

THE LOOP MUSIC

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN GRIES



FIELD OF DREAMS Bingham

TAILGATE TROUBADOR *With a buzzy new disc and growing audience for his folksy rock, Ryan Bingham's far from his rodeo parking-lot debut*

Sittin' on a truck's tailgate, strumming a guitar, plaid-clad Ryan Bingham doesn't look much different from the rodeo cowboys around him. In fact, the folksy upstart is indeed a bit of a cowboy by virtue of a youth spent on ranches in West Texas, before living for a while in both Houston and Laredo. All of his hometowns had an influence on his music, which he describes as "just music for people, I guess."

In a voice part gravelly Bob Dylan and Texas twang, Bingham says, "I used to rodeo before I ever started playing music, then I learned how to play the guitar and started playing tailgates on pickup trucks at rodeos and eventually started playin' bars." (He laughs and says that he wasn't any good at riding bulls, but he *did* get one of his teeth knocked out.) The first song he ever played was a mariachi song called "La Malagueña"—and he pays homage to those roots with a Spanish song, "Boracho Station," on his new 14-track record on Lost Highway Records. His first disc, *Mescalito*, was released last month. Roughly translated, it means "little cactus bottoms."

He says being on a label has its perks: "It seems like they do a lot more of the hard work—phone calls, booking the gigs. I don't have to do anything but sit and play music anymore." Well, and maybe trying to remember his songs? "A lot of times I don't even write songs down. I play the guitar and start with a little melody or something ... most of the time

I forget. I get dudes who come up and say, 'Play that old song you used to play,' and I'm like, 'I don't even remember it anymore!'"

When he does write a song down, it may go a little something like this: *Then I take a pen and a little piece of paper / I scribble on down the lines / And what you're hearing now / Is something I found / Hidin' way down inside / With the cellar of my heart.* In songs like "Ever Wonder Why" he's searching his soul in that irresistibly honest way of a young songwriter.

Bingham spends many weekends with friends, floating the river in New Braunfels, and he says that his favorite bar is the first place he ever played—Ray's Bar in Marfa. "The sign out front says 'Joe's Place' because they just haven't changed the sign." He works two or three weeks a month on the road with his band, the Dead Horses. And, although he recently relocated from Austin to L.A. to spend more time with his filmmaker girlfriend, he still claims to be a Texan at heart.

His throaty, roughneck voice and soulful, sincere lyrics pull at your heartstrings. And, like any singing cowboy worth his weight in strong-silent appeal, his search for meaning continues. His relocation of the Pacific West has only intensified the exploration. He's now fascinated by the ocean, since, as he puts it, "A lot of things are deep there, things nobody knows anything about." ■