

Nothing is Sweeter Than Catfish

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It's around three o'clock in the afternoon when I decide to make my way up to the Porch. Into the back of the car I throw my guitar, my tenor sax, and my bodhrán. I don't expect to play the latter two, but I put them in anyway because I remember some advice Moses gave me during my first week in town:

“One thing you need to learn about Terlingua,” he said, “when you come to the Porch, bring every instrument you own.” He may have been exaggerating, but he does have a point. The Porch is the social and musical center of town, the place where local musicians go to sing and play every day of the week, and you can never be sure what's going to happen until you get there: you might be one of a dozen musicians or you might be alone; you might hear old-time fiddle music or western swing, country, folk, or rock 'n' roll; you might find yourself in the middle of a circle of songwriters performing in turns or a blues jam where everyone jumps in all at once. The music can be a struggle one day and transcendent the next. A wise musician comes prepared for any possibility.

I turn out of B.J.'s trailer park and begin heading west on Highway 170, the famous “River Road” that follows the Rio Grande as it traverses the canyon country of the Big Bend through Far-West Texas. Just under a mile's drive brings me to the main Ghost Town turnoff where a cluster of signs announces food and lodging to passersby. An iron marker placed by the State Historical Survey Committee informs readers that the Terlingua Ghost Town was once home to the Chisos Mining Company, a mercury mining operation that got started in the late 1890s but went bust shortly after World War II. Further up the road, a wooden sign with peeling

paint informs visitors that the Ghost Town is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The designation is deserved, as most of the ruins and other artifacts from the original settlement are still here, but referring to Terlingua as a “ghost town” feels like a misnomer these days when considering that at least a hundred people now call it home.

Driving into the Ghost Town can be a sensory overload for first-time visitors: it looks like a weird mishmash of historical site, modern village, wildlife area, shantytown, trailer park, primitive campground, art installation, tourist trap, and junkyard. Occasionally tourists from the resort in Lajitas will come for a visit but will do a U-turn and leave before they’ve made it the first hundred yards. At the entrance travelers are greeted by a life-size replica of a pirate ship and another of a submarine, both built to look like they have been partially submerged underground; the sign marking the entrance to the complex reads “Passing Wind Ranch” and is evidence that its owner possesses a sense of humor. Up the road on the right is a pickup-size piece of artwork, made in the likeness of a giant mosquito or some other winged creature, fashioned out of old car parts and bits of metal and swiveling high on a ten-foot pole. A bit further out, a small white yacht, perhaps thirty feet long, rests on its hull among the cacti with no evidence to suggest how or why it arrived in the desert. On the left, a picturesque cemetery perched on the edge of a deep ravine contains crumbling gravestones and wooden crosses — many of them unmarked — that date from the past 115 years or so; clustered in the northeast corner, a handful of newer headstones show that the site is still in use. Next door to the cemetery, a small community garden with rain shed and water catchment tanks provides life to rows of vegetables that break up the monotony of the desert flora.

As you proceed across the undulating terrain, remnants of buildings made of stones and adobe bricks the same color as the earth appear and disappear among the creosote bushes. Some

have been reduced to disintegrated outlines by their constant exposure to the harsh desert sun and wind. Others were better preserved, and these have been refurbished and reoccupied by a new wave of residents who began repopulating the Ghost Town in the mid 1970s. Many of the people not fortunate enough to find a suitable ruin have chosen to bring their homes with them — an old school bus, perhaps, or a prefabricated metal structure. Here and there my eye catches the glint of an Airstream trailer interspersed among the earthen dwellings, their silver exteriors reflecting the brilliant desert sunlight like giant mirrors. Newer buildings dot the landscape as well, some made with conventional materials and others from hay bales, adobe, old tires, beer cans and plaster, or whatever else happened to be lying around. A few of the newest houses have yet to shed their protective Tyvek cocoons. These days there is always someone building.

The main road used to be dirt but it was paved about a decade ago; the primary land and business owner in Terlingua presumably thought a paved road from the highway would attract more tourists into the Ghost Town. He was probably right, but many locals look at such signs of “progress” and shake their heads. On a few occasions I have heard someone proclaim, “I was here before the road was paved,” which sounds like something not worth boasting about, but being able to say so puts a person in less company than you might think. Even fewer people can say they were here back in the 80s, when the Starlight Theatre was still a roofless ruin serving as an after-work hangout for a handful of river guides. It’s a familiar refrain, and one that can be heard throughout rural America: *Times are changing. Gone are the good ‘ole days.* Most of Terlingua’s residents have already said the words about other places — that’s why they moved to a ghost town in the middle of nowhere.

