abilene, but Dustin didn't think the timing was right. "My biggest regret is that I didn't book *Bon Iver*. During spring break week, *Bon Iver's* booking agent was begging me to book him at *Monks*. I'm a fan, but if I book this show, literally 4 people will be there because everyone went back home for spring break."

*Monks* was slowly becoming a legitimate tour stop for traveling artists, but this was only made possible because Abilene had a local band like *The Rocketboys* who could draw hundreds of concertgoers on any given weekend. The locals enjoyed seeing the travelling bands, but the majority of the crowd was there for the chance to see *The Rocketboys* perform again. Michael Perkins, an Abilene High student at the time who went on to play a number of shows at *Monks* with his band *Moroccan Victory Chant* and his solo project *Blinded By Bears*, still holds the band in high regard. "Homer Hiccolm & *The Rocketboys* and *Death Cab for Cutie* were my two favorite bands in high school. *The Rocketboys* used to be able to create a wall of sound. I've been to other shows and those shows hold up with the best of them. Really incredible guitar tones, Using a lot of triple delay. U2 inspired stuff," Perkins said.

*The Rocketboys* formed at ACU. Brandon Kinder and Mitch Holt knew each other from Memphis where they had grown up. Daniel



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Wheeler was from East Texas, along with Justin Wiseman and Philip Ellis, who would join the band later. Eventually, Josh Campbell joined on to play bass and this became the lineup most people remember from this time period. Wiseman remembers there being a lot of energy for the arts when he arrived in Abilene. "There were a ton of very interesting people who went on to do creative things since then. A lot of people found Abilene boring and got wasted all the time, but there was a group of people who were like let's do weird, creative stuff," Wiseman shared. Thanks to their success at *Jamfest* the band had some fans, but they still needed to promote their off-campus shows. There was no social media yet, so they went around posting flyers across Abilene's three colleges. They even convinced ACU to display the posters on the student login page.

After the release of their first project *Sing, Bird, Sing* (recorded at *The University Baptist Church* with pastor Kevin Peters in what has to be the most Abilene thing ever), the shows at *Monks* got bigger and bigger. Word of *The Rocketboys* was getting around the colleges and even the high schools. This was helped in part by the fact that Wiseman was also a substitute teacher, who would have flyers with him on occasion when he taught high school classes. Personally, I remember passing some out myself after I discovered the band. Matthew Davis, a Cooper High school student at the time and now a local music producer/DJ better known as *Hush Money*, remembers it vividly. "We would go to *The Rocketboys* show and leave thinking this is the most incredible thing we ever saw. To this day, I have not seen a local act be able to pull the crowds that they did and that's for any genre. They had to literally pull all tables and chairs out. There would be a crowd outside. The more back you went towards the front door, the older the crowd got. A giant cloud of cigarette smoke was right outside. Maybe they really were just that good," said Davis.

By this time, *The Rocketboys* were making a lot of noise and even being asked to play events that the city was sponsoring. "We had the chance to open up for *Switchfoot* at the convention center, and that was a pretty incredible experience for us too," Kinder recalled. "But honestly, those shows at *Monks* are the ones that I think of the most fondly. Just making music with people I love for people I love. We probably wouldn't be a band if it weren't for that place."

Dustin and *The Rocketboys* had created a profitable music scene in the heart of West Texas that seemed poised for real longevity. The only problem: it was time for these kids to graduate college. "That last year, I took on four interns. I tried to teach them everything that I do. It's a lot of work to put on those shows. I struggled to financially make it work. We're an Abilene venue, so we had to go above and beyond to keep future artists wanting to come. We created a little green room in the back of *Monks*. I had different friends cooking for the bands each time. I did a lot to try and make the shows work. You have to have a passion for it, you have to have a passion for music which means constantly trying to find what's out and what's now, so you have that curatorial ability to bring artists who are going to surprise people," Dustin said.

When Dustin left for NY upon graduation in 2008, *The Rocketboys* were also on their way out. The band had won a contest sponsored by Dell and Austin City Limits that culminated in a sold out show in Austin, TX at Antone's. "We had never

played for that many people. It was known as the hotbed of music in Texas, so we wanted to give it a try," said *The Rocketboys'* Wiseman.

With the booking manager and the scene's biggest band gone, the responsibility of maintaining the status of *Monks* fell on the shoulders of two of the high school interns: the aforementioned Michael Perkins and Silas Acosta. They started *Pandahouse Productions* and tried to keep the momentum going. "It was pretty big shoes to fill because these dudes all went to ACU for four years. We didn't really have the home crowd of support that they generated," Silas acknowledged. The local bands that emerged in the wake of *The Rocketboys'* absence included Perkins and Silas' band *Moroccan Victory Chant*, Silas' other band *The Sound of Wales* (fka *Ballroom! Ballroom!*), *Hungry, Mother* (fronted by Walker Lyle), *Old Banners*, and *Hunters & Gatherers*.

The shows never reached the fever pitch of *The Rocketboys'* shows, and as a result, less and less touring bands were coming to town. One development that did emerge during this period was a Thursday night open mic that became very popular. One of the standouts, Walker Lyle, remembers it well, "I can't think of a person who didn't start by doing open mic night at *Monks*. [It] was the thing to do on Thursday."

Soon too, though, these artists were also itching to get out of Abilene, and the next stop for most was Austin. "The people who were into music and art all moved to Austin," Perkins said. "In Austin, you could throw a rock and you would hit someone who wants to play with you. At least that's how it felt." *The Rocketboys* had sort of paved the way, and Perkins, Lyle, Silas, and many others found themselves venturing to Austin to see what the city had to offer. "Austin being the live music capital, it's either cover bands on Sixth Street or major headliner bands coming through and playing at *Stubbs*. I got down here and eventually I got this job working on events, sort of ticketing and band merchandise. We ran Willie Nelson's website and merch and a lot of his ticket sales. We did merchandise for *Slayer* and *Iron Maiden*. I really got worn down with the realities of it all. Sitting there thinking Willie Nelson is great, but this dude is still hocking a tee shirt. If you get to where you're trying to get to, you're still going to be a merchandiser," Lyle quickly realized.

