

Country living

Where other students dine and drink, Ben Smith would rather be behind the mic

By Carrie Pierce
THE BATTALION

When Ben Smith was in high school, his truck had no radio, so he began singing songs to himself to avoid boredom. He realized that he had a decent voice and decided to pick up a guitar. Four years later, Smith, a senior urban forestry major from Gainesville, Texas, is pursuing a career in the country music business.

"Music is one thing I've stayed consistently devoted to," Smith said.

Smith wasn't interested in music until he started playing, but now has more than 30 songs of his own. Smith said his influences have been Jack Ingram and some rock music. He grew up listening to bands such as Creedence Clearwater Revival and the Beatles, not hearing much country music until his arrival at Texas A&M. Smith said his sound is a mix of Texas country and rock.

"Country can be a conservative genre," Smith said. "I want to be creative and new."

A turning point for Smith was in 2002 when he saw Charlie Robison play and decided to make music more than just a hobby.

"Everyone was having fun and I realized I wanted to do that," Smith said.

Smith's first paid gig was at the Even Keel Marina in Gainesville. When the marina restaurant and bar was first opening, he walked in and asked if the owners wanted live music. Since then, he has made thousands playing there and is attracting great crowds, he said.

"Music works well with college," Smith said. "It has earned me quite a bit of money as a college student."

Smith's local gigs have included Shadow Canyon, Hole in the Wall, Kerri's Stacked Enchiladas, Hornbeck's and private parties. He has also performed at open-mic nights at Zapatos on Northgate and at Rudder Plaza and Rumours Coffee House & Deli on campus. Most of his gigs have been booked through word of mouth.

"I love being on stage with a concert kind of atmosphere," Smith said. "There's a high energy."

Smith started his practicing and music writing in Hart Hall.

"I used to hate when he'd practice in the dorm room. He was playing at midnight, but I knew he had talent, so I put up with it," said Matt Fuller, an education administration graduate student, who has known Smith since they were suitemates in 1999.

Apparently, the growing recognition hasn't affected his ego, according to Fuller. "He is a good, wholesome guy," he said. "He is a good roommate and a good buddy."

Fuller said when former A&M President Dr. Ray Bowen was on a dorm tour, he ran into Smith practicing his music. Smith performed "The Truck Song" in his boxer shorts and a wife-beater shirt for Bowen, who said he'd like to dance to it and wanted a copy.

Brian Mican, a senior industrial distribution major and friend of Smith's, said Smith has especially improved on stage, going out and not being nervous.

Smith started out small with only his friends and family attend-

ing his shows, and then other people realized they really liked his music, Fuller said.

"He is getting a name for himself around town," Fuller said. "I think he will be big and he stands a good chance if he gets a band together."

Smith's most recent performance was opening for Pat Green Sunday evening at a wedding reception in Navasota. A friend's mom was getting married and he was invited to perform, he said.

"I get a lot of gigs through knowing people," Smith said.

With his strong voice and engaging lyrics, Smith entertained the wedding crowd with his guitar, harmonica and obvious passion for music. With wonderful stage presence and energy, Smith strings a story with his words.

"Everything he writes has some sort of truth in it," Fuller said.

Smith said he enjoys creative writing and will take something that really happened and embellish on it. "Gasoline," the title song from his CD set to be released in September, is about a kid chasing a man who has stolen gasoline from his farm. The truth in the song, Smith said, is that he really did find someone stealing gasoline from his family's farm.

"I thought of what would have happened if I had really chased him," Smith said.

Smith, who loves skiing and kayaking when he's not writing music, is also an avid outdoorsman. He has been an active member of the Student Society of Arboriculture since 2002, climbing trees around campus and making zip-lines between them. Tommy Black, a senior urban forestry major and fellow tree climber, describes Smith as a "nature boy."

"His big toe is purple (from dropping wooden logs on his feet) from cutting logs for his log cabin he's building," Black said.

For the time being, Smith is focused on school and graduating. Smith said a big part of being a musician is playing a show one night then going to school early the next morning.

"Sometimes it's tough to finish class on Friday, then drive up to play a show in Gainesville," Smith said.

