Cultural Daily

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Coyote Store: Music in the Heart of Gail, Texas

Jim Storm · Wednesday, June 12th, 2019

While small town U.S.A. is truly the backbone of middle America, all across the country these small towns are disappearing. Thus, when the community of a small-town bands together out of love and loyalty for each other to thrive, it is a story that warms one's heart and must be told. Such a place is tucked away in the small charming town of Gail, Texas and exemplified by the music of the Coyote Store.

This is the story of Becky Justice Ford, her sister Rika Jo Law, and the Coyote Store, a place that is built on love, loyalty, and respect for the community. As Becky shares, "It's all about the land, the people, and the music." So much so, that Becky and Rika have transformed the Coyote Store from a former general store established in 1985 into a place that now features famous music greats, including former Nashville headliners, while delightfully keeping its country store magic. In fact, this past May, the Coyote Store hosted country music great, Moe Bandy.

Here's how this inspiring story has unfolded:

Born in Post, Texas, Becky and her sister Rika were inspired by their grandmother Bertie Copeland's work ethic. As children, these young girls would walk "hand in hand" to sell their mom's burritos to the community. After Bertie acquired The Coyote Store in 1992, everyone in the family worked there at one time or another.

Becky reflects lovingly on the tales of her grandmother Bertie, well known for being "blunt and cantankerous" and "loved for her honesty that you could count on." For instance, she shares a story of Bon Jovi who came thru town, and her grandmother telling him that he needed a haircut. When Bon Jovi reportedly responded with, "You know who I am right?", Bertie was quick to say, "I don't care. You need a haircut".

In 2014, while working a case in her area of expertise in criminology, Becky heard that her grandmother was selling The Coyote Store. With the nostalgic love she had for this place while growing up, Becky purchased it from her grandmother, and saved it from becoming a taco stand. Becky declares that this decision was the *"best thing that ever happened*" to her. In fact, the day Becky purchased the store from Bertie, her grandmother grabbed her arm and said, *"This store will be your salvation and it will be your sister's, too."*

Well, Bertie was right! Inspired by their grandmother's work ethic to maintain the stamina to run a small-town business, Becky and Rika began ideas for an amazing transformation. They put up curtains to cover the windows to begin a renovation and gave their children ages 7-12 sledge

hammers, and told them to *"go to town."* As they toiled tirelessly for six weeks, it was unclear how this small community of slightly over 200 people would react to the change in ownership. Everyone had a special affection in their hearts for Bertie and in fact they mourned the loss of this piece of history when the keys were exchanged, and even posted photographs of their last purchases on Facebook.

Well, as expected, the delightful community of Gail and the ounty of Borden rose to the occasion and embraced Becky and her sister. According to Becky, it was "a welcomed change due to lifetime friendships and close relationships. When a town this small with generations share the love for this community…the community is a story in itself…the way they loved this place."

Becky and Rika started Friday night fish frys, using the recipe they used on the riverside fishing with their father as the "boys he never had." As the word spread, the inside business started growing and they needed to expand to the outside to accommodate more people from surrounding small Texas towns. In her never-ending inspiring entrepreneurial spirit, Becky looked upon the cement patio that was added and envisioned a small stage and the music which now makes the Coyote Store nationally famous was born.

The first to perform at the Coyote Store was a charming local group of gospel singers, and courtesy of the enthusiastic power of "Facebook Live" and her "mom's famous pies," the Coyote Store was soon booking big names from Nashville greats of times remembered fondly, like The Kendalls and Johnny Rodriguez. As the guest list grew and space dwindled, additional cement patio blocks were added in front of the building to accommodate more guests. Becky smiles as she notes that every time they sold out of tickets, the space was enlarged in the spirit of Johnny Cash, "one piece at a time."

