

'Outlaw' shuns pop country

By MICHAEL SCHAU
THE BATTALION

Texas singer-songwriter Ronny Spears has no problem describing his music. "It's in between country, blues, rock, jazz and R&B," Spears said. "A lot of people don't know what to call it, and I think, 'Good.'" This "modern-day outlaw" will play at Bryan's Dixie Theatre Saturday at 9 p.m.

"Everyone just calls it Texas music," Spears said. "We fit right in, and what makes you fit in to Texas music is originality."

And originality is Spears' biggest concern, he said.

"I do what I do, and if it takes me producing and selling my own album, that's what I'll do," he said. "That's the reason we don't go to Nashville—we try not to be put in a category."

Spears' manager, Texas A&M graduate John Muzyka, said the guitarist has no intention of altering his iconoclastic style to get radio air play.

"His music is real," Muzyka said. "It's from his heart and soul. He doesn't compromise or play music just because he thinks other people will like it."

Spears released his second album, *Modern Day Outlaw*, in August.

"That album was work, man," Spears said. "We'll do a pretty love ballad one minute and we're rocking the next."

Spears is the latest addition to a growing roster of Texas singer-songwriters who go largely ignored by Nashville-based major record labels.

"Ronny wants to stay true to his Texas roots," Muzyka said. "That's one of the main attributes of Texas musicians. They're true to themselves. They have great artistic integrity."

Spears said his songwriting is influenced by Texan artists like Willie Nelson and Chris Wall.

"Back in the '70s, you had people like David Allan Coe, Gary P. Nunn and Ray Wylie Hubbard just come out of the woodwork," Spears said. "That's happening again. Nashville thinks it's just a regional thing."

The growing popularity of country rock is evidenced by such artists as Robert Earl Keen Jr., Son Volt, Wilco and Spears' childhood hero, Johnny Cash.

"When I write, I still have a little bit of that Cash in me," he said. "I've kind of taken that outlaw country music to other dimensions."

Muzyka said American audiences have begun to ignore many of the country pop artists signed by Nashville labels.

"The public said, 'Stop feeding me this pop with a cowboy head on it,'" Muzyka said. "They want a return to the country roots, which is basically Texas music."

Spears, who spent years in a "Top 40" cover band, said he has no plans to sacrifice the innovative roots-rock that has won him acclaim and air play on Dallas' KSCS-FM.

"We could have cut a demo tape, brought it to Nashville and said, 'Here's a song I'm singing just like Garth Brooks. Take a listen to it.' And they'd have kicked it right out the window," Spears said.

"Everyone sounds the same now. They're still signing people who look and sound the same as people they've already signed."



Ronny Spears

Spears' beloved Texas remains a major influence on his music, he said.

"I was born and reared here," he said. "I've been a lot of other places. I don't think I'd be comfortable living anywhere else."

"Nashville's not as accepting to Texas musicians as they'd like to have you believe. I think there's room for everyone to do their own thing."

Muzyka, who used to perform as an opening act for Robert Earl Keen Jr. at Bryan's Stafford

Opera House, said he is happy to bring Texas singer-songwriters to Bryan-College Station.

"Ronny has his own edge, his own style," Muzyka said. "Bringing him to Bryan-College Station is kind of a contribution to him and to my fellow Aggies."

Spears may not know how to label his music readily, but he knows he loves playing it.

"Some people are calling it alternative-country," Spears said. "Up here in Dallas, they're calling it cowpunk."

► OPAS Jr

Jungle Book swings into College Station

By MELISSA PRICE
THE BATTALION

There is more to life than television—but some kids may not think so.

Children can explore the arts as they watch Opera and Performing Arts Jr's ballet interpretation of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* Saturday at Rudder Theatre.

OPAS Jr, which has existed for eight years, aims to bring a variety of dramatic programs to the Bryan-College Station community to educate children about the performing arts.

Sheri Scoggins, OPAS director of children's programming and a junior history major, said OPAS Jr tries to give children an appreciation for the arts early in life.

"OPAS Jr tries to provide different types of theater that are geared to young audiences," Scoggins said. "We would like to introduce them to the world of theater so when they get older, they'll be ready for OPAS productions."

Scoggins said OPAS Jr usually has four performances a year, and production runs similar to that of the regular OPAS season. However, the OPAS season is much more expensive and extensive than OPAS Jr's and appeals to an older audience.

Scoggins said although OPAS Jr performances are on a smaller scale than OPAS shows, the two are still equivalent in quality.

Anne Black, executive director of OPAS, said OPAS Jr targets the family audience.

"We work very hard to find things that families can enjoy together," Black said. "In order for education to happen, we want to create opportunities for families to have this experience together. We don't want parents dropping off

their kids."

The ballet interpretation of *The Jungle Book* is being performed by the Ballet for Young Audiences, a professional ballet troupe based in New York.

Jeffrey Cranor, OPAS director of audience education and development and a senior journalism major, said OPAS Jr's presentation of *The Jungle Book* provides more than movie or mall entertainment. He said children who attend an OPAS Jr presentation view an aspect of life they may not have the chance to see normally.

"There are other ways to tell somebody something other than using words," Cranor said. "We're letting people know there's more to life than the television set. You see

it on the page, you see it on the screen—now you're going to see it on stage."

Laura Charlotte Smith, a fourth-grader at South Knoll Elementary, said she and her family have been going to OPAS Jr presentations since they began in 1989. She said she is looking forward to watching *The Jungle Book* on

Saturday because OPAS Jr performances are always entertaining.

"They're fun to go to and they're interesting," Smith said. "It's like an OPAS performance—except it is for kids."

Scoggins said the presentation of *The Jungle Book* is an amazing opportunity for the children of Bryan-College Station because there are not many ballets designed specifically for children.

Cranor said OPAS Jr helps children get in touch with the fine arts at an early age.

"We can't provide all of the knowledge of the world about the performing arts, but OPAS Jr certainly provides the key to getting there," Cranor said.

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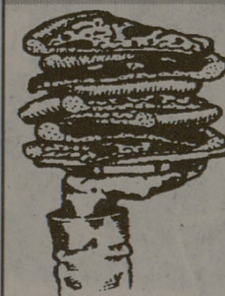
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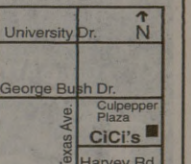
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