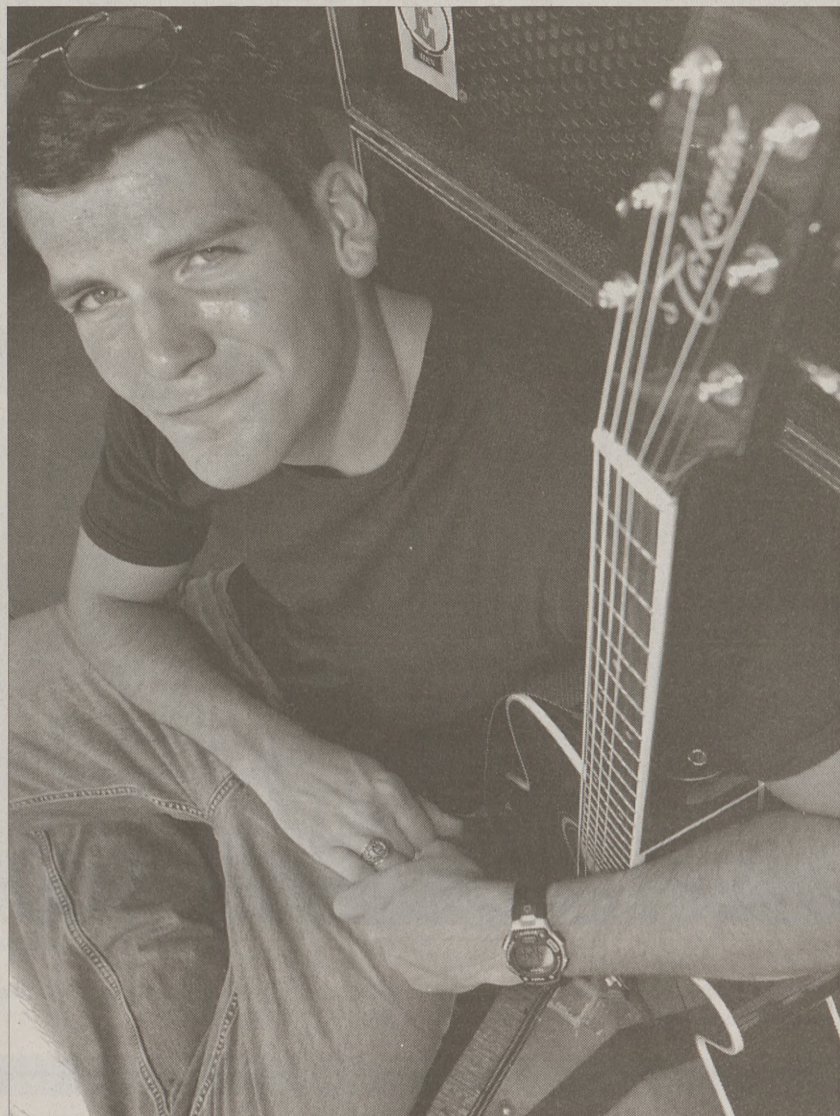
"But, school is my first priority."

After graduating in August, Smith will move to Austin to pursue his music career and possibly get a job in urban forestry.

He said that there is a lot of music in Austin, "even though it's an evil school."

Smith said his parents are supportive of his endeavors and his mom wants him to focus on music, not getting a job after graduation. Encouragement from others has been a huge motivator for Smith.

Smith is one of 32 finalists for "Shiner Rising Star," where musicians compete to be the first act ever signed to Shiner



BRIAN WILLS • THE BATTALION

Senior urban forestry major **Ben Smith**, who can be heard in local venues, hopes to become a well-known Texas country singer and songwriter. He has secured many invitations to perform solely through the word-of-mouth of his friends and fans.

Records, which will award the winner a recording deal in October and a main-stage performance at Bocktoberfest. Smith will compete in round one of three of the finals on Thursday.

He said his dream would be to perform with the country music tour in Europe and make a name for himself in Texas.

"I want to be able to go to any town around Texas and have a good size show," Smith said.

Smith will perform at Kerri's Stacked Enchiladas restaurant on Texas Avenue Friday night at 10 p.m.

ON THE BIG SCREEN

"Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy"

Starring Will Ferrell
DreamWorks Pictures

Review by Jose Cruz

In a time before cable television, the local anchorman reigned supreme, or so Ron Burgundy tells us. Will Ferrell stars as the wonderfully pompous and egotistical Ron Burgundy. Former "Saturday Night Live" head writer Adam McKay makes his directorial debut in "Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy."

The movie takes place during the 1970s, a time when newsroom tasks for women included taking notes in meetings, styling hair and not much else. Burgundy, the most beloved anchorman in all of San Diego, finds his job in jeopardy when news reporter Veronica Corningstone (Christina Applegate) threatens to break the glass barrier and take over the position of anchor.

While this may seem like a condensed version of the plot, it is not. There is simply not much else to add.

This movie works not because it guides the audience through a thought-provoking plot, but instead because it provides just the right amount of framework to allow Ferrell free reign to showcase his comedic talent. Who needs a plot when you have Ferrell parading around in his underwear? The movie functions largely as a series of skits tied together.

This film is enjoyable because the approach taken to perform the comedy is not the tired old Hollywood approach. The filmmakers instead choose to rely on absurdity to get the laughs. The characters flirt with bouts of absurdity throughout the course of the movie. The characters utter ridiculous phrases to one another. Rival news stations break out into spontaneous free-for-all battles in the back alleys of San Diego.

Will Ferrell is at his absolute best. One could easily argue this is his best performance to date. The supporting cast, which includes Fred Willard, Paul Rudd and Steve Carell, are on par with Ferrell and the unexpected cameos provide a pleasant surprise for the audience as well.

"Anchorman" is one of the better comedies of the year because it takes a fresh approach at comedy. "Anchorman" is an original, no-holds-barred comedy that is sure to inspire big laughs for the viewer.



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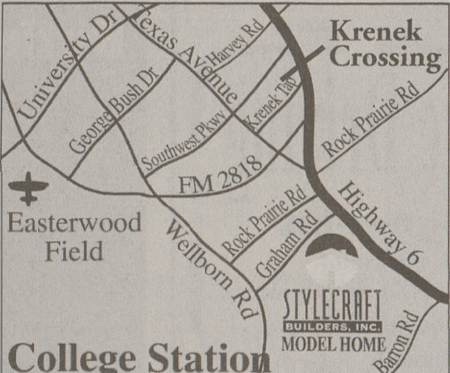
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