

Josh Abbott Band Bio

Weeks before its Valentine's Day release on iTunes, the Josh Abbott Band's "Touch" was already well on its way toward being one of the most talked-about songs in Texas music of 2012. Granted, the hot-streak momentum of Abbott's career had a lot to do with that. In the wake of the breakout success of "Oh, Tonight" (which climbed to No. 44 on Billboard's country chart) and the title track from 2010's regional smash "She's Like Texas," created a stir that reached all the way to music executives in Nashville and New York City. That set up pretty much any track that the 31-year-old singer-songwriter picked to be the lead single from his band's much-anticipated third album nicely, ensuring it was bound to garner a fair amount of attention. But from the very first time it was played in concert or over the airwaves, it was clear that "Touch" had a lot more going for it than just good timing. From the erotic tension and release of its slow-burning verses and soaring chorus to the dramatic crescendo of fiddle and guitars at the outro, it's a song that captures every ounce of the passion, talent, and vision that's propelled the Josh Abbott Band to the forefront of the Texas music scene in record time. And as the rest of Small Town Family Dream proves convincingly, they're here to stay.

Truth is, that's been pretty evident for a while now — even though the Josh Abbott Band has only been recording and touring for half a decade. Abbott didn't even begin writing songs until around 2004, when he was still in grad school at Texas Tech in Lubbock. A diehard Texas country fan, he'd picked up guitar a few years earlier, mainly to strum along to his favorite Pat Green songs. He vividly recalls the epiphany he had at a concert one night at Lubbock's Blue Light when the notion of

writing and playing his own music — maybe even for a living — first took root.

“It happened to be the Randy Rogers Band playing that night, but it could have been Pat or Wade Bowen or Cory Morrow, any of those guys that I saw over the years,” Abbott explains. “I always had this fascination with what they were doing. I’d go to their concerts and there’d be hundreds if not thousands of college kids singing along. That night at the Blue Light, I just remember watching the band and thinking, I want to do this...I think I can do this.”

“Maybe that was a little naïve at the time,” he admits with a laugh, “but the truth is, I guess I’ve always felt like if I’m going to do something, then I just can.” And so he did. Together with his banjo-playing fraternity brother, Austin Davis, Abbott began putting that confidence to the test at open mic nights. A year and a half later, fiddle player Preston Wait and drummer Edward Villanueva came onboard, and the fledgling Josh Abbott Band was off and running — slowly, at first, but not for long. “We didn’t record a demo until 2007, which was ‘Taste,’ and then we didn’t even get a booking agent and start touring outside of Lubbock until 2008,” says Abbott. “But after that, everything started happening so fast for us that we really weren’t ready for it at first. We’d start showing up at venues and there’d be a lot of people there, and we didn’t even have enough originals to play 90 minutes. And it was kind of a weird deal for us because there were a lot of bands on the scene that were a lot more tenured, and they went from not even knowing who we were to all of a sudden playing these co-bills with us within like a two-year span. I mean, we definitely paid our dues, but it all came together a lot faster than we’d anticipated. For that, we’re so grateful.”

Abbott, though, was too focused on building his band’s loyal and ever-growing fan base to fret too much about critics or skeptics. Booked to

play towns like Waco where they could barely draw a 100 paying customers early on, he'd once gave away 100 more tickets through the local radio station — figuring that if even half those people showed up, they'd bring along friends, every one of them a potential new fan. At one particularly memorable show at the Wormy Dog in Oklahoma, he thanked the crowd of some 300 people by inviting every one of them to hit the merch booth for a free CD and T-shirt.

“We probably gave away thousands of dollars of merch that night, but ever since, we've done really well in Oklahoma City,” says Abbott.

“Another night, I think I bought the entire bar a round of shots, and my bar tab was like \$1,000. But it was my way of showing everyone there, ‘I'm just thanking you for coming to our show tonight, because you didn't have to, and I want you to know I appreciate it.’ We have so much gratitude for our fans and the people that come to our shows. You want to thank every single person. When you do that, you don't just create fans, you create friends — people who are gonna then go out and pitch your album and who you are to every single person they know.”