*The Rocketboys* also had some setbacks in their new city. Three band members called it quits, leaving just Brandon Kinder, Justin Wiseman, and Josh Campbell. "We had to reinvent the wheel from writing music as a six-piece to three-piece. We had to figure this out on our own without a drummer. We felt defeated for a long time. We wanted to keep the thing alive, but we didn't know how to do it," Wiseman admitted. *The Rocketboys* eventually figured it out and released *Build Anyway* in 2012, an obvious nod to the band's commitment to perseverance. As the band continued to adapt, they began to find success with music placements in television shows like *One Tree Hill*, *Private Practice*, *Bones*, *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*, and a big placement in *Glee*. "Our first music placement was in the background of Khloe Kardashian and Lamar Odom's wedding. Khloe hops on Lamar's lap and they start kissing, and it's a *Rocketboys* song for whatever reason.



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**"BUT HONESTLY, THOSE SHOWS AT MONKS ARE THE ONES THAT I THINK OF THE MOST FONDLY. JUST MAKING MUSIC WITH PEOPLE I LOVE FOR PEOPLE I LOVE. WE PROBABLY WOULDN'T BE A BAND IF IT WEREN'T FOR THAT PLACE."**

A guy who was part of the production company liked our music," Justin shared. "The one that made the most impact though was "Viva Voce" getting on *Glee*. That was singularly the biggest thing. All of a sudden that song was trending on iTunes."

"Viva Voce" now has over 2 millions streams on Spotify. Not bad for a couple of dudes who sprouted up from a basement coffee shop at ACU seventeen years ago. They've gone on to tour Europe and even did a string of shows with *Twenty One Pilots* a few years before that band topped the *Billboard* charts. Wiseman currently resides in Austin with his wife and child, and Kinder is living in Memphis with his wife and 1.5 dogs (that's what he said, I didn't ask). Kinder's recently started a side project called *The Wealthy West*, and he's about to make a new record for that. As for the future of *The Rocketboys*, Kinder said, "I'm hoping to make another record or 5."

And what about Jennifer Fuentes Harmel, the organizer who gave *The Rocketboys* their first show? After putting *Jamfest* together, she was offered a job as a radio DJ at *KJ TZ Tejano 106.9*, where she worked for a little bit while she was still in college. After college, she focused on graphic design until a desire to play music again led her to organizing a concert at *Mezamiz* in 2013. That concert transformed into *A People Party Craft Fair*, a bi-annual event with a growing number of 50+ vendors, food trucks, and music. Ultimately, *Jamfest* was not able to stay afloat either after Jennifer's departure, and at one point, ACU reached out to her in an effort to revitalize the event she pioneered years ago, but talks ultimately fell through.

In early 2020, her company *A People Party* partnered with *Ark on Elm* to host a live music series. This series, in addition to the craft fairs, has provided to spotlight Abilene's up-and-coming artists over the years like Casper Anderson, Jess Goodlett, Andrew Holmes, and on occasion, even herself. Over the past two decades,





Jennifer has selflessly sacrificed her own art in efforts to provide exposure for Abilene's music community as a whole, usually without any acknowledgement. "I've had to make peace with the fact that as a promoter, I'm rarely promoted," expressed Jennifer.

As for Dustin Reid, the monks architect who had left for the east coast... He had fallen in love with New York. "It was like South by Southwest, but everyday, all year round," Dustin said.

He had begun working at Red Hot, an AIDS non-profit that was more like a music production company. Red Hot would create compilations of original recordings, hold concerts, film those concerts, and sell the DVDs to raise money for AIDS relief.

In 2014, Dustin got the opportunity to produce a compilation album for Red Hot, Master Mix: Red Hot + Arthur Russell. He recruited some of the most acclaimed music artists in the world to record original covers of Arthur Russell songs, a legendary underground musician who died of AIDS-related causes in 1992. The tracklist featured names like Academy Award nominee and Grammy nominee Sufjan Stevens, Jose Gonzales, Robyn, Hot Chip, Blood Orange, and even an Abilene artist: John-Mark Lapham's The Revival Hour. There were two other artists on that compilation that Dustin knew from his days booking artists at Monks: Phosphorescent and Neon Indian (who played Monks back when he went by the name Ghosthunter).

The time Dustin spent in Abilene still continues to pay dividends, so much so that he recently

visited Abilene for the first time since graduating from ACU. He took a trip down memory lane to Monks only to discover that the stage he had built was no longer there. "I asked what happened to the stage, and they said there was still a little piece of it in the back."

Dustin left and returned to his home in Brooklyn, New York shortly thereafter, where he does what he's always done -- surround himself with art. Some video production here, a little artist management there, sprinkle in the occasional music and event production... He acknowledges that he's not "always making art that's going to be making tons of money," but he's more than comfortable with that, quoting the up-and-coming Chicago rapper Ric Wilson, "We don't chase the wave, we make the wave."

## FRIENDS ARE FRIENDS FOREVER

Before there was Close Your Eyes, there was Fontane. Fontane was a hardcore band that originated in Abilene around 2000. The members included Brandon Peterson, Zach Neeley, Larry Kendrick and Clint Norris. Most members of the hardcore community that surrounded Close Your Eyes were too young at the time to see Fontane play, but the band maintained a fabled reputation that spanned generations. "Fontane was right before I started going to shows. A friend gave their cd to me at the Skate Park. That was one of the first bands I remember hearing about. They were this mythical thing to me. It was the first time I heard of bands in Abilene that weren't cover bands," recalled Philip Odom, currently a LA-based music producer and longtime member of hardcore band Ivy League Tx. "Part of my drive to become a good musician was this mythical idea of Fontane. This idea that there used to be a really good band called Fontane pushed me. I thought, 'I gotta be better than Fontane,'" said Andrew Rodriguez, lead guitarist for Close Your Eyes's three studio albums.