The road dead-ends at a complex of ruins in the center of the Ghost Town that have been remodeled and opened as businesses: on the right, the Starlight Theatre (a restaurant and bar); on

the left, the Terlingua Trading Company (a souvenir shop); and the long covered porch that connects the two, known locally as “the Porch.” The pavement erodes into dirt once the road reaches the parking lot, and as I pull in I have to navigate my way through a handful of cars that are parked willy-nilly — there are no lines painted in the lot and tourists sometimes have a hard time parking in orderly rows. Fortunately, it’s still early in the afternoon and the rush hasn’t hit yet, so I have my choice of several spots right in front of the Porch. I can already see most of the regulars: Judy, Ed, Uh Clem, Mike, Big Hat Dave, Ralph, Catfish, and Shawn are all here, as well as a handful of people I don’t recognize, though no one is playing music yet. I get out of the car, leaving the doors unlocked with the keys in the ignition and my instruments in the backseat, and walk down the Porch saying hello to everyone. I pass the stand where the Porch guitar sits, swing open the big wooden door to the Trading Company, and head to the back room where I grab two Lone Star longnecks out of the refrigerator. No one is at the register but the beer list is on the counter, so I scroll down the column of names scribbled on the large yellow notepad until I find my own and see that I still have four beers left from the last time I bought a six-pack. I cross off numbers “4” and “3” next to my name and walk back outside.

I take a seat next to Clem on one of the long wooden benches that stretch the length of the Porch and hand him one of the beers as I sit down. It is warmer than usual for March, and the bench and the plastered adobe wall at my back feel cool in the dry heat of the afternoon. During the summer months, when the temperature regularly exceeds 110 degrees Fahrenheit, these benches provide a shady refuge for people who live here without air conditioning, which is most of the population. As I take a swig and set the bottle on the bench beside me, I notice that the edge of the bench closest to the wall is more rounded than the outside edge, worn smooth from repeated contact with the legs of decades of Porch sitters. Someone must have thought to

rotate the benches at intervals so they would wear more evenly, not unlike the way you're supposed to rotate the tires on a car. It's a good idea — these benches look like they've been here a long time, as do the walls with their peeling paint and eroding plaster, the smooth-worn brick and stone tile underfoot, the patchwork metal roof that leaks when it rains, and the slowly disintegrating wooden beams that hold the roof in place. I have seen a handful of photographs of this porch taken during the 1960s and 70s and it doesn't appear that much has changed in the intervening decades. That's part of the appeal.

As the minutes pass, a steady trickle of cars begins filling the parking lot, and after a while I spot Mark's white two-door pickup truck creeping up the road from the highway. He pulls into one of the last remaining spots directly in front of the Porch and gets out, grabbing his fiddle and mandolin cases from the back seat as he shuts the door. Seeing this, I stand up and go to grab my guitar out of my own car, and by the time I return Mark is already seated on the bench with his fiddle out and is tuning up. He is dressed in his standard attire: a plain white t-shirt, sleeves cut off at the shoulders to reveal muscular arms sculpted by years of rowing a raft; shirt tucked into dark denim shorts, cut long but with legs rolled up, and held in place by a belt; Chaco sandals, sunglasses, and a black skull cap with white skull-and-crossbones pattern, tied in the back with tag ends flowing over a short ponytail of graying hair. Like many longtime locals, Mark has the sunbaked look of a desert dweller that sets him immediately apart from the more casual visitors to the Big Bend. He hands me a fresh Lone Star as I grab a folding chair and sit down to face him.

“Are you telling me you haven't been playing yet?” he asks, looking at the closed guitar case in my hand.

“Not yet,” I answer. “I was waiting for someone else to show up.”

