

Ryan Bingham

They Call Us the Lucky Ones



photo credit: Elias Tahar

A few years back, Ryan Bingham was in need of a band. The Grammy and Academy Award-winning singer-songwriter had scaled back his touring commitments while he was appearing on *Yellowstone*, but there was a show at Fort Worth's Billy Bob's looming on his calendar.

Bingham reached out to The Texas Gentlemen, the beloved Lone Star collective that has backed up Paul Cauthen, Leon Bridges, Shawn Mendes, and the late Joe Ely, among many others. They hadn't previously worked together, and it was going to be a tight turnaround. "I didn't have any time to rehearse with them or anything," Bingham recalls. He sent recordings and hoped for the best. What he got exceeded his expectations.

"We ended up playing these versions of these songs that were really almost how I meant for them to be played live from the time I wrote them 20 years ago," Bingham says. "And it just really blew me away."

The one-off date turned into more than one, and then a 2024 concert album recorded at Red Rocks Amphitheatre that reminded everyone why Bingham is such a revered live performer. The latest chapter of their ongoing collaboration is captured on Bingham's seventh studio album *They Call Us the Lucky Ones* — his first release since 2023's conceptual *Watch Out for the Wolf* EP and his first