After four large cement patios had been added to the front of the store to accommodate The Kendalls and Johnny Rodriquez, it was time to expand. From this moment on, the Coyote Country Store learned the power of its charm, as people preferred to enjoy music in this warm community than moving the venue off site. Within 10 days, the teens and adults from the community rose up to help provide 675 seats for Jean Watson to perform in the backyard of The Coyote Store. The rest is history. A large stage was built, and many more country western greats have performed, including Gene Watson, T.G. Sheppard, Shenandoah, Doug Stone, and Johnny Lee, to name a few.

On May 18th, 2019, the community was thrilled to welcome Moe Bandy. Three back up performers/bands played, and each were fabulous in their own rights. These included Jeff Smithart, the Texas Pride Band (Richard Klitz, Gerald Dykes, and Cecil Bingham), and Will Banister and the Modern Day Ramblers (William Banister, Johnny Mulhair, Jill Mulhair, Paul Goad, and Danny Darling). By the time that the iconic Moe Bandy graced the stage with his band (Nick Ochoa, John Clark, Dennis Casey, Buster Sharp, Tommy Rials), the dance floor was filled to the brim. It was a truly memorable night full of great barbeque, dance, and beautiful country music. Enhanced by the vision of these two amazing ladies, the heartwarming sense of this loving community was truly felt.

This coming weekend, the Coyote Store welcomes The Bellamy Brothers, with a sold out crowd of over 1000 people, five times the population of the town. Fortunately, if you hurry, you may be able to squeeze in a standing room only ticket. On October 12th, Mickey Gilley and Johnny Lee will be performing, with most of the cast members of *Urban Cowboy* in attendance. For a full list of all

upcoming performances and to purchase tickets, please visit: https://www.outhousetickets.com/Venue/The_Coyote_Store

The authors would like to thank Becky Justice Ford for sharing her story of heroic courage, and the beauty of what makes the Coyote Store along with the supportive community, truly the heart of Gail, Texas. For the best of small town great southern cooking, southern hospitality, and music, join people and celebrities alike from all over world, and mosey on over to Gail, Texas and visit the Coyote Store, and the dynamic duo of Becky Justice Ford and her sister Rika Law. Great people in a small town with a Big Heart!

In addition, a special thank you to Moe Bandy and his manager, Nick Ochoa, for sharing time with Jim Storm and Valerie Pronio on their concert bus.

Featured Photo: Becky Justice Ford and her sister Rika Jo Law with country great musician, Moe Bandy, just prior to his concert at the Country Store on May 18th, 2019. Photograph by Valerie Pronio

Article written by Valerie Pronio, in collaboration with the interview conducted by Jim Storm with Becky Justice Ford. Photography by both Jim Storm and Valerie Pronio.

Introducing Becky Justice Ford, owner of The Coyote Store, and her sister, Rika Jo Law. Rika now runs the store, while Becky manages the music venues. Photography by Valerie Pronio- Stelluto, M.D.

Welcome to Gail, Texas! Gail is a charming small town in Borden County, with a delightful community of about 200 people. Photography by Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D.

Welcome to the Coyote Store – the Heart of Gail, Texas…and the location of our story. Photography by Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D.

The Coyote Store is a charming country store and doubles as the “Green Room” for musicians during concerts. Photography by Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D.

The first cement block and stage. This is where The Coyote Country Store music venues were born, out of the vision of owner Becky Justice Ford. Photography by Valerie Pronio-Stelluto. M.D.

While new cement blocks were added to the front stage to accommodate the increasing number of guests, it wasn’t long before more space was needed. The community of Gail came together to help build this outdoor stage. Photography by Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D.

Guitars and cowboy hats look forward to having Moe Bandy sign them before his concert. Photography by Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D.

The Coyote Store “Green Room” with Moe Bandy (center), Will Banister and the Modern Day Ramblers, and Jeff Smithart (right). Photography by Jim Storm.

Moe Bandy dined with his backup bands, shown here with Johnny and Jill Mulhair (Will Bannister and the Modern Day Ramblers). Photography by Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D.

Delightful guests of the “Sold-Out” Moe Bandy Concert on May 18, 2019 in the “backyard” of The

Coyote Store. Photography by Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D.

