



Radio Dreams: The Story of an Outlaw DJ and a Cosmic Cowgirl

By Joe Gracey and Kimmie Rhodes (Austin: Dancing Feet Publishing, 2018)

Writing a readable memoir is a daunting task, but creating a dual memoir of two people who are not exactly household names that is educational, entertaining, and emotional is near impossible. Despite the challenges, Kimmie Rhodes has completed a project Joe Gracey started long before they met in 1979, and it is the story of *Radio Dreams*.

Radio Dreams began as Joe Gracey's memoir. He was a Fort Worth native who landed in Austin in the early 1970s and established the world's first progressive country radio station, helping KOKE-FM earn *Billboard's* Trendsetter of the Year Honors in 1974. Gracey was also the talent coordinator for the first season of *Austin City Limits*, which would become the longest-running music series on American television. He and Bobby Earl Smith established Electric Graceland Studios in Austin. Calling themselves the Jackalope Brothers, the friends had two record labels, Rude and Jackalope, and were eager to preserve the synchronicity of the singer-songwriter, blues, country, swing, and Tejano that was the Austin Sound. In 1979, Gracey lost his voice to cancer, but continued to engineer, produce, and perform as a bassist and rhythm guitarist. Crediting M.D. Anderson Cancer Research Hospital,

his cancer went into remission for nearly three decades, and Gracey engineered albums for Willie Nelson, Ray Price, and a host of others over the course of his career. A gourmet cook and wine connoisseur, Gracey was also a regular contributor to *Saveur* magazine. His head and neck cancer returned in 2009. After a long battle with the disease, Gracey died in 2011.

Kimmie Rhodes's songs have been recorded by Willie Nelson, Joe Ely, Waylon Jennings, Peter Frampton, Emmylou Harris, Townes Van Zandt and others. Her own albums have met high acclaim at home and in Europe. She was the driving force behind the current *Outlaws and Armadillos* exhibition at the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville. Rodney Crowell says Rhodes has "the soul of a poet and the voice of an angel." She has been named an ambassador for The Buddy Holly Educational Foundation and travels in the United States and abroad, performing and working with young talent in songwriter retreats and workshops. She has also played on stages from the Armadillo World Headquarters to Royal Albert Hall.

Rhodes met Joe Gracey in 1979, after he had lost his voice. She walked into the studio, passing a young Stevie Ray



Vaughan on his way out, having just finished tracking one of his first ever recording sessions with Gracey behind the board. She shook Gracey's hand, and as he wrote a greeting to her on his ever-present Magic Slate, she felt an immediate connection with this man with no voice but much to say.

Rhodes writes that the second she laid eyes on Gracey, "all the bells and whistles in my intuition went off." She recorded some songs that day, and about a week later Gracey sent her a letter saying that he liked her voice and her songs, and was interested in helping with her career. She shrugged off her "crush," and was happy that he had, at least, fallen in love with her voice.

With Gracey as her producer and Smith as her record promoter, Rhodes began to gain traction in that progressive country moment when all eyes were on Austin, Texas. In a letter to a friend, Joe Gracey called her "Jackalope's new fair-haired boy," and wrote, "We used the best musicians in town and bought a brand-new box of tape. ... I view it as my best production to date." He shared the session with his mentor, Cowboy Jack Clement, and Rhodes's first single, "You'll Take Care of You," was the beginning of a thirty-year fairytale romance, career, and life of adventure for Gracey and Rhodes. They married and added a daughter, Jole Goodnight Gracey, to the family that included her two sons from a previous marriage.

As the story continues, Rhodes and Gracey write of the pioneer efforts in the Austin music business, recording on a shoestring, and promoting the old school way. They even include some geeked out technical studio equipment and recording methodology that defines the rough and real elements that created the Austin Sound in the studio. Music historian Joe Nick Patoski describes Gracey as "a pillar of the burgeoning music community on the verge of being discovered nationally and internationally. ... [He] coolly and casually opened his microphone so Willie Nelson and his friend Kris Kristofferson could perform an impromptu concert

for listeners at home. Gracey not only played Ernest Tubb on his radio show, he took the time to explain ET's significance and line out Tubb's hip bona fides for a generation that had previously ignored their parents' and grandparents' music. Gracey spent time on KOKE-FM educating his audiences about how Gram Parsons and the Rolling Stones were related to George Jones, Bob Wills, and others." And Patoski adds, "In that respect, he was as influential as Willie Nelson, Austin's musical godfather, in bringing the hippies and the rednecks together through the common love of music."

The rise and fall of that moment in Austin music history is chronicled conversationally, and with wit and humor as well as daily adventure as Rhodes and Gracey moved out to Briarcliff Country Club and became an integral part of the Willie Nelson family. Rhodes writes and performs plays with her neighbor, Joe Sears, and she and Gracey hit the road with son Gabe Rhodes playing guitar in the now-family band, as they take Europe by storm.

Along the way, the book moves, as did their lives, from the *laissez faire* world of music and creative flow, to the end of his thirty-year remission, and their final battle with his cancer. M.D. Anderson Hospital in Houston plays a major part in this book, and is just as evenly-documented as the other aspects of their lives.

Radio Dreams is much more than a memoir. It is a firsthand chronicle of much of what made Austin the live music capital of the world. It is a once-in-a-lifetime adventure of two people who were meant for each other, and their free-spirited cavalcade of friends. It is a boots-on-the-ground battle with cancer, one in which the patient and his caregiver never lose hope, even in the end.

Months after Gracey's death, back in her home in Briarcliff, Rhodes says a man came to help her friend with some repairs. This stranger said, "This house is heavy with the spirit of Joe Gracey. He's here right now and says that your life is your own now, and he's not ever going to leave you, but he wants you to go on with your life and be happy."

And so Kimmie Rhodes has begun the next chapter of her life with a reminder of the life she began with Gracey. Perhaps the title for the new chapter should be that long-ago Jackalope single, "You'll Take Care of You."

- Diana Finlay Hendricks

Our Contributors

Jason Crouch

is a reference and research librarian at the Alkek Library of Texas State University. He is an El Pasoan who has lived in Austin for the last quarter century. He earned two history degrees at Texas State University, including an M.A. in Public History. Crouch researches the convergence of popular music, Texas history, and American history. He also maintains a massive collection of physical music formats and has been the vocalist in a number of rock bands including the New Texicans and Sanchoville.

Diana Finlay Hendricks,

who holds an M.A. from Texas State University with an emphasis on Texas music and culture, has worked as a journalist, author, editor, and photographer. She is a regular contributor to the *Journal of Texas Music History*, and recently released the biography *Delbert McClinton, One Of The Fortunate Few* (Texas A&M University Press, 2017). She is currently working on a project with actor and playwright Jaston Williams and developing a book about the women in the business of Texas music. www.dianahendricks.com

Rich Kelly

is the author of the 2017 M.A. history thesis “Unintended Consequences: Robert Earl Keen and the Origins of the Texas Country Music Scene,” and he is currently expanding that work on the formation of the Texas Country music scene of the 1990s. He was among the first DJs to put the artists of that scene on the air through his KTSW radio show at Texas State University. Kelly is an Austin native and has been a high school teacher there since 2002.

Bryan Proksch

is associate professor of music history and literature at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas. He has written two books: *A Sousa Reader: Essays, Interviews, and Clippings* (GIA, 2017) and *Reviving Haydn: New Appreciations in the Twentieth Century* (Rochester, 2015). In addition to numerous essays on brass history, band history, and the music of the Classical era, he serves as a column editor for the International “Trumpet Guild Journal” and the website content editor for the Historic Brass Society.

