

# Blood for Oil

By Laurie Barker James

Even in the relatively diverse world of Red Dirt music, Brandon Jenkins is an anomaly. Large, fierce-looking, and multiply-tattooed, he's got a voice that's more Hank Williams twang than black hat baritone. Truth be told, he doesn't wear a cowboy hat. Or cowboy boots. He'd look equally at home in some grotty blues bar as in any honky tonk.

For years, Jenkins has written songs that have been regional successes for others, and had some of his own success as well. "Down in Flames" is a Jenkins co-write with Kristen Kelly and singer Stoney Larue. "Feet Don't Touch the Ground", a perpetual Larue romantic favorite with audiences, is a Jenkins piece. So is "Finger on the Trigger," which busted open some national radio doors when Bleu Edmondson released his version last year.

Jenkins has the quirky ability to produce soft ballads, bitter-sweet introspective self-analysis and plain ol' rock songs with a grinding, bluesy backbone -- sometimes all merged together. He's honest, perhaps to a fault. And that's what makes him interesting.

Occasionally, that honesty gets him into trouble. "Blood for Oil" opens his 2009 release, *Brothers of the Dirt*. The song starts out with a fairly innocuous, two-step beat. But within seconds, the lyrics -- comparing the American need for gasoline and oil to a junkie's need for crack cocaine -- tell you, it's not a feel-good, flag-waving piece.

It's not the first song that's mentioned the connection between oil and American military politics -- rapper Eminem's song "Mosh" features the lyric "no more blood for oil/we got our own battles to fight on our own soil", while Ministry's "Rio Grande Blood" says "We went to war because of our dependence on foreign oil... However, "Blood for Oil" may be the first Texas country song to do so. And the song actually almost didn't make the recording. "The record was already finished, but I had the song," Jenkins says. "It's not gonna be relevant in two years." At that point, he was thinking, if the song didn't make the album, he'd maybe just put it on his website.

"Blood for Oil" is, at its core, an indictment of what Jenkins sees as an unholy merger of the United States armed forces with private oil corporations. "War is a part of the human condition," he says. "The problem I have is this: A company like Halliburton is making billions in profits. We've got guys in the military and their families on food stamps, escorting the guys who work for the private company. When there's an explosion outside the convoy, guess who's on the front lines?"

"This is not my opinion; this is fascism," he continues. "When state and private industry work together, you lose track of where one starts and the other ends." That gets translated in the second verse of his song. "Use other peoples' sons and daughters/ make 'em human shields/make 'em cannon fodder/hell yeah we'll trade their blood for oil." And he's not alone in his sentiments. "War for the most part, unless it is home defense, is a way for rich men to get richer off poor men fighting and dying," says fellow outlaw country artist Jackson Taylor, who's also an Army veteran. "Always has been, always will be." Perhaps surprisingly, the staff at Jenkins' new record company, Red Dirt Music/E1 Music, liked what they heard. While not an official single with a promotional team behind it, the song got pushed out last fall,

and received a bit of regional airplay. Most radio programming directors would give the song a listen since they knew it was a Jenkins piece. But for many stations, that listen didn't translate into featuring the song in prime time drive hours.

Chance Cody, program director and morning show host for KHYI The Range in Dallas, says that "Blood for Oil" was added to the playlist last year, and played a handful of times.

"Then I checked my voicemail," Cody says. "It was full of complaint after complaint about the song. There wasn't one positive comment. We yanked it pretty quick."

In January, the Sirius Satellite radio's Outlaw Country channel added "Blood for Oil" to their playlist. And then the feedback started. First came the negative, if thoughtful, "reviews" on fan sites, like the one on Lone Star Music. "I hate when these artist (sic) go politico," wrote one fan. "And the CD starts out with 'Blood for Oil.'"

Other people have commented to the effect of: If you're going to take a stand against the politics of putting gas in the tank, you should be riding a bike instead of riding a gas-guzzling white van. Jenkins disagrees.

"By that logic, (the people who say that) should go into the military," he says. "We had plenty of gas before we invaded a sovereign nation. We just want record profits with no trickle down."

To be fair, Jenkins' lyrics are a reflection of his disgust with the both the previous administration and the current one. Jenkins served in the U.S. Army Reserves from 1988 through 1996. Back when he joined the Army, he says he was aligned with the Republican Party.

"I've been a Republican, and occasionally a Democrat," he says. "But we've got to separate from the whole left-right paradigm, red and blue mentality. I am not pro-Obama and I'm damn sure not pro-Bush" he says. The third verse starts with "G.W. don't give a fuck/he just rides around his ranch in his pickup truck..." Jenkins is not one to pull his punches. Willy Braun voiced a similar sentiment in Reckless Kelly's "American Blood," off the band's 2008 *Bulletproof* CD. Braun's lyrics included "George is a real go-getter and he's running the show...he sits at home with his feet on his desk while the boys got theirs in the sand". Braun released a pre-emptive statement about the song on the band's website.