Jeff Smithart opened for Moe Bandy at the Coyote Store. Smithart received the Josie Music Award, “Outlaw Country Artist of the Year 2017”. He is also a 2019 nominee for the Josie Music Awards for “Outlaw Vocalist of the Year 2019”, as well as, “Outlaw Artist of the Year” to be held September 21st at Dollywood in Pigeon Forge, TN. Smithart is also a nominee for the “Entertainer of the Year” award for the International Singer Songwriters Association, which will be held on August 3rd at the Dawson County Performing Arts Center (Atlanta, Georgia). In addition to Moe Bandy, Smithart has opened for Percy Sledge, “The Coasters”, “The Fabulous Thunderbirds”, “Restless Heart”, Bleu Edmonson, Stony Larue, “The Randy Rogers Band”, “Shenandoah”, and Gene Watson. On July 5th, 2019, he will be opening for T. Graham Brown at the Coyote Store. (Source: Jeff Smithart) Photography by Jim Storm.

Texas Pride Band’s extraordinary musicians are Richard Klitz (lead guitar and lead vocals), Gerald Dykes (bass guitar and vocals), and Cecil Bingham (drums). They are known for “playing to the crowd”, with great country music, rock ‘n roll oldies, and the Mississippi and Texas blues. In addition to Moe Bandy, they have performed at concert shows with other great headliners such as Doug Stone, T.G Sheppard, Johnny Lee, Gene Watson, Janie Fricke, and Johnny Rodriguez . (Source: https://texaspridecountry.org/) .Photography by Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D.

As Will Banister and the Modern Day Ramblers hit the Coyote Store stage, the dance floor begins to fill. Photography by Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D.

The Coyote Store backyard concerts have become an extraordinary occasion with all ages, as seen in this young cowgirl on the dance floor. Photography by Jim Storm.

Will Banister is an extraordinary country western singer/song writer, who has a smooth voice that is reminiscent of George Straight, Alan Jackson and Merle Haggard. He first came to the lime light after rave reviews of his album, “Turned Her on to Country”.

In 2017, Will won two New Mexico Music Awards in the categories, “Country Artist”, and “Country Song” for the first release of his album, “What a Way to Live”. In the spirit of the great Hank Williams, and as quoted in a recent review by the Daily Telegraph’s Douglas MacPherson, Will’s “sublimely straightforward Lovesick Blues” is “proof that country, like rock ‘n’ roll, will never die”. (Source: www.willbanister.com) Photography by Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D.

Will Bannister and the Modern Day Ramblers: Johnny Mulhair (lead guitar, steel guitar, manager) and Jill Mulhair (bass guitar). Johnny was named as one of the “Top Ten Guitarist in the County” by Nashville Music Row Magazine. Johnny has played with the legendary musicians, such as “The 60’s Legends”, “The Fireballs” (“Sugar Shack”, “Bottle of Wine”) Buddy Knox, and “The Coasters”, in addition to, touring with LeAnn Rimes, “Chicago”, “Big Bad Voodoo Daddy”, and “America”. As former head engineer for the historic Norman Petty Recording Studio (Buddy Holly, Waylon Jennings), Johnny with his lovely wife, Jill Mulhair, are the owners of Johnny Mulhair Recording Studio. In addition, to recording Will Banister’s stellar records, Johnny recorded and produced LeAnn Rimes best-selling 8 time platinum album, “Blue” which launched her career. For this Johnny has received CMA and ACM nominations for its recording and production. (Source: http://www.johnnymulhair.com/). Photography by Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D.

In addition to Will Bannister and the Modern Day Ramblers and the Darling Brothers Band, Danny Darling has also played drums and toured with “Legendary Pop Rock artist Leon Russell, Legendary

Grammy winning Blues Artist Johnny Jones, The Late Great Texas Blues Legend Jessie Guitar Taylor, Texas Troubadour Jimmy Dale Gilmore, Joe Ely, Butch Hancock and Bandleader / Drummer for Country Star Clay Walker just to name a few."
(Source: https://web.tunecore.com/music/darlingbrothersband) . Photography by Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D.