“Well dammit, someone’s got to get it started!” Mark smiles. “How about the Boatman’s Song?” It’s one he learned recently so he has been calling it often for practice. I finish tuning my guitar and wait for him to play “potatoes,” a distinct four-beat rhythm used in old-time fiddle music to signal that the tune is starting, and together we launch in, Mark playing melody and me providing the rhythmic *boom-chuck* guitar accompaniment that is typical for this style. The accompaniment is relatively straightforward, with one, four, and five chords coming in predictable succession, so occasionally I spice things up, only half intentionally, by throwing in little rhythmic hiccups of syncopation here and there. When I do this Mark immediately glances up from his fiddle, and in my mind I hear his voice on previous occasions reminding me: *The guitar is the foundation, it carries the tunes... Don’t play any of that syncopation that singer-songwriters play... You are the drummer in this music, it has to be steady.* I rein it in and focus on locking into the rhythm.

We play another fiddle tune, then another. When I botch the chords Mark helps me get back on track by calling them aloud while he plays, sometimes using numbers (“One... Four... One... Five...”) and other times using letters (“G... F... C... G...”). He ends each tune by lifting his foot off the ground to signal the last time through the form. When we finish a tune that was really clicking, he smiles and says, “Thank you, that was a good ride.” Mark always thanks me when we play together. He doesn’t get many opportunities to play these tunes with an accompanist, despite the fact that “there’s a guitarist under every rock in this town,” as one resident informed me when I moved here. Terlingua is brimming with singer-songwriters, but only a handful of local musicians have shown any interest in learning old-time fiddle music, and this has frustrated Mark at times. When I accepted his offer to teach me the style — a tradition I had long wanted to learn — we quickly developed a mutually beneficial relationship.

After four or five tunes Mark sets his fiddle down and begins rolling a cigarette, looking more at the horizon than he does at his hands as he works.

“Man, what a gorgeous day,” he says as he leans back against the wall. “There wasn’t a breath of wind on the river, made for *real* easy paddling. Yeah, it was awesome.” I get up from the folding chair and take a seat next to him so I can see the desert panorama, and for a while the two of us sit in silence as we admire the view. The landscape here possesses such immediacy that it often feels like a participant in the conversation. This is especially true on the Porch: it is one of the best places in Terlingua — indeed, one of the best places in the entire Big Bend country — from which to view the Chisos Mountains to the east. Even though we’re only eight miles from the boundary of Big Bend National Park, it’s another twenty or so miles to the Chisos massif, and from this vantage point you can see the entire range from end to end. The scene reminds me of a view from the back of a concert hall: how all the rows slope gradually down as they progress forward so that every seat in front of you is visible, until suddenly, at the lowest point of the room, the stage juts abruptly upward into a place of prominence so that it becomes the focal point for the entire hall. Sitting on the Porch benches, the Chisos appear as the orchestra, and the entire desert foreground slopes downward toward their base so that every crevice and arroyo between the Porch and the mountains seems to be laid clearly in view. I can’t help but wonder if the original architects had this scenery in mind when they erected the Trading Company, or if the building’s orientation was intended for some more utilitarian purpose: to catch the warmth of the winter sunrise in the southeast, perhaps, or to provide a view overlooking activities in the rest of the town. At any rate, these days the Porch is famous for its view, and its notoriety is well deserved.

Today is a clear spring day and visibility is good which is typical for this part of the country, and all the park landmarks are within view: Emory Peak, Casa Grande, the Window, Mule Ears, Elephant Tusk. Off to the right and just out of sight behind Reed's Plateau, a great V marks where the Rio Grande cuts through Santa Elena Canyon in the Mesa de Anguila. Even the Pinos Mountains are clearly visible as they stand in isolation a hundred miles south of the river into Mexico. The Chisos are a washed-out ruddy brown at this time of day, but their shadows have already started to elongate making their wrinkly texture more plainly visible; in a few hours, the setting sun at our backs will cast its changing light on the desert canvas before us, painting it in gradually deepening shades of pink, orange, red, purple, and blue.

"Looks like it's gonna be a good one today," I remark.

"Only place I know where people watch the sun set in the east." The response comes from my right, and I lean forward and see that Catfish has scooted closer to Mark and me since we started playing. I smile and take a swig of beer. I remember hearing someone else say this when I first arrived in town, but at the time I didn't appreciate the deeper significance of what sounds like a straightforward statement. After all, if it weren't for the national park and the tourism it brings, Terlingua probably would have remained uninhabited once its mining heyday ended, so a comment that points to the relationship between Terlingua and the Chisos Mountains — the crown jewel of the national park — would seem to warrant no further explanation. Yet the more time I spend in Terlingua, the more I come to realize that these eastern sunsets hold symbolic meaning for many of the people who live here. In the years since its rebirth, the Terlingua Ghost Town has developed a reputation as a haven for people who drift at the margins of mainstream American society — a reputation that seems fitting for a town that is also geographically situated at one of the remotest margins of the contiguous United States. To use