"When I wrote 'American Blood' I knew some people were not going to like it and I realize that there are some lyrics in the song that could seem disrespectful..." reads Braun's statement. "I hope that listeners will realize that the song is about the fact that there are some people in Washington making a lot of money on this war at the expense of the...American soldiers who have been killed or injured on the frontlines."

Maybe it's the F-bomb in Jenkins' lyrics that people respond to so vehemently. He says he can pretty much track the times that Sirius plays the song. Because shortly after each spin, his email account will get a few rants like the following.

"'Blood for Oil' makes you sound stupid. Liberal talking points for bad country songs. Maybe you and McMurtry could get back on our side. We normal people out here are sick of anti-American, anti-Bush songs..." Another email Jenkins received

said: "Lefties always say it's about money and oil. Why is everything America does (sic) have to be evil....I don't see what oil or money we're getting..."

Jenkins is not particularly inclined to suffer what he sees as foolishness. "The two big oil baron presidents have both made war around oil," he says. That lyric -- about invading a nation so that we can keep our gas prices under \$4 per gallon -- seems to have been lost in the profanity and the debate about patriotism and political affiliation. Jenkins will also inquire, on occasion, what branch of the military in which his critics served. He's in a unique position, both as a veteran and a songwriter, to bridge issues that polarize many Americans into opposite camps.

"I've always believed that if a wise person argues with a fool, pretty soon you can't tell which is which," he says, with a grin. Jenkins directs critics to listen to the whole song. "Get past the Bush reference and listen to the last verse," he says. "I am far from liberal. Soldiers are dying, and if you think we're over there for any other reason than money or oil, you don't have a clue."

The final verse, which has been overlooked by most of the people who tell him they don't like the song, has some harsh words for the current administration, calling it a "new face on the corporation." Jenkins is making a comment on the endless American political infighting that inhabits partisan politics.

"People are not looking at the bigger picture," he says with a sigh. "It's divide-and-conquer thru 24 hour a day, left spin and right spin media. I don't know the answer. But it's the same fuckin' bullshit."

Jenkins occasionally grows weary of both defending his position and at the general state of apathy and ignorance he sees in America.

"We're in two wars and the middle of a depression and people want to know where you goin' for vacation," he says. "People don't understand this. Nobody's having to ration sugar these days. Most of the coverage of war and politics is dumbed down by the media."

Jenkins reports getting more. He says there are at least three incidents of people threatening him, in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways. The most concerning is when someone says he might get killed singing "that song."

Jenkins is 6'2, 250 pounds easy, and he's not a pacifist. But he's contemplating extra security, or perhaps a concealed weapons permit. This is the core problem with freedom of speech. Jenkins has the right to sing what he wants. Listeners have the right not to like it or not to buy it. An artist releasing anything stronger than a song that talks about drinking beer after work on Tuesday should expect some feedback. "(The song) is very political," says KHYI's Chance Cody. "If you make a song that leans one way or the other, you manage to alienate half your audience."

American writer and philosopher Noam Chomsky says "If you believe in freedom of speech, you believe in freedom of speech for views you don't like." Something is terribly wrong with America when it's considered acceptable to make death threats when you don't like what someone else has to say.

However, Jenkins also gets support, perhaps from unlikely sources. Jackson Taylor, who could never be accused of being liberal, lent his two cents to the debate.

"I have always been a big fan of Brandon's even if our politics don't always fall in synch," Taylor says. "Brandon and I both served in the military because we believe in the right to speak your mind freely without compromise as afforded us by our founding fathers. Anyone bitching about Brandon's music needs to read the Constitution and the Bill of Rights."

And there have been some pleasant surprises, like the gig he played in College Station, a town not known for being a haven of hippie politics. "I sang (the song) live in College Sta-



tion, and I kind of expected to piss people off," he says, with a grin. "But some of those college kids liked it. I heard some cheering"

At the end of the day, Jenkins says, it's just a song. It's how he feels about the world as he sees it, right this minute. It's not the first time he's touched on politics, and it won't be the last. Back in 2001, Jenkins returned to Austin from a tour in The Netherlands on September 10. The morning of September 11, he woke up jet-lagged and groggy, to the news that air traffic had been effectively shut down by attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. Anyone who flies for a good part of their job will tell you that it was a little harder to get on a plane right after 9/11.

From that experience, he wrote the song "Whole World's Gone Crazy", which marks the time, as Jenkins sees it, when the American people as a whole began to surrender individual freedom for perceived security. Granted, it's scary when people fly planes into your buildings and it seems that nobody can stop them. Jenkins quotes Benjamin Franklin to illustrate: "They who would give up an essential liberty for temporary security, deserve neither liberty or security." Whether you buy his opinions or not, Jenkins can at least back up what he says. An hour spent with him is a fascinating walk down a road paved with quotes from some of the American founding fathers to British writer George Orwell. It may make you uncomfortable to have to think so hard. But Jenkins says that's his job: Writing songs that are simple, like "White Van Blues," and writing songs that are complicated.

"That's what we're for, as artists."