

## REVIEW / MUSIC

# Billy Joe Shaver: An American original

**BILLY JOE SHAVER** — *In concert with John Lincoln Wright & the Sour Mash Review at Jonathan Swift's Monday.*

By Steve Morse  
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Most country music fans recognize the name of Waylon Jennings. Most only scratch their heads, though, at the mention of Billy Joe Shaver. Yet it was Shaver who wrote the songs for Jennings' "Honky Tonk Heroes" album, the album that catapulted him to stardom back in 1973.

Shaver, now 41 and on the comeback trail, was the underground icon of the so-called progressive country movement, which attempted to reverse Nashville's trend to country/pop schlock and return the music to its hillbilly/cowboy roots. The movement made a momentary splash in the mid-'70s, but like new wave rock, was co-opted by the industry's big business, profit-motive-over-art mentality. A country singer was essentially told he had to water down his sound to "cross over" into the pop market — thus selling more records — or be dropped by his company and forgotten.

Being partly his own worst enemy, Shaver blew most of his royalties from the "Honky Tonk Heroes" album, and fell into a debilitating pill-popping addiction. He made a couple of albums for Capricorn Records, but they didn't do much and seemed to indicate he was more of a songwriter than a singer. Disillusioned, he then left music for several years, moving from Nashville to Houston, which was closer to his original home of Waco, Tex.

The good news is that Shaver has landed on his feet. "I had to kick my-

self in the ass, but I got up," he said after a startling set at Jonathan Swift's, which was his first appearance ever in the Boston area.

Having been helped by religion (he's not preachy, but does call Jesus "the cheapest psychiatrist there is"), and by a general recommitment to music, Shaver proved to be a much more powerful singer than he's shown on record. His deep, uncompromising country voice, which is the Guinness Stout of the genre, hurtled his songs forward with a honky-tonk vengeance. His old standards like "Ain't No God in Mexico," "(I've Been) To Georgia on a Fast Train," and "Ride Me Down Easy" all were bracing and sensitive at the same time, without any bogus machismo. These were matched by many solid new songs, several in a transporting country-blues vein.

Shaver's set, coming on the heels of another fine outing by John Lincoln Wright's rapidly developing band, featured his nimble 18-year-old son, Eddy, on guitar, and revealed that Shaver has not lost pride in his cowboy roots. His cowboy hat, work shirt and jeans were in polar opposition to Nashville's love of Las Vegas tuxedos, and his pithy lyrics were no less down-home and sincere.

Where else can you hear lyrics like these: "Been a rodeo bum, a son of a gun and a hobo with stars in my crown / Ride me down easy, Lord, ride me on down / Leave word in the dust where I lay / Say I'm easy come, easy go and easy to love when I stay." Shaver is a true American original at a time when originality of any kind is scarce.