By the time Close Your Eyes emerged, Fontane had already called it quits and lead singer Clint Norris had joined the Grammy nominated metalcore band As I Lay Dying. Even if only theoretically, the band had set the groundwork for the creation of a hardcore scene in Abilene. According to Jeremy Barker, founder of booking company Support Your Scene Abilene, the shows arose from a desire to "give kids a safe place to watch good bands without having to worry about a bunch drinking or belligerence going on around them." In comparison to the bar metal shows that were popular around Abilene at the time, Barker said, "I wanted the music to be the focus."

Barker and company started booking their own shows at Rose Park & Cobb Park Activity Buildings, as well as The Bean Counter. The community started out small with many of the bands being made up of the same three or four band members just switching instruments and calling themselves different names. The bands that started to emerge from this time were BUG, Kids Got Heart, and Close Your Eyes. "There was one big loosely connected group of musicians within our scene that almost constantly started new projects with each other," Barker pointed out.

BUG was formed when Barker heard about a talented drummer in town named Eric Turner and saw a guitarist by the name of Andrew Rodriguez play a bar show with his band In Vain/The Drakes Descent. "I was playing drums and doing backup screaming," Turner said.

"Andrew on guitar and Jeremy on vocals. Our friend Zack Keane played bass for a stint. Then Brett from Close Your Eyes came and played bass. Zack came back and started playing second guitar, then we were a five-piece." Rodriguez wrote the music for the band who began to venture out and

play other cities. "San Antonio was my favorite place to play. I was 16 or 17 and driving to San Antonio. My dad was super supportive," Rodriguez said. BUG and Close Your Eyes went on their first tour together and had a blast. Turner noted, "Since we shared members, there weren't that many people in the car."

**"I wish I would have had someone who could have talked to me and prepared me mentally for what touring was going to be like to help me not get burnt out."**

As the bands continued to intermingle, Rodriguez was eventually asked to join Close Your Eyes. "Close Your Eyes and BUG were doing a Texas tour. Close Your Eyes guitarist had just quit and the other guitarist hit me up and asked me to learn the songs. He said, 'Just do this tour with us, help us out, and be done.' After that, I never left Close Your Eyes." Turner added, "They originally asked me to play guitar, but I wasn't good, so they got Andrew to play guitar."

After adding Rodriguez into the fold, Close Your Eyes won a contest and got invited to play on the main stage at Cornerstone Festival in Bushnell, Illinois. This was a breakthrough moment for the band, not only because it would bring great exposure, but also because Cornerstone was a Christian music festival. This inclusion cemented Close Your Eyes into the Christian hardcore scene, which Shane Raymond and Brett Callaway had been conscious of when they founded the faith-based band at Hardin-Simmons University. "I was never asked to be part of Close Your Eyes, and I wouldn't have wanted to be. They were a Christian band, and I am not a Christian. It would have felt wrong to represent something I didn't believe like that, and I always assumed the reason I wasn't considered for any of CYE's vacancies was due to that," Barker expressed.

"Close Your Eyes started with the understanding that it was a faith-based band. I don't know if they wanted to call it a religious band, but I know they wanted to draw on their spirituality," Rodriguez

shared. The Christian element of the band also ended up playing a vital role in their hometown appeal, as well. Philip Odom was in high school at the time and remembers, "Our scene was based around Christian hardcore. I didn't care if the band was Christian, but it helped us get venues. We could do shows at the church. It was easier to convince our parents to let us go, because there were Christian bands playing. I wasn't stoked that the bands were Christian, I was just stoked that there were bands."

After Cornerstone Festival, Close Your Eyes were offered a record deal by Victory Records whose roster consisted of popular bands A Day To Remember, Hawthorne Heights, and Taking Back Sunday. Not even the members could believe it. "I was like, 'Wait. Victory. Victory?'" said Rodriguez. As Close Your Eyes' profile was rising, BUG toured again the next year with Iwrestledabearonce. That Louisiana metalcore band went on to do multiple world tours. Barker said, "We used to joke that if you went on tour with us, you would get famous, but we wouldn't."

As Barker, Turner, and another teenager named Alex Whitten started to turn their focus toward bringing touring bands to Abilene, it was time for Close Your Eyes to record their debut album, We Will Overcome. "That was the first time I was in a real studio, and it's funny because I hate it so much. I hate all of it. I don't think it's a good record," said Rodriguez. Rodriguez's feelings were not shared by the general public. Their first single, "Song for the Broken", is still their biggest hit and currently has over four million Youtube views. "The music really helped some people. After shows, I heard the stuff they were going through and how much it helped them. I remember that really stuck with me for a long time," said Rodriguez.

The band was quickly becoming an inspiration to other aspiring artists in Abilene, as well. Mickey Matta, an Abilene High student at the time who's 2017 album Insult To Injury was produced by Rodriguez, said, "I idolized Close Your Eyes. That was the first band that I was like, 'This is like a real band.' I remember seeing Andrew Rodriguez play guitar and I was like, 'This guy is a real genius.'" "I think Andrew Rodriguez was widely known to be the best musician in our scene. He could/can do amazing things with a guitar," added Barker.

Meanwhile, the booking team at Support Your Scene, Abilene was making progress and bringing more and more out of town bands to the city to play shows. This was not going unnoticed by concertgoers. "We were getting national acts that weren't huge, but the fact that they were out of state was huge to us. Someone from not Texas was playing in Rose park right now. We would go apeshit for them, because we were so grateful they were there. It was a connection to the outside world. Facebook and Instagram weren't big yet, so when a band from the northeast comes down and





It didn't matter that these bands were playing in a small annex room at a public park with unprofessional sound equipment. "You couldn't hear anything at Rose park, but you could feel it," Odom recalled, fondly.

