

## **Streets of Laredo**

*Lacy Johnson*

“I’ll find a place to rest my spirit if I can  
Perhaps I may become a highwayman again.”

- Johnny Cash

On the trunk of a small silver car he sits, aged guitar in hand. He begins to pluck out a bluesy rhythm as I stand in the dark parking lot in anticipation of the music he is about to share. Although this setting is a humble one for a musician, the light of the Pizza Hut sign acts as a spotlight illuminating his face and occasionally resulting in a bright glimmer of reflection from his guitar’s finish. Although his stage is perhaps unorthodox he commands it, and there is an energy that makes the scene fit together.

“What do you want me to play?” he asks as he continues with his bluesy improvisation. I reply that he should play his favorite song. “My favorite for what audience?” he says.

“Me,” I reply.

My answer settles in the night’s chilly air for less than a second, and the first gentle chords of an original song begin to flow from his guitar. Then he sings:

Here we are again, looking out on a perfect sunset

As it slowly slips away, I can see the stars coming out in your eyes

As the day fades into night, all I want to do is hold you tight

As the night slips back into day,

I never ever want to let you go away. The voice that fills the night air is filled with a unique tenderness, a sharp contrast to his more often cynical speaking tone. Intertwining with his picking, it becomes a beautiful language of warmth.

His dad gave him that guitar. It isn’t anything special, at least not to an outsider, unless of course they pick it up and play it. The Johnson

guitar has been with him for three years. “This guitar means more to me than most people I know,” he says of LJ, which is the name he gave his guitar in honor of his first love. The guitar is his get away, and he says he can always count on it. Besides the sentimental value, the guitar produces a good sound and not just in his opinion. When sitting in with a bluegrass band one of the members set his own \$1400 guitar aside, picked up inexpensive LJ, and loved it.

LJ’s body catches the light as he holds it across his lap. His left hand moves adeptly from fret to fret along the entire stretch of LJ’s long neck. He executes the song beautifully, and just as I get completely lost in the music he stops, rolls back on the trunk, and laughs at himself. “I can see this is going to be a short concert,” he says in apparent frustration at some perceived error in his playing. He moves on to a classic Johnny Cash song. For one reason or another he seems more comfortable with this song. As he sings a bluesy rendition of “Folsom Prison Blues” his head bobs to the music. It’s as though the song has gotten inside of him and the music is dictating his movement, or perhaps he has gotten inside the music. He does not fall into the category of musicians whose eyes are closed as they play. He falls far from it. Actually his eyes look on, not in the worried concentration of a novice musician, but in the vision of an artist. He is living the music.

Devon Gideon grew up in small town Drakesville, Iowa. He went to school like most everyone else. He followed the rules and he excelled, unlike many. In fact, everyone expected him to graduate at the top of his class and to do great things, and they told him so. “Everyone thought I was going to be valedictorian and that I was going to go places.” He certainly did go places.

Now at 20 Devon looks into his future and sees a melody waiting for lyrics. He lives by a belief that making plans for the future only leads to disappointment. One thing is certain for Devon though, and that is the presence of music in his life. “Music is what I am going to be doing.

That's not a hope. There's no doubt about it. I will be making music the rest of my life. Even if I am starving to death in a ditch somewhere, I will have my guitar with me." That may sound like an extreme statement, but given Devon's background, there's really nothing extreme about it.

"When I left Drakesville I had no plans of coming back," he said with a hint of something that could be interpreted as sadness. Devon had entertained the thought of making this journey for years, but one night in the summer of 2004 he made these thoughts a reality. "Life kept kicking me in the head repeatedly, and a series of events happened that made me want to leave so I packed up and left." That's right, Devon set off one summer night with LJ and a tote bag with clothes and some basic supplies. He left his tiny rural community and walked the twenty-some miles to Ottumwa, Iowa, the next big town. He took gravel back roads as opposed to the dark highway and after growing quite tired, realized that no one picks up a would-be hitchhiker on a gravel road at night.

Devon survived the night, but then he had to face ninety-three degree heat with about ninety percent humidity. These conditions would make any sort of outdoor activity uncomfortable to say the least, but Devon endured them while carrying LJ and his tote bag, which he later discovered weighed around eighty pounds.

Devon would hear many times, from many people, throughout his schooling, "Gosh Devon, you are going to do great things!" or "You are such an intelligent young man. What are you going to do once you graduate?" Devon came up with a response. He started in eighth grade joking around that he was going to be a hermit. As he began high school his jokes developed into his reality. The only problem with this idea was that this was about the time Devon began playing guitar. "I discovered my love for performing in front of people. A hermit doesn't play in front of people, so I had to change it to a hobo." Devon began to see in his future a lot of traveling around playing music. "Maybe I thought I was joking too," he said in reflection.

In those hours on the way to Ottumwa, which Devon calls the longest of his life, there was a blessing sent to him in the form of a saddle club. They were on their way to the Fort Madison Rodeo on horseback and invited Devon along. Having never ridden a horse Devon was, naturally, an expert. After what could have been a disaster in a horse being spooked while carrying an inexperienced rider, Devon was told he rode with “bronc qualities”. I wish I could tell you here exactly the correct response to a bucking horse as Devon demonstrated to me. However, I was so distracted by his quick movements of the imaginary reins that I lost his words. Something about circling something around and pulling it back? The saddle club was impressed and even went so far as to accuse him of previous experience. Whether it was his musical ability, his gentle personality, his natural riding skills, or some other factor, the saddle club accepted Devon into their group. He rode with them for five days and was called “the gentleman.” “I guess they called me that because they partied and drank and wreaked havoc, and I’m not the kind of person that would normally hang with them,” he said. But the saddle club accepted him and took him in as one of their own.