The results speak for themselves. “Josh Abbott has ascended to that A-list level of the Texas country scene faster than anyone I've ever seen coming from an upstart position,” says Chris Mosser, the morning host of Austin's 98.1 KVET-FM who also programs the station's popular Texas country “Roadhouse” program. “And it seems to me that for a lot of the younger Texas country fans, he's definitely the gravitational center of the current scene. His impact with the kids is remarkable.”

Nevertheless, with great impact comes great responsibility — specifically, the responsibility, as an artist, to continue to reward those fans not with free T-shirts and shots, but with new music worthy of their continued support. To that end, Abbott knew there was a lot riding on his band's third album. Fans in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona,

Colorado and beyond helped the independently released *She's Like Texas* climb all the way to No. 28 on the national country chart, and following it up was going to be a tall order.

“My main objective for this album was for it to be cohesive,” says Abbott. “I think at least half of the songs on our first album [2009’s *Scapegoat*] were really good, but it wasn’t our best effort. But we really hit a home run with *She's Like Texas* in terms of creating a big fan base and a little bit of radio success and even a bit more national success than I thought we were maybe ready for or even going for at the time. So when we went to record this one, I thought, ‘I don’t know that we’ll have another song go national like ‘Oh, Tonight,’ but I do want it to keep the consistency of the last album.’ But at the same time, we tried to take it in a different direction, too.”

To wit: whereas Abbott’s songs on *She's Like Texas* for the most part paralleled the timeline of a romantic relationship, *Small Town Family Dream* finds him celebrating the independent spirit of the people who make his beloved Lone Star State well, his kind of Texas. “Dallas and Houston and Austin and San Antonio, they’re all great, but the backbone of what makes Texas really Texas is the rural communities,” explains Abbott, who now lives in Austin but still thinks of West Texas as home — specifically, the small town of Idalou, right outside of Lubbock. “The farmers and ranchers and all the other people who work their asses off while living in small towns all across the state ... this whole album is really an ode to them, and I really wanted that theme to come through in the songs.”

And it does — from the opening, hometown salute of “Idalou” and all the way through to the closing title track. He also salutes the brave fire fighters and the communities affected by the statewide 2011 wildfires in the raging “Hell’s Gates on Fire,” and the plight of Texas farmers

battling the recent drought in “Rain Finally Coming Down.” Meanwhile, the Adam Hood/Brian Keane song “I’ll Sing About Mine” — one of the first covers the band has ever recorded. While songs like the aforementioned “Touch,” “She Will Be Free,” “Dallas Love” and “Hotty Toddy” all prove that Abbott is still a natural when it comes to flattering and celebrating the fairer sex in song.

But just as importantly, *Small Town Family Dream*, recorded in Denton and released, like the first two albums, on Abbott’s own *Pretty Damn Tough* label, is also an ode to the music of Texas — a rich legacy that has spawned not only populist icons like Willie Nelson, George Strait, and Abbott’s college hero Pat Green, but such underground mavericks as Lubbock’s acclaimed Flatlanders and songwriter’s songwriter Terry Allen. Abbott and band actually cover two songs (“FFA” and “Flatland Farmer”) from Allen’s legendary 1979 album, *Lubbock on Everything*, on *Small Town Family Dream*, while Green himself guests on Abbott’s own “My Texas.”

