

Brenn Hill: Steppin' Out

By Misti Ashford

Just when it seems the spirit of the American West is long gone and the idea of the working cowboy just a faint memory, someone like Brenn Hill comes along. The Ogden, Utah native has always been known as a "cowboy" singer, but his latest album, *Endangered*, shows he's that and a whole lot more. His latest single "Buckaroo Tattoo," recently reached number 17 on the Texas Music Chart and the cowboy – make that singer-songwriter – couldn't be more pleased.

"*Endangered* has allowed me to step out beyond cowboy music," says Hill. "In my heart of hearts I always knew that Texas would be a place I would visit throughout my career. I've watched the growth of the Texas scene, and I've always been interested in the fact that it's so broad and accepting of so many musical styles. Texas really showed me there is a home for my music."

Hill started singing at the age of four in church choirs. He credits a seventh grade English teacher for telling him he had a real knack for writing. It wasn't too long before he wrote his first song at age 15.

"I would write a song and sing it to the dog, or my mom, or whoever I could get to listen," laughs Hill. "I think they were tired of being my only audience."

That soon changed when his family took him to the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, when he was 16. He performed there and was asked to play at the "Best of the Cowboy Music Jamboree" jam session at the end of the festival. The jam session featured musical greats like Peter Rowan, Ramblin' Jack Elliott and Sawyer Tom Hayden.

"I can draw a line back to that one show," says Hill. "That's where a lot of people heard me

and heard about me. Next I played a show in Denver and eventually became a regular at cowboy gatherings and western music festivals."

In '95 Hill decided to head east to Nashville. He spent his time knocking on doors of various publishers on Music Row only to hear them say he needed to be more "mainstream."

"Here I was – a cowboy singer from the west," says Hill. "And at that time country music centered around the southern country lifestyle, not the western country lifestyle. I had a rough time in Nashville. And I kept thinking that out west I already had a career started. So I came back home to pursue what has evolved into five albums."

In 1997 Hill released the first of those albums, *Rangefire*. The Academy of Western Artists (AWA) named him their Rising Star for the year and his song "Call You a Cowboy" was nominated for Song of the Year. In 1999 he released his second independent album, *Deeper Than Mud* and was deemed "a bright new voice" by *American Cowboy* magazine. His next project was *Trail Through Yesterday* in 2000. That album was named Album of the Year for 2001 by the AWA, and Hill also won the Western Music Association's prestigious Crescendo Award. He followed up with a fourth album, *Call You Cowboy*. The awards kept coming: In July of 2004 the AWA membership responded to the release of his latest album, *Endangered*, by naming Hill their Western Male Vocalist of the Year.

Endangered is the album Hill says he always wanted to do.

"The cowboy genre and way of life will always be a part of me, but I wanted to reach a broader, younger audience," says Hill.

His approach was no-holds-barred. He headed again to Nashville and asked Eddie Schwartz if he would consider producing a record for a cowboy singer and was honored when he accepted.

Schwartz is perhaps best known for writing Pat Benatar's hit song "Hit Me With Your Best Shot." He has also written songs for Joe Cocker, the Doobie Brothers, Carly Simon, and



Rita Coolidge. Schwartz and Hill assembled some of Nashville's A-list players for the album.

"Our approach was that I was a songwriter and we weren't going to have any boundaries," says Hill.

"It didn't matter if it was country, cowboy, bluegrass, folk, Americana – I was going to do the songs I wanted to do. [Eddie] gave me the freedom I always wanted to have on an album."

Endangered is an album Hill is proud to call his own. Blending the roots of his cowboy sound and the more traditional country style, the album takes Hill's work to a new arena.

"Nashville has always tried to tell me how to sound," says Hill. "I like cowboy music and I like country music. But so many other types of music have influenced me. This album lets those influences shine through."

While Hill is happy to appeal to a wider audience, he is still a proud voice for the western way of life. Growing up working on his grandparents' land and riding horses has given him a great respect for those who make their living from the land. Hill calls agriculture the "true cornerstone of our country." Though he has spent time as a working cowboy, he says he doesn't consider himself a cowboy.