the common parlance, Terlingua is a place where people march to the beat of a different drummer; it is a town that is self-consciously *other*, a place where weirdness is cultivated and celebrated. Locals will tell you that it takes a special kind of person to live here. Most residents live partially or entirely off-grid, relying on solar power and rainwater collection to satisfy their needs; some people forego electricity and running water entirely. One of my neighbors lives in a cave, and has done so comfortably for more than thirty years. The nearest airport with any kind of commercial service is 238 miles away; the nearest stoplight is 65 miles away in Mexico or 150 miles away in Texas. Because of its isolation, making a life in Terlingua has always taken a commitment to simple living and a willingness to forgo many of the conveniences and amenities that characterize urban life in a developed nation. Not surprisingly, such relative hardships have ensured that the population in Terlingua remains small and extremely close-knit. Terlinguans speak with reverence about their spirit of community, a bond that is cultivated through the shared experience of remote living in a harsh and unforgiving environment. It is a feeling that most locals say they were only able to discover once they dropped out of the rat race that is urban life and moved to the desert. All this is to say that when Terlinguans gaze out at the Chisos Mountains and proclaim, “Out here, we watch the sun set in the east,” they are talking about more than geography: the eastern sunset is a symbolic and celebratory affirmation of Terlingua as an alternative social, cultural, and political space. *In Terlingua, we do things a little differently.*

In recent years, however, gentrification and an expanding population have threatened to bring profound social transformation to Terlingua. The town now has a public water supply, an emergency response center, a well-stocked grocery store, a high school, and a bank — all services that required a three-hour round trip not long ago. Predictably, a new wave of residents

has arrived in the wake of these amenities as the desert has gradually been made more accommodating. When long-time locals express their concern, they aren't simply grumbling about modernity or urban sprawl; a lot of people around here believe that Terlingua's sense of community — that thing that makes the town so special — exists precisely *because* of the town's hardships, its isolation, and its diminutive population. For them, Terlingua's very identity is at stake. They respond to the crisis the best way they know how: campfires. Potlucks. Poetry. Music.

“Why don't you sing one,” Mark says to me after we've been sitting for a while. I think about it for a moment.

“How about a Townes song?” I ask. “Let's do ‘Don't You Take It Too Bad.’ I do it in E-flat, starts on the five.” He tunes up his mandolin and I launch into a short melodic introduction before beginning the first verse of the song. Mark finds his way along the neck of the instrument and through the patterns in the new key, an uncommon one for string players, but once he gets his fingers going he begins inserting snippets of melody into the breaks in my singing.

Partway through the second verse, I hear someone whistle to my right and look up to see Jeffro and Sha approaching from the direction of the Starlight Theatre. Sha radiates enthusiasm, from her sprightly pigtails to her colorful sundress and cowboy boots to the way she waves at us with both hands; Jeffro, ever calm and casual, smiles a subtler greeting, his guitar in one hand and his cane in the other. I pause the song by vamping on the one chord while we all exchange a few punctuated hellos. As she passes, Sha bends down and hugs me around the neck from behind, being careful not to hit the guitar as I keep time, before taking a seat next to Catfish a

few feet away. Jeffro lowers himself into the folding chair next to me, and as I resume singing he takes out his guitar and begins tuning up.

“Take it, Mark,” I say aloud after the third verse, signaling for him to take a solo over the form of the song. Mark increases the volume of his playing so that his mandolin is now the most prominent voice, and he takes over the main melody, embellishing it here and there as he goes. As he nears the end of the form, I lean over to get Jeffro’s attention. “You want one?” Jeffro nods and takes the lead as Mark wraps up his solo and reverts to a quieter strumming pattern. We take it once more through the form before I repeat the first verse and conclude the song by raising my foot, a gesture I learned on the Porch. Sha and several others clap, and Judy yells “Ayeeeeeeeee!” as we wrap up the song and reach for our beers.