The first major artist the group was able to get to come through was New Jersey band The Dillinger Escape Plan. As Rodriguez tells it, it was sort of a happy accident. "They had a show cancel. They posted on a Myspace bulletin board: Texas show cancelled we'll play anywhere hit us up," said Odom. "I hit him up 100 percent not expecting a reply. He sent me his phone number, and I was like, "Oh [expletive]," remembers Rodriguez. The group was able to get the money together, and as soon as people got word that the band was headed to Abilene, people from out of town started calling the city asking about tickets. The city wasn't aware of what was happening, so they sent fire marshals to Rose Park to check it out. When the fire marshals arrived, the venue was over capacity with about 200 people crammed inside. "I'm pretty sure we were quick enough to just open the side doors and told people to go outside so it didn't look like there were that many people inside," Rodriguez recalled. "When the fire marshals showed up, the band was trying to figure out if they should play two sets or just have everybody rush back in when they start playing. We voted everybody rush in when they start playing," said Odom, reminiscing.

Over time, Barker made friends with a big promoter in DFW and that led to bigger bands coming into town more frequently and larger venues, as well. "The first tour package I got from the big booking agent (Elysia, The Warriors, The Ghost Inside, Stray From The Path) was the beginning of the bigger SYSAs shows. It was also the first show we did at the Civic Center," said Barker. Another milestone was bringing Los Angeles band Terror to Abilene to play at Midnight Rodeo 3. "I was SO excited about booking Terror. Our group of friends had been listening to them for years and we never thought we could bring a band like that to Abilene.

The show was ridiculous and a lot of fun. Just to

give you an idea of the energy of the show, Philip Maculka brought a small exercise trampoline and put it on the front of the stage for stage dives. It was a crazy atmosphere, but everyone was having a good time," Barker said.

Things were going so well that Barker decided to open up his own venue called The Key in hopes that having a centralized location would bring even more people to the shows. "The shows there did decently, but it was hard to pay the rent after a little while, because there's only so many shows per month that Abilene can support," Barker admitted. The Key eventually closed after a minor was found across the street drinking alcohol in his own car and pressure was put on the venue to close. The Key did not allow alcohol at their shows, and as stated before, many of the bands were Christian bands with members who considered themselves to be "straight edge"; a subculture of hardcore punk whose adherents refrain from using alcohol, tobacco and other recreational drugs, in reaction to the excesses of punk subculture.

Some look at The Key's closing as the end of the hardcore scene in Abilene, but Barker doesn't agree. "The Key was losing money and attendance was down before it closed, and that was because the Abilene hardcore scene was already on the decline," said Barker. Alex Whitten, who later went on to become the bass player for Close Your Eyes, funded what Barker considers to be the last Support Your Scene, Abilene show featuring Connecticut band With Honor in 2010. The scene's decline was spurred, at least in some part, by Close Your Eyes constantly being on tour and not able to play Abilene shows as much. Not only were they the biggest band in the scene, their members also were integral parts of numerous other Abilene bands.

Touring wasn't exactly a dream come true though. "I wish I would have had someone who could have talked to me and prepared me mentally for what touring was going to be like to help me not get burnt out. I don't really remember anything other than being exhausted," Rodriguez shared. Rodriguez stopped touring after that to study Music Theory and Composition at Hardin-Simmons University, although he continued to write music for Close Your Eyes. "The first time that I felt like I really composed something was when I wrote the song "Wolves" on our second album. The process of me writing that song was me taking all this stuff I was learning and trying to apply it to this hardcore music. I was really proud of how that turned out," said Rodriguez.

By this time, Rodriguez' former bandmate Eric Turner was doing everything he could to keep the scene alive. His big idea: shows without venues. "I wanted to have bands play that I like, and I didn't want to have to pay for a venue. What's the cheapest way I can do a free show? Let's rent a house where we can do house shows. We got a place and called it the Rebel Base. It was a college area, so there were a lot of parties and everything would be fine. Let's borrow Phillip Odom's PA and just do a show at the house," Turner concluded.

Turner would book bands at his house from eight to midnight, often starting with an occasional acoustic act, so it wasn't constantly loud. He didn't have a lot of money to offer, but there was free beer. "Those house shows really allowed people to get as rowdy as they wanted to be and do things that they couldn't do at a venue like Monks or something like that. It let people go insane, break windows, put holes in

walls and things they couldn't do anywhere else," Turner said, but the music was still the focus for him. "There were times that people would just come and stay outside and get drunk instead of watching the band, and I'd get mad and tell them to come back in." There was a lot of sheetrock involved in the morning after, but Turner felt it was important to provide a place for bands to play during that time. "When you play shows, that's when all of those emotions finally come out of you and you're able to express yourself in a really honest way. You're getting the visual of it, you're the sound of it, you're getting the smell. You're feeling it. At a live show, all your senses are going off and it's a really beautiful thing," he said.

Turner's band The Urgency & the Exit had broken up after talks with a label fell through, so he decided to start a new band, No On 15 that eventually became known as Kamikaze Pilots Manual. This was the first time he was a lead vocalist and songwriter in a band. "That was me trying to get back into it again and not be sad about my last band breaking up. No On 15 was me letting loose and getting things off my chest, and Kamikaze was me getting sad and writing more in-depth about things," revealed Turner. Turner released Kamikaze Pilots Manual's first album My Ship Will Sail in 2016 and the band continues to release records, as recently as March 2020. Currently, Turner is also in an Austin band by the name of Drakulas that includes members of Rise Against and The Riverboat Gamblers.

## "Music industry is such an unknown thing in Abilene. I wanted to figure out how it all worked"

After Close Your Eyes became inactive in 2015, Rodriguez began to get into producing. Turner's My Ship Will Sail was the first record he produced. It was engineered, mixed, and mastered by the guy with the PA, Philip Odom. Turner had nothing but praise for the both of them. "Andrew knows so much and he's such a genius in understanding and creating. He's such a phenomenal musician. He's really fun to work with because he pushes you to be better than what you're being, and I'm so proud of Philip. He's such a good producer and he's so ballsy," Turner said.

Rodriguez went on to produce the aforementioned Mickey Matta's Insult To Injury in 2017 and graduate with a master's degree in composition from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. He is currently the Chou Wenchung Fellow at the Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music in Illinois, an organization created to provide mentorship and community to composers.