“That was a pretty big moment for me,” says Abbott, who has since shared a number of stages with Green. Co-written with Thom Shepherd in Nashville, “My Texas” is Abbott’s unabashed salute to not just Green but all of the Texas country artists that provided the soundtrack to his college days not so long ago. A lot of those artists are still very much still around today, just as the Texas country scene still thrives. “I just thought that it was time to pay homage to the entire reason why I fell in love with Texas country in the first place. I want people to hear ‘My Texas’ and go, ‘Man, I feel like I’m in 1999 again, listening to this song.’” It’s also his hope that people listening to *Small Town Family Dream* take note of the impressive, muscular instrumental chops on full display throughout the album. The Josh Abbott Band has undergone a few personnel changes in its short lifespan, but the current lineup —

comprised of longtime members Wait (fiddle) and Villanueva (drums) along with lead guitarist Caleb Keeter, bassist James Hertless, and Abbott's old college friend Davis back in the mix on electric banjo after a few seasons pursuing other interests — has now played hundreds of shows together across Texas and beyond, resulting in what is easily the band's best sounding recording to date. On ballads like "Touch" and "Dallas Love," the young players display the polished finesse of seasoned Nashville session pros, but on tracks like the anthemic "Idalou," the saucy "Hotty Toddy" and especially the aforementioned Terry Allen covers, they sound fit to tear the roof off and go head to head with any other take-no-prisoners roots-rocking band on either the modern Country or Americana scene.

"I really feel like this is the band I've always wanted," Abbott says with matter of fact pride. And it couldn't come together at a better time, either. Looking back over his career, Abbott recalls one of the first times he ever dared to not only dream out loud, but dream big.

"I did an interview for a Lubbock news station in late 2007, back when we first started hitting the road, and the reporter asked me, 'Where do you want to be in five years?' And I just looked at him and said, 'I want to be one of the biggest bands in Texas music.'

"Everyone at the time was like, 'Dude, that was one of the most arrogant things ever — it's never going to happen,'" Abbott admits with a self-effacing chuckle. "But if you ask any sports team that starts out with rookies where they want to be in five years, if they don't say 'winning championships,' then those are not the kind of guys you want on your team. From day one, my goal was, if I'm going to commit to doing this, then I'm going to do it, and I'm going to be as successful as I possibly can."

Five years later, right on schedule, he's close enough to that once seemingly far-fetched goal to reach out and touch it. But not surprisingly, he's long since raised the stakes.

"The main objective now is to make sure that the bell curve stays in our favor," Abbott says when asked where he wants his band to be in the next five years. "For me, the goal is for us to be able to not just maintain, but consistently get bigger. I feel like Texas has really done well for us, but I'll never be satisfied. I'll never be like, 'we've got Texas locked down,' because that's our base and we've got to keep growing, but I think our biggest objective right now is to get bigger in markets outside of Texas. That's why you'll see our emphasis continue to be on touring the West Coast, along with New Mexico, Denver, Kansas, Nebraska, Chicago, and even going East ... I think that's really important to do."

And yet, even as he expands his horizons beyond the Lone Star State, Abbott's independent Texas spirit is stronger than ever. Among his goals "from the get-go," he says, was for his band to distinguish itself as one of the "most successful independent country bands" of its era. And if there's a difference between that and what most people consider "megastardom," well, he's quite OK with that, because "success" in his book isn't defined by the all-or-nothing fantasy of platinum-selling records and sold-out arena tours.

"I'm sure that would be fun, and damn right we would enjoy that ride," Abbott admits. "But if that doesn't happen, that doesn't mean we still can't sell 100,000-plus records, tour across the country and play to crowds of 500-1,000 a night just like we do in Texas. We want to impact fans that really care about our music and that are willing to drive up to two hours to come and see us play. To me, that's success, right there."

And so far, the Josh Abbott Band has achieved that success without having to sign a deal with an outside record label. “We’ve had offers” Abbott explains. “I’m not turning a blind eye to them, but if we ever sign one, it’s going to have to be a really good deal and one that makes sense for us.”

“People who do sign with record labels shouldn’t be crucified,” Abbott continues thoughtfully. “I mean, there’s a real science to it, and I have a lot of admiration for the guys that have made that system work for them. But there really is another way. Being indie right now is working for our band and has worked for many other bands in the past. It’s too soon to know if we’ll sign or if we won’t. For now, we’re happy making music and connecting with our fans.”