“Batter up, Jeffro,” Mark says. Jeffro strums a few chords to make sure he’s in tune before launching into a local favorite, “Northeast Texas Women” by Willis Alan Ramsey. I grab the capo off my guitar and begin using it to play a backbeat rhythm on the neck of my beer bottle. Clem, who up until this point has been listening in silence, gets up from his seat and returns with the washboard and snare drum brushes that he leaves just inside the entrance to the Trading Company, and he too begins to play rhythm. As the song picks up momentum, a handful of tourists walking down the Porch begin slowing down to watch us as they pass. A few reach for their cameras and begin taking photographs, and Sha stands up from the bench to take some pictures with her smartphone. When Jeffro gets to the line in the song that says, “Kisses that are sweeter than cactus,” he changes the last word and instead sings, “Kisses that are sweeter than Catfish.” Sha has anticipated this alteration and sings it along with Jeffro, and as she does she motions to Catfish, who is still sitting on the bench a few feet away with a contented look on his face, skinny legs crossed at the knees with foot tapping as it is suspended in the air.

“*Nothing* is sweeter than Catfish!” Sha says as she reclaims her seat beside him. Catfish doesn’t say anything, but his eyes sparkle as he smiles through his beard. Like most Porch sitters, he alternates between listening to the music and conversing with friends. The atmosphere on the Porch is informal — this is not a “concert” in the traditional sense of the word — so there is no expected code of conduct for the audience. Here talking is allowed, and cell phones need not be silenced. This informality extends to the musicians themselves, as they too drift in and out of conversation while the music is being played. Musicians come and go, playing a little or a lot, moving seamlessly from performer to audience member and back to performer until the line between “performer” and “audience” becomes blurred and the terms themselves no longer seem appropriate.

Jeffro leans back in his chair and holds up his leg to end the song. Some applause and hollering, a bit more enthusiastic this time, emanates from the Porch, and a tourist wearing a bright blue polo shirt and khaki shorts reaches down and throws a ten-dollar bill into Jeffro’s guitar case, which is sitting open in the middle of the circle of musicians.

“Y’all are great,” he says to the group. “Y’all could be playing on Sixth Street in Austin.”

“Well, most of us *escaped* from Austin,” Clem says. “Too many fuckin’ monkeys and they’re all in a hurry.” He cracks his knuckles and replaces the empty bottle in his koozie with a full one. I’m surprised, as Clem almost never talks to tourists voluntarily. The man in the polo shirt laughs, less out of humor than to fill the space.

“Well, anyway, y’all sound great. Do any of you ever play in the Starlight?”

“Yeah, I’m playing in there tonight,” says Clem.

“But you know,” Mark interjects, “you don’t need a stage to play music. That’s a city thing. It’s called stage addiction, people who have to have an audience to play music. That’s not why we play. Music shouldn’t be about *me me me me me*. It should be about *WE*.” He gestures to signify the group.

The man smiles politely. “Well, thank you for the music. We enjoyed listening to y’all.” Jeffro thanks him as he walks away, and Mark picks up the ten dollars and takes it inside to buy a six-pack to share among the musicians. Jeffro leans forward in his chair and holds out the guitar at arm’s length in Clem’s direction.

“Clem, you got one?” Clem doesn’t respond immediately.

“Hmm... No, I better not,” he finally answers. “I still gotta play inside tonight.” He looks at me and a grin develops across his whiskered face. “It’s like, ‘These old hands can’t handle as much playin’ as they used to,’ right?” He laughs and holds up his hands in front of his chest, opening and closing them into fists to show me their decreased mobility. A three-hour show is a lot for him these days, but he still plays the Starlight every Tuesday night, as he has for years. Clem wired the place for electricity back when it first opened for business in 1991, so today he enjoys an unwritten contract of sorts for a weekly performance.

Clem eventually goes inside to start his gig, but other musicians soon arrive to take his place on the benches. We follow a loose rotation, taking turns leading songs and playing solos. The membership of the group changes constantly as musicians drift in and out, sometimes to grab another round of beers, sometimes to go into the Starlight for food, sometimes to talk to someone elsewhere on the Porch, and sometimes simply to listen. Nearby, Pat spends most of the afternoon chewing on a cigar while taking photographs of the musicians for his website about the Terlingua music scene, but after some prodding he eventually sits down to play some bluesy

lead guitar behind the singers. On some days the tourists will bring their guitars, occasionally asking permission before they join (an appreciated gesture), but on most days the participants are locals who join without being prompted. The style of music fluctuates depending on who is leading the song at any given moment: Web plays a country song in the classic style of Hank Williams Senior; Jeffro plays a soft and introspective original; I play a rowdy outlaw country song by Gary P. Nunn; Carol sings a slow and haunting folk song about Terlingua's mining days; Mark plays a fiddle tune and then sings a song by the Grateful Dead; Hank plays a local favorite called "Terlingua Blues" by past resident Randy Moore.

