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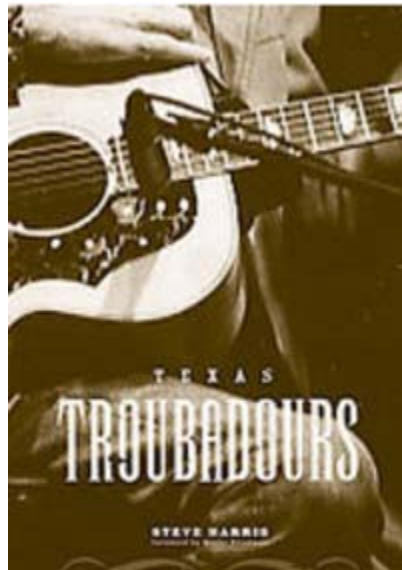
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February 09, 2007

## Ode to the Troubadours

Texas is legendary for its singer-songwriters, so numerous that they've almost become a dime a dozen in musical meccas like Austin and Houston. For every Willie Nelson or Lyle Lovett there have been



hundreds, make that thousands, of wannabes toiling away in the state's coffeehouses and honkytonks. A new photo book by Steve Harris captures the flavor of the breed in artful images and an apt title: *Texas Troubadours* (University of Texas Press, \$40).

The term "troubadour" literally refers to a European lyric poet or poet-musician from the 11th through the 13th centuries, but like the word "bohemian," it's acquired a pervasive (if vague) modern

meaning. Probably with the help of the Troubadour Club in Los Angeles, the term now connotes a musician who sings his or her own songs and peddles them from town to town, year after year, often earning little glory and even less pay. As Kinky Friedman writes in this book's foreword, "Singer-songwriters have always been the long-suffering, little-celebrated spiritual stepchildren of the bigger, more



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commercial country music stars."

Photographer Steve Harris, himself a bit of an unsung journeyman, says he set out to document what he realized was a dying breed when Townes Van Zandt, whom he calls "the master," passed away in 1997, followed by Doug Sahm in 1999. "I realized that someone needed to document the visual existence of these amazing singer-songwriter artists," Harris recalls.

Over six years, Harris travelled the Lone Star State with his 4x5 camera and made dozens of evocative portraits of singers, also gathering hand-written quotes from each of them (printed in the book along with a typeset version of each quote to help decipher the scribbles). The quotes range from pithy—"Simplicity don't need to be greased," writes Billy Joe Shaver; "I'd rather be a dead Gram Parsons than a live Garth Brooks," Kinky Friedman opines—to mysterious: "Up on the ridge, there's a fire about to burn," says Joe Ely. It seems that only one artist, the notoriously cranky Steve Earle, failed to submit any words, instead offering a steely, let's-finish-this-thing gaze at the camera.

But most of these pictures are warm and atmospheric, reflecting lots of wizened faces that still show a passion for their work and a love of their homeland. As the well-traveled Kris Kristofferson writes on the back of his portrait: "You can leave Brownsville, but you can never get the music of Matamoros out of your soul." Not to mention perseverance. In the words of the much-less-famous Richard Dobson: "If you love it enough you can find a way to make it work."

—**Jack Crager**

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Congratulations Steven, and also to my daughter. At least we know he can feed you for a year or so (just kidding)

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Posted by: [Bride's Dad](#) | [February 10, 2007 at 04:05 AM](#)

Congratulations !!! Since I drove on some of the trips, I want my autographed copy....

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Posted by: [Nelson Morales-Bello](#) | [February 13, 2007 at 10:08 AM](#)

who is this steve harris? he sounds like an interesting person, i would



like to hear more about him. Does he have any new projects in the works? where did he study?

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Posted by: [cloudibyle](#) | February 13, 2007 at 03:53 PM

Awesome--your dream come true. As to the question of who is Steve Harris?!? Why, he's "Harris--from the Post!" I ain't waitin' 6 years for this to be autographed...

Suz

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Posted by: [Suz E. G.](#) | March 05, 2007 at 02:11 PM

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