“I caught a ride with Hank Williams when I was on the road.” Devon had just left a gas station where he had camped for the night. He walked two or three miles down the road and saw a house under construction which was nothing out of the ordinary for this traveler. He heard a holler ring out asking if he would like something to drink. The holler belonged to a scraggly looking redheaded man. The two got to talking and the supposed carpenter handed Devon a Dr. Pepper. Devon stood there with the cold can dripping in the heat. A dog that perhaps could have been this man’s brother in another life hung around with his similar scraggly looks. The difference between man and dog was that the dog lacked the vitality the man had. “He had this old dog that looked like it could keel over at any moment.” The man asked what Devon was doing, and upon telling his story the two hopped in a rusty and beat-up little Datsun pick-up truck.

They were headed down the highway, bullshitting, and the man casually said, “My name’s Hank Williams.” Devon laughed but the man was serious. He illustrated his frustrations with his name through stories, “I got pulled over and the officer asked for my name. I told him and he laughed. I handed him my license and he was like, “Oh. (Clears throat) Sorry.” Hank also told Devon that he had spared his son, much to the disappointment of many, by not naming him Hank Williams Jr.

So traveling he did, but what about his music? Just on the border of Kentucky and Tennessee Devon slept in a state park upon the recommendation of a man who had helped him. The man offered to buy Devon food and water, but Devon refused to take the hand out. He camped in that state park for two days due to inclement weather. “I ended up camping for two days with no food or water of any kind so I took off because I was starving. I was just praying for a gas station.” Devon admitted to craving some pretty weird things when he was starving. “I crave Oreos and Dr. Pepper. I don’t normally eat those things!” Devon was in luck and found a gas station where he could satisfy his nutritional needs with empty calories, caffeine, and lots of fat. As he was leaving, a truck pulled up. The two good ‘ol boys inside had noticed Devon’s guitar and asked what kind of music he played. Devon’s reply of “classic country” was just what these boys wanted to hear. “Would y’all mind comin’ back to the trailer park and playin’ fer our mama?” one of the guys asked in his southern drawl.

The truck pulled into a trailer park. This was the kind of trailer park you see on the television with the back woods family of hillbillies. It’s the kind with tin cans and goats in the overgrown front yard. The rusty lawn mower is parked on the spot that separates the shorter part of the weeds from the part that you can get lost in. It’s been in that spot since it broke down two summers ago. “I didn’t know those people actually existed!” Devon admitted. He went in with the two good ‘ol boys and met “mama.” It turns out “mama” was a rather large woman who was unable to get off the couch on her own. But equal to her size was her love of classic coun-

try music. The good ‘ol boys and “mama” enjoyed Devon’s house call concert so much they wanted to share it. “We want the whole trailer park to hear this!” said one of the good ‘ol boys as he fiddled with an old karaoke machine. He kept fiddling and fiddling and couldn’t get the thing to work. Seeing that this had the potential to be an all day operation, Devon mentioned that he needed to be getting on to Tennessee. This ended his concert for “mama.”

In addition to this experience Devon sat in with bands, jammed with other musicians, played for all who would listen, and spent personal time with his music along the way. He actually made it to Nashville, Tennessee riding with Hank Williams. While he was amused at the man’s name, this was not a moment of destiny for Devon as you might expect of an aspiring country musician. “I never really planned on going to Nashville in the first place. If I did, it wouldn’t have taken six weeks to get down there. I actually made it to Nashville. Nobody believed me when I said I got a ride with Hank Williams. I was just grateful I got a Dr. Pepper!”

When met with questions from people as to what he was doing Devon gave the same story again and again. He was drifting around from town to town playing music for anybody. He was going wherever the wind took him. Upon talking to Devon people wanted to help him. He never once asked for anything in all of his travels, but received rides, money, camaraderie, food, hospitality, and helpful information everywhere he went. An obvious reaction he got was the concern of the danger of his travels. “I knew it wasn’t dangerous I had faith that there were a lot more good people out there than they want you to believe,” Devon says. And according to his experience he was right as he can only cite one person he rode with during his two months of travel who made him feel uncomfortable.

“After about 2 months on the road I started noticing my body did not want to go on. I actually got so homesick; I would think I saw people I knew. There was no possible way it could be them. I started making bad decisions. I took rides with people I normally wouldn’t take rides with.

I got a fever and became physically ill.” Devon knew it was time for his journey to come to an end.

“The whole trip back was the worst. On the way down, there were no problems at all. On the way back, among other things, my belt broke, both shoelaces broke and I was using guitar strings for laces. I was almost out of money with no real place to stay. I actually slept in a field in drizzling rain.” Devon soon got an answer to his questioning the sudden lack of help he had been receiving from motorists. As he got back up on the highway he saw a sign that read, “do not pick up hitchhikers.” Devon had been traveling near a maximum security prison. He wound up breaking down and calling his mom in Ina, Illinois, which they had “a hell of a time finding on a map.” His mom drove eight hours to pick him up, and they headed back to small town Iowa.

Is Devon just a drifter wandering and playing his guitar without a responsibility or care? No, Devon can be found working to pay his bills like most people. His day often starts with a bowl of cornflakes, the drive to town, and then working at the local Pizza Hut. “I am officially a cook, but I do everything. I do manager prep work and run the kitchen by myself. I am the one they count on.” Perhaps he isn’t learning the kind of life lessons that he learned on his journey, but he has learned a few not so life-changing facts in his job at Pizza Hut. “You don’t get as many toppings on a pizza as you think you do, and there is bacon on the Meat Lover’s. Everyone’s always like, ‘I didn’t know there was bacon on those!’” And after his day on the job you can bet Devon plays his guitar.