Three communal instruments remain on the Porch at all times — a guitar, a washboard, and a washtub bass — and they all see some action today. The washtub in particular tends to attract people who might not otherwise participate, possibly because of its novelty or the apparent simplicity of its design. Several people try learning to play on the job without much success, which is frustrating to some of the other participants but not to everyone. The washtub is also very good at coaxing out cameras, something that perhaps shouldn't be surprising given the setting: the instrument is a powerful and recognizable symbol of rural places and of so-called "lowbrow" music, and as such it seems to fit outsiders' expectations of what music-making in a place like Terlingua should be.

Alex and Marti Whitmore arrive for dinner as the sun nears the horizon, but before they enter the Starlight they sit down to sing a few songs. The Whitmores have an unmistakable sound when they perform as a duo: Alex plays precise finger-style guitar and sings in a clear, folk-inspired tenor, while Marti is a classically trained operatic soprano who accompanies her husband by drumming on an old suitcase decorated with a floral pattern that reminds me of my grandmother's wallpaper. The first song they sing, an original titled "79852" after Terlingua's

zip code, has become something of a local anthem, and when Alex and Marti arrive at the chorus, a handful of voices join in from across the Porch to sing along with the refrain:

I found myself in the middle of nowhere
I found myself in the middle of nowhere
I found myself in 7-9-8-5-2.

As the afternoon progresses into evening, the light show on the Chisos intensifies and the Porch gradually fills with people until it becomes a bustling hive of activity. To my right, a throng of tourists with drinks in hand mill around and converse while waiting for tables to open in the Starlight, and every now and then the hostess comes outside and yells a name: *Robert, party of four!* The rest of the Porch is filled with people sitting and standing, drinking beer and cocktails, talking, laughing, sometimes yelling, taking photos of the Chisos and each other, and otherwise enjoying the evening atmosphere. A few couples dance a two-step when we happen to play a country song at about the right tempo. Out in the parking lot some locals play hacky-sack, laughing and hollering and jumping and trying their best to keep the small footbag airborne without spilling their beers. Nearby, a few others are hula-hooping, alternately selecting from a stack of perhaps a dozen different-sized hoops that were all made by Shawn from plumbing pipe and electrical tape. In the middle of everything, a pack of dogs chase each other up, down, and off the Porch, deftly weaving slalom-like between pairs of legs as they go; I watch as they streak past a pair of tourists who look at each other inquisitively while pointing to a wooden sign hanging from the Porch roof that reads *No Dogs on the Porch*. Occasionally all this activity gets drowned out by bikers announcing their comings and goings with revving engines, presumably for their own amusement but much to the annoyance of everyone else.

Everything is happening at once, and the music continues. We get louder and louder, feeding off the energy around us until the sounds we produce become a reflection and an

extension of an atmosphere we have helped to create. Finally, after reaching a high point of activity around dusk, the Porch gradually begins to quiet down as everyone waiting for tables makes it inside, and one by one the musicians begin packing up their instruments and leaving for the night. Eventually Mark and I are the only two musicians remaining. Our instruments are already in their cases, and we both sit facing east as we finish what's left of our beers. The Trading Company is all locked up for the night, and over by its entrance the Porch guitar rests idly on its stand. The colors on the Chisos have faded to blackness, but before long a new light show will begin as the stars come out one by one and the Milky Way appears, its entire length clearly visible like a streak of powdered sugar flung across the sky. Over to our left, a handful of people are sitting on the patio in front of the Starlight. Soft light and the sounds of Clem's amplified guitar come bleeding out the front door into the night.

“You know,” Mark says, “I can remember back when there wasn't a single light between here and the Chisos. Yeah, it was like being on a boat in the ocean at night. *Man*, it was dark.” He gazes out in silence for a while, as if he's trying to picture the image in his head. Then he looks over at me and smiles. “Good tunes today, man. Thank you. Yeah, it was a *good* day on the Porch. One of the best days of music I've seen here in a long time.” He drains his beer, grabs his instruments, and gets up to leave. “Yeah, this was *fuuuun*. People in this town just don't play on the Porch like they used to.”

I know he is thinking about more than music.