Will Banister and the Modern Day Ramblers: Paul Goad is featured here on the keyboards, and is known as a "mega-talented musician that has been playing throughout Texas and New Mexico for many years."
(Source: https://www.reverbnation.com/willbanister?popup_bio=true). Photography by Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D.

The Coyote Store concert crowd have livened up the dance floor just in time for Moe Bandy to arrive. Photography by Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D.

Moe Bandy hits the stage at The Coyote Store. Mr. Bandy signed with Columbia Records in 1975 and his first release "Hank Williams You Wrote My Life" soared in the charts. He quickly became the "Academy of Country Music Most Promising Male Vocalist" in 1976, and the rest is history. (Source: https://moebandy.com/awards-songs/). His accomplishments can fill a country music history book. With so many wonderful songs to note, the crowd went wild when hearing his famous, "Bandy The Rodeo Clown" and "Till I'm Too Old To Die Young". Photography by Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D.

Nick Ochoa is a long time friend and band manager for Moe Bandy, He is also the band's phenomenal drummer with a tremendous amount of accomplishments in his own right. (Source) https://www.allmusic.com/artist/nick-ochoa-mn0001733481.) Photography by Jim Storm.

Dennis Kent Casey, Jr. is the lead guitarist for Moe Bandy. He has also played with other country great artists as Janie Fricke, Johnny Lee, Tanya Tucker, Mickey Gilley, John Conlee and T Graham Brown. Photography by Jim Storm. (Source: https://thecounty.me/2015/09/16/living/arts/local-musician-in-the-spotlight/).

John Clark is the long-time steel guitar and fiddle player for the Moe Bandy Band. He also teaches all the stringed instruments, guitar, fiddle, banjo and bass. Formerly, Clark notes he worked for about 25 years with a guitar player named Rich O'Brien, who heavily influenced his style. (Source: https://harrisondaily.com/john-clark-teaching-others-to-grow-their-musical-talents/article_cdd36712-e370-59c0-a742-974acde351f2.html). Photography by Jim Storm.

Moe Bandy provided a truly memorable evening. With 10 # 1 Hits, 40 Top Ten Hits, 66 Chart Hits, 5 Gold Albums, Academy of Country Music (ACM) "Song of The Year", ACM "Most Promising Male Vocalist of the Year", "American Video of the Year", Academy of Country Music and Country Music Association "Duet of the Year", the audience was thrilled that the Coyote Store featured this country great musician! (Award Source: www.moebandy.com). Photography by Jim Storm.

Heartfelt appreciation to Moe Bandy for sharing time with photographers Jim Storm and Valerie Pronio-Stelluto before the show. Moe Bandy,, along with his brother, Mike Bandy, a six-time NFR bull-riding qualifier, were inducted into the Texas Rodeo Cowboy Hall of Fame in 2007. Photograph held by Mr. Bandy was from Jim Storm's "Ain't My First Rodeo" show at Beyond Baroque. Photography by Nick Ochoa, manager and stellar drummer.

A heartfelt thank you to Becky Justice Ford for sharing her story of heroic courage, and the beauty of

what makes the Coyote Store along with the supportive community, truly the heart of Gail, Texas. Here with photographers, Jim Storm and Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D. Photography by Ben Justice.

Bios for Jim Storm and Valerie Pronio-Stelluto, M.D. as they first appeared on "Cultural Weekly". Since this time both Jim and Valerie have also enjoyed photographing rodeos together. In 2018 alone, they photographed over 25 rodeos together across Texas, Montana, Colorado, and Wyoming, which culminated in the highly successful "Ain't My First Rodeo" Photography exhibit at "Beyond Baroque" in Venice, California in December 2018. Jim and Valerie extends a huge note of sincere appreciation to all these extraordinary new friends included in this article.

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