The testicular fortitude of Odom that Turner was referring to can be traced back to Odom's journey as a recording engineer and eventually an LA-based music producer. Upon graduation from Abilene High in 2009, Odom knew he wanted to pursue a career in music after the positive



experiences he had with the Abilene music scene. "I asked all my music teachers and band teachers where I needed to go and nobody knew the answers. Where do I go? Do I need to go to school? Nobody knew. Music industry is such an unknown thing in Abilene. I wanted to figure out how it all worked," Odom remembers.

His first stop was UT Arlington, and it was a rude awakening. "I realized I had lost ground to other people living in major cities. Connections, general knowledge of what the music world is like. I had to start from square one. You go to college and everyone already has a laptop, because they had media class in high school. What is media class?" Odom asked himself at the time. Odom moved to Austin after that and created BadWolf Studios where he began recording, engineering, mixing, mastering, and sometimes producing records for numerous Texas bands, such as Turner's Kamikaze Pilots Manual. Until one day, the rent for his studio in Austin doubled overnight. "I took it as a sign, so I put everything in a storage unit and moved to Philly. I wanted to do it and had thought about it for a long time," said Odom.

But why Philadelphia? That's where Grammy nominated producer/engineer Will Yip's studio was. "Will Yip was the dude in my scene of music doing all the big stuff. Every band I worked for referenced Will as how they wanted to sound," Odom revealed. Odom tried to get in contact with him, but his emails all went unanswered, so... "I just went to his studio and introduced myself outside the door. I said, 'I'm from Texas and you are

the only person I want to learn under. If you need help, I'm here. If you need an intern, an assistant, whatever you need, I just want to be a part of what you're doing, because I think it's important," Odom recalled. Yip told Odom that he was busy, but would get back to him in a week. A week later, Yip invited Odom into the studio to assist with an upcoming record by Baltimore band Turnstile. It was sort of a trial run, but the two hit it off and Odom spent the next two years working with him, and as a result working with Say Anything, MewithoutYou, and Grammy nominees Code Orange. "It was rough living for two years. It's normal in my line of work to work for a studio for one year and not get paid. Will is like my best friend, my brother. We talk all the time. We work on records together still. I send him stuff to master for me. Personally, and in music, I have a mentor for the rest of my life," Odom said.

Odom now lives in Los Angeles and is gearing up for his next chapter. "One of the reasons I moved out here is I want to be a producer. Bands always came to me as the recording guy, but I ended up producing the record. For the longest time, nobody knew I was a producer. They just thought I was great at recording, but I've been producing for the last few years. I'm at the point now where I want to make the biggest music out there, and there's nothing bigger than LA," Odom said, without batting an eye.



## Allow Me To Reintroduce Myself...

The last artist that this series planned to profile was Plato III, better known as me, the person writing this article. Abilene-Reporter News did a great job covering my recent history back in 2019, so I would like to use this platform to highlight a few more Abilene artists who have inspired me up to this point. Beginning with the person who taught me how to make beats, my former collaborator Matthew Davis.

Davis, who now makes music under the name Hush Money, first started playing music in the Madison Middle School band, but soon found it to be limiting. "I just remember I was in percussion and I really liked my teacher Mr. Belgart. I didn't do well in his class. We had a test where we had to play a scale or come back and play a specific piece. I couldn't do that. I'd come back and play my own piece like "Check this out!", Davis said.

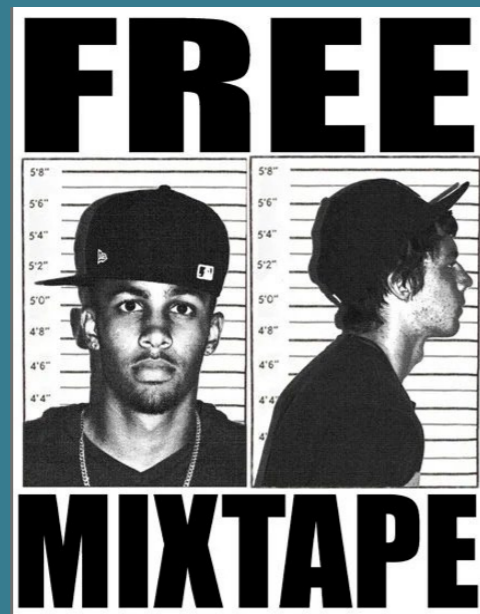
Davis soon lost interest in band, and had begun to develop an affinity for hip-hop music. "I didn't wear clothes from Abercrombie & Fitch or Hollister like some of the other kids in school. They would look at me like I was the poor white boy, so I always felt like an outcast, and I felt like I understood what it was like to be disadvantaged or judged because you don't fit a certain standard," recalled Davis. This interest in hip-hop led Davis to online rap forums like Datpiff.com and RapGodFathers.com. These were online communities where you could discuss music, find new music, and even participate in typed rap battles against anonymous users from all over the world.

It was around this time that I met Davis, and we discovered that we were both a part of these forums. We also discovered that we lived a few blocks away from each other, and could talk about music in person now, instead of online. We were in middle school, but I had already released a few rap songs on MySpace with my friends Damor Barnes and Jovan Lindsey. My mom had gotten me a USB mic from Wal-Mart that came with a free software called Mixpad. This allowed me and my friends to make songs rapping about going to the mall and Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. But I wasn't able to make songs with Davis, because we had cats, and he was allergic to cats.

It wasn't until high school, when my mom and I moved into a new place, that Davis was able to come over and record music. By this time, I had gotten my first girlfriend, my tastes had changed, and Davis was taken aback by the Juno movie poster hanging in my room. "I remember thinking you were lame for how much you loved the movie Juno. It was a really weird poster to have for a rapper," Davis recalled. Despite this, in 2009, our sophomore year, we started recording our first songs together and called ourselves Native

Strangers.

Our first album was called Dinner & A Movie and combined movie quotes with songs over classic hip-hop beats. "I remember I found a way to get the beats for free online," said Davis. "I learned descargar meant download." When we were finished recording, we bought blank cds, put our albums on them, wrote the title with a sharpie and sold them at school for \$5. "We sold a surprising amount, considering the sound quality was terrible," Davis said.