"You have to be born a cowboy," says Hill. "I sure have a lot of respect for those who live that way of life. It's so hard to be a farmer or a rancher. I'm just thankful I have had the opportunity to have insight into that way of life and to know there is purpose in my music." ★

Misti Ashford covers Red Dirt music and the rodeo scene.

BEST IN TEXAS™



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BEST OF 2004

| <u>Artist</u> | <u>Song</u> | <u>Spins</u> |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1. Cross Canadian Ragweed | Sick and Tired | 24,225 |
| 2. Pat Green | Guy Like Me | 23,645 |
| 3. Kevin Fowler | I Ain't Drinkin' Anymore | 21,973 |
| 4. Gretchen Wilson | Redneck Woman | 20,109 |
| 5. Pat Green | Don't Break My Heart Again | 19,475 |
| 6. Jason Allen | Your Heart Turned Left | 17,704 |
| 7. Allie Danielle | Next Big Thing | 17,262 |
| 8. Kevin Fowler | Not Lovin' Anymore | 14,110 |
| 9. Tommy Alverson | Maybe in Mexico | 13,894 |
| 10. Jamie Richards | Wasted | 13,735 |
| 11. Randy Rogers Band | Tonight's Not the Night | 13,714 |
| 12. Aaron Watson | Reckless | 13,443 |
| 13. Eleven Hundred Springs | Why You Been Gone So Long | 12,635 |
| 14. Templeton Thompson | If I Didn't Need the Money | 12,083 |
| 15. Zona Jones | Whiskey Kind of Way | 11,851 |
| 16. Gary P. Nunn | Perfectly Normal | 11,720 |
| 17. Roger Creager | Long Way to Mexico | 11,507 |
| 18. Mark Chesnutt | The Lord Loves the Drinkin' Man | 11,383 |
| 19. Zona Jones | House of Negotiable Affections | 11,248 |
| 20. Jason Boland & the Stragglers | Somewhere in the Middle | 11,030 |
| 21. Cory Morrow | Nothing Better | 11,026 |
| 22. Los Lonely Boys | Heaven | 9,913 |
| 23. Aaron Watson | The Right Place | 9,822 |
| 24. Waylon Pierce | Speed of Coors Light | 9,628 |
| 25. Robert Earl Keen | Out Here in the Middle | 9,146 |
| 26. Jack Ingram | Attitude & Drivin' | 9,140 |
| 27. Brittany Roe | Shoes | 8,647 |
| 28. Great Divide | Freedom | 8,537 |
| 29. Charlie Robison | New Year's Day | 8,445 |
| 30. Dale Watson | Honky Tonkers Don't Cry | 8,355 |
| 31. Deryl Dodd | Things Are Fixin' to Get Real Good | 8,099 |
| 32. Brenn Hill | Buckaroo Tattoo | 8,047 |
| 33. Josh Turner | Long Black Train | 8,006 |
| 34. Deryl Dodd | Let Me Be | 7,982 |
| 35. Rodney Crowell | Earthbound | 7,778 |
| 36. Johnny Bush/Willie Nelson | Whiskey River | 7,325 |
| 37. Ed Bursleson | Dead Skunk | 7,318 |
| 38. Mike McClure Band | She Gets to You | 7,291 |
| 39. Cooder Graw | Lifetime Stand | 7,273 |
| 40. Reckless Kelly | Nobody's Girl | 7,146 |
| 41. Craig Collins | Just What I Need | 7,083 |
| 42. Forty 5 South | Back of My Truck | 7,040 |
| 43. Bobby Marquez | She's Not From Texas | 7,027 |
| 44. Blue Dogs | Wrong Love at the Right Time | 7,011 |
| 45. Rob Darien | Ain't Enough | 6,932 |
| 46. Houston Marchman | Not Tonight | 6,894 |
| 47. Pauline Reese | One Less Honky Tonk | 6,851 |
| 48. Mike McClure Band | Don't You Say Anything | 6,819 |
| 49. Blake Stamper | The Way Back to Texas | 6,799 |
| 50. Cross Canadian Ragweed | Alabama | 6,710 |