The "success" of Dinner & A Movie led to our "All The Way Turnt Up Remix" which was a eight minute collaboration with twelve Cooper High School rappers including KJ, #1 Contenda, Darius, King Wayne, and The Guru. This song got the attention of Abe Walzer, who ran a local rap label called Ackin' Bad Entertainment. "Abe is what glued everything for us. We started taking it serious. Abe took us to our first studio and paid for all our studio sessions. Abe really managed us. We did a photoshoot downtown where we were standing outside Escalades. Abe was a driving force. He was the reason we had any shows. He took it to the next level. If it wasn't for Abe, we might not have kept going," Davis admitted. Thanks to Abe, we were recording in a real studio in the house of another local rapper, EGZ. We began work on our first studio album The Tutorial. We couldn't rap over well-known hip-hop beats anymore, so we had to find original beats online. Davis found a site called Soundclick.com where he could get free beats, and we were on our way.

When the album was finished, Abe organized our album release party and first concert at a local nightclub called Fast Lanes. We billed it as an "end-of-school bash", and put up posters all around town. Abe also took us to the mall to buy new outfits and get our haircut (dyed in Davis' case) to ensure we looked the part for the concert. "The end-of-school bash went really well," Davis remembers. "They were not letting people in at one point, because it was at capacity. Abe helped with our outfits. We had shirts that were two sizes too big. I remember he told me to take my hat off, because the people couldn't see the blonde," David said, laughing. The concert was a hit, and we headed to San Angelo shortly thereafter to play a teen night at one of their nightclubs. That show was even better. "People were asking to take our picture after the show and it felt amazing," Davis recalled.

We had a lot of momentum, so we went back to the studio to record our next album Free Mixtape in 2010. With the arrival of social media, selling music was no longer in vogue, so our idea was to give the music away for free and sell tee-shirts, instead. "I remember we used to go to a lot of local punk shows and thought we can do this too, so we started selling tee-shirts, and that idea came from the punk shows. Then we went to Warped Tour, and I remember one out of every eight people had on a "Free Weezy" shirt. I thought what if we put our faces instead of Lil Wayne's face and put "Free Mixtape" said Davis.

**"Abe was a driving force. He was the reason we had any shows. He took it to the next level. If it wasn't for Abe, we might not have kept going."**

That album was arguably our most successful, and we sold all 50 shirts we made at \$20 a piece. It was enough money to occasionally afford the cheese sticks in the lunch line. The standout track "Stay" was a remix of a Grizzly

Bear song of the same name and reached over 40,000 plays before it was removed for copyright infringement. This helped us realize that we needed to start composing our own music if we wanted to continue. "I googled free beatmaking software and FL studio was the first thing that popped up," Davis recalled. "The first song I ever tried sampling was Stereolab's "Fluorescences". Davis got the hang of beatmaking quicker than I did, and I remember him walking me through everything he was learning.

As we were slowly getting better, graduation was approaching. I was headed to the University of Texas at San Antonio and Davis was staying in town to go to McMurry. "I went to McMurry and immediately regretted it. I remember not leaving my room often and making a lot of beats," Davis said. I was loving UT San Antonio, but was also making a lot of beats too. After a semester, Davis transferred to UTSA, so we could make our first album with our own original music. We really wanted this to be our best work, so we met with the director of the music technology program at UTSA, Chris Cline, and asked him to help us.

Cline had worked with notable indie rock bands And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead and Explosions in the Sky, so we thought he was the guy for the job. "We showed him some beats at the initial meeting, and he told us we were better than most of his students already. It seemed like for some odd reason, he wanted to work with us as much we wanted to work with him... Originally he quoted us 5 grand," Davis remembers. Neither of us had ever had that kind of money, but the student loan I had been given to go to school had been a few thousand dollars more than I needed... So I negotiated with Cline for about half of that price and we began to record Heroes Eventually Die. The sessions were fun, but our production was still pretty amateur and Cline wasn't used to working on rap music. By the time we released the album, it was summer and we weren't able to capitalize on the benefits of being on campus.

That was the end of Native Strangers, and Davis eventually returned to McMurry, where he began to DJ parties. His production began to shift from hip-hop to electronic dance music at this time as well. "I remember always liking EDM. I remember buying the Skrillex EP from Hastings my senior year of high school. That was my start for dubstep. Free The Universe by Major Lazer, that album made me want to make that kind of music," Davis recalled. Around 2018, he was doing a house party about every two weeks, mixing EDM and hip-hop. He was eventually asked to play for some venues in town. "I wanted to build an EDM scene here and tried doing shows at The Hallows & Homer's Bar, but with little turnout," David said, disappointed.

Davis has since returned to producing hip-hop music in a studio downtown and improving his audio engineering skills. "I want to try and work with people in the city for free. I just want to get more musical activity going. The city has been missing a good quality studio to put out high quality recordings," said Davis. He mentioned Jess Goodlett and Merk as artists that he would love to work with.

A promotional poster for Native Strangers' CD release party. The poster features two young men in the background, one holding a CD case for "The Tutorial". The text on the poster includes "ACKIN' BAD ENTERTAINMENT", "NATIVE STRANGERS", "CD RELEASE PARTY", "AND END OF SCHOOL JAM SATURDAY MAY 22ND", "FASTLANE CLUB", "721 S. 1ST STREET", "LIVE PERFORMANCES", "LIVE DJ SPINNING THE NEWEST IN HIP HOP AND R&amp;B", "DOORS OPEN @ 8PM", "PRESALE TICKETS \$5", "AT THE DOOR \$10", and "CALL (325) 829 - 2592 FOR PRESALE TICKETS AND MORE INFO".

**"I want to try and work with people in the city for free. I just want to get more musical activity going. The city has been missing a good quality studio to put out high quality recordings."**



## 'Lene Town Representatives

**M**erk is an Abilene-based rapper whose first show was at Desperados in 2008 at the age of 15. He opened for platinum-selling rapper Kirko Bangz when Bangz came to Abilene a few years later. He remembers selling CDs at FreshCuts and Lucky's Beauty Supply. After a while, Merk noticed his community's interest in music was waning. "To be honest, in a small city when you're doing music for so long, it's hard to keep people involved. Lives continue to change year after year. You see people come, you see people go," he shared.

After a hiatus in the 2010s, Merk returned in 2018 and 2019 with a string of singles that I personally consider to be some of my favorite music ever from Abilene artists: "Blueberry Swisher", "4-Bar Baby", and "Movida Trappin". These songs were all beautiful in their simplicity, a style that Merk calls "Texas boom-bap". The sudden surge in releases was born out of misfortune, initially. "I lost my computer. I fried it and I lost everything I ever did, so I started over and realized that all of that stuff wasn't very important," Merk shared.

Merk has continued to release music since and is currently working on a new project in his home studio. He was recently set to perform at The Hallows before the show was cancelled due to COVID-related concerns. When asked about the obstacles he had faced being part of the Abilene rap scene, he said, "The main thing is advertising and exposure. Even when you get the venues and release albums, you don't have a great place to go and advertise what you make. When you do, you don't get involvement from the city and if you do, it's usually resistance. I can't blame the city for being restrictive, because it's easy for things to go wrong, but I wish they were more involved."

Hopefully, this is a start.

When it comes to other rap artists in the Abilene community, I can only speak to those who I have crossed paths with and observed from afar. The community is substantial, and I apologize for any artists that I may be leaving out.

When I began releasing music as part of Native Strangers, the only other rappers that I remember who had released music were Robbie B. and Chaphilia. When I left for college, more rappers had emerged like Supa High Society, HerbalEggo and Young T. The community was beginning to come together and it showed when many united for a music video in 2013. Chaphilia might have garnered more support than any other rapper in town ever had when he geared up to release his #RedRope EP in 2013. He was selling wristbands with the album title on them, and when I came back to Abilene from college, everyone I knew had one. Robbie B. and HerbalEggo had begun to collaborate as part of the crew OTD (Off the Dome) and started performing in Austin frequently, opening for Grammy-nominated artists such as Chance the Rapper, Mac Miller, and Waka Flocka Flame. Supa High Society was expanding their brand and doing more video work, as well as starting a blog to try and give more exposure to Abilene artists. They opened for platinum-selling artists like OG Maco and 21 Savage when they came to town, among others.

Of all these Abilene rappers from the early 2010s, Robbie B. took Abilene the farthest. Performing at A3C in 2015, releasing a song with RCA Records artist Maxo Kream, doing shows across the country, and even living in Asia for a while.

As the end of the 2010s approached, two more notable rap artists appeared on the scene: Toot De'Ville and Tumigun. Toot De'Ville is the most prolific artist in Abilene right now. By my count, he's released five albums over the past three years: So Toot De'Ville III, Classic Beginnings, Toot De'Ville Presents: Food for the Streets, Vol. 1, Purple Heart (The Mixtape), and most recently COVID-19 (the Quarantunes). His brand of rap combines the street knowledge of 2Pac and personal introspection of legendary Houston rapper Scarface. Personally, I find myself returning to "Sometimes", a standout from his 2018 album So Toot De'Ville III.

Tumigun is a trap artist who might be one of the most popular artists in the world if he lived in Atlanta. He recently released the projects Unforgiving Soul and Unforgiving Souls 2 in 2019 and 2020, respectively. There isn't an artist in Abilene with a more modern sound, and I firmly believe that with the right exposure, he could legitimize the city's rap scene in a way no other artist has. His 2018 single "Love Me" samples Daniel Johnston's "Some Things Last A Long Time" and displays his keen ear for melody.

"I can't blame the city for being restrictive, because it's easy for things to go wrong, but I wish they were more involved."



## Abilene's Island of MISFIT TOYS

Over the years, there here have been a substantial number of talented Abilene artists whose stories don't fit neatly within the history of the city's indie, hardcore, or hip-hop scenes. Due to their undefinable originality, I have associated them with the Island of Misfit Toys and would like to share their stories, as well.

As a person of color in Abilene, I was always hyper-aware of the demographics of the audiences that surrounded me. When I went to Monks to see The Rocketboys or Rose Park to see Close Your Eyes, the overwhelming majority of the audience and artists were white. This was fine. I never felt discriminated against, but it was always welcoming to see another person of color.



**M**ickey Matta was one of the first that I remember seeing. His style of dress was striking and it turns out, it was a conscious choice. "In general in the world, being a Hispanic musician definitely has an effect on how people perceive me. I've been told to my face, 'You're not allowed to do that,' referring to the way I dressed, my haircut," Matta revealed. Even though he was just a year older than me, I remember looking up to him. When he started performing shows and selling CDs, I thought I could too, even if our genres were very different. "When I was 17, I got a Mac. I got GarageBand and made the Blackbird EP. I realized that I can do this by myself. I peddled that little CD everywhere I could. I made 100 and sold them all for \$5 or whatever people wanted to give me," Matta recalled.

While most of the people trying to make music at the time were joining bands, Matta elected to go solo. This stood out to me. When asked why he didn't try to start a band, Matta replied, "I was too shy." He was finding that recording music himself wasn't too difficult either. "I learned that Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska was made with two S57's microphone, and I was like, 'I can do that.' I don't even like Bruce Springsteen, but for \$300, you can actually make something professional," Matta discovered.

After high school, he moved to NY for a few months because he had the thought, "You know what would be really cool is playing a show in New York City." Matta played about fifteen shows in NY over the course of six months before returning to Abilene. On his second go-round, he was more open to collaboration and worked with both Philip Odom and Andrew Rodriguez on ensuing records.

Matta shifts his sound with each release, from the acoustic Inhale to the Bowie-inspired character-driven Heaven's High to the emo-trap he experimented with on his most recent release "Shotgun Soul Kiss." "I wanted to push myself and do something that was absolutely terrifying. That was something that was really scary, because I didn't know what people were going to think. That shouldn't matter, but it does. That's going to be part of an EP. Recording that myself. Learning the whole process of finding beats. I have some cool things lined up," Matta shared.

Keep your eyes peeled, whatever he does next will be different than what he did last.

**F**antom '87 Casper Anderson and are two artists that I wasn't aware of until I started working on this piece, but that isn't the only thing they have in common. They both use the app Auxe to create music.

Fantom '87 emerged from Abilene's hardcore scene. His first band was A King Called Ocean, but he shared a practice space with a band

called Forgotten Community, and even went on to sing with them for one show. Forgotten Community became Far From Nothing, a metalcore band that, along with Headlock, became Abilene's most prominent hardcore bands in the latter half of the 2010s. Fantom began to mess around with FL Studio, and around the same time, he noticed that more than a few movies had come out with an 80s retrowave soundtracks. Drive and Tron: Legacy come to mind. "I had this inkling that it was going to start getting trendy, and if I was going to get ahead of it, the time was now," Fantom said.

Then, he discovered the Auxe app and started producing music exclusively from his phone. Another app, Amuse, allows him to upload the songs directly from his phone to streaming services like Spotify, Apple Music, and Amazon Music. The music never has to leave his phone. Now, he just had to get his music out there. But how? "You have to seek out the people who make the playlists. I found a couple of the people on Reddit. I asked them, and they put my music on there. There's a label for Retrowave music called New Retrowave. They have a certain time of the month that they allow submissions for their YouTube channel. I got a couple of my songs on YouTube and then found others," Fantom shared.

It worked. Fantom '87 is arguably the city's most popular musician right now with over a million Spotify plays and counting. When you search for Abilene music on Bandcamp, Fantom '87 is the city's best-selling artist. When I was interviewing Brandon Carr of The Earlies, he was dying to know more. "Fantom '87. Who is this guy? Somebody in Abilene making that kind of music, I surely would have heard of him. I think his stuff is great. Synthwave. It's really, really good, but I don't know who this dude is. It's got me interested," Carr said.

When asked what's next, Fantom replied, "I really want to be able to play shows. I'm hoping I can get some money to fall in my lap, so I can get some gear, some hardware." The phone is working out just fine, but if Fantom '87 gets his hands on some synthesizers, who knows what he might be capable of.

**T**he other Auxe app user I discovered is Casper Anderson, whose song "Something In My Way" was created using the app exclusively, and is one of the most forward-thinking songs I've heard from an Abilene artist. As one of the few female artists in the Abilene music scene, I found it interesting that I was not familiar with her work. I was not surprised to find that, due to some discouraging experiences related to gender as well as the originality of her art, she has found it difficult to pursue music fully.

Her first serious foray into music was 2016's Dreams and Other Dead Things. Her brother-



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in-law had some gear and a studio at a church in Houston, so they went over one spring break and recorded the five-song EP. "I've never been technically good at music, but I can hear all the parts in my head and know what I want them to sound like. I paid a cellist we knew to play on one of the songs by knitting him a hat. He had never played anything "weird" before. I was asking him to do all these high pitched squeaky-noises. I would just sing to him what I wanted him to sound like and he would repeat back to me on the cello," Anderson recalled.

Anderson returned to Abilene and performed her first show, unfortunately experiencing inappropriate advances from a male booking agent interested in more than just her artistic abilities. "I'm very wary now, just because if somebody is offering to collaborate it is usually a dude that is creepy," Anderson said. She later performed at an exhibit for local artist Twig Capra. That was one of the few shows where Anderson felt comfortable. "At the Twig Capra show, it meshed well and made sense. When I play other shows, I have been asked, 'Can you do these quiet?' or 'Can you play these acoustically?' I can, because I write my songs on guitar, but that's not how I want to do it," Anderson expressed.

At one point, Anderson tried to start an all-girl band, but at their first practice, a group of guys showed up and hijacked it. "I asked a friend to use his drum set for the practice. He said yeah, but he stayed while we played. Then he invited a bunch of dudes over and they brought their instruments and it became their practice," Anderson remembers. "I look back and I know it wasn't on purpose or anything. All the girls wound up sitting on the couch, and I remember looking at how defeated the other two girls looked. This was supposed to be our practice." The band never practiced again, because as Anderson puts it, "I didn't know anyone else with drums that wasn't a dude."

Anderson has given up on playing shows in Abilene, but thankfully, hasn't given up on music entirely. "I am working on an album and stuff. I've looked back, and all these feelings have collected inside of me. I've sat on them and processed them, and now I can put out something that is true. How everything truly feels, Anderson said.

I can't wait.

**A** few other genre-defying artists that I would like to mention who have done amazing things musically and continue to do so.

Logan Burroughs of pop-punk band The Smile Bunch, metal band The High Cost of Playing God, and lofi hip hop production duo Operator:Operator. Burroughs emerged on Abilene's hardcore scene in the early 2010s with Ignite The Sky!, and continued to make pop-punk music when he went to UT Austin in 2012. The Smile Bunch worked with fellow Abilenian Philip Odom on all three of their projects: The Politics of Lowered Expectations, The Bunch Punch EP, and ...but do the aliens believe in me. I used "Furtive", one the beats Burroughs produced as Operator:Operator, for my song "I Saw a Pretty Girl at the Store Today", which has now been streamed over a million times on TikTok. I recommend other

people use his beats too.

Uriyah Hodge-Presnall was the first artist to play on the outdoor stage at local record store The Record Guys. After leaving Abilene, he spent a little time in Austin where he released music as The Presnall Experiments before relocating to Denver. In Denver, he developed some relationships while working at a practice studio, ended up playing bass for The Savage Blush, and starting the band Uriyah & The Psychedelics, who released their debut album Outa' My Control in 2017. Outa' My Control is one of the most original projects to come from an Abilene artist, a mix of southern blues and psychedelic rock that sounds like it was recorded in rock & roll's heyday.

Brandon Vasquez started out playing pop-punk music in Ignite The Sky! as a high-schooler then joined Eric Turner's pop-punk band No On 15 when he moved to Denton for college. He eventually joined Tyler Dial's country band and travelled all over the US. He now lives in Nashville with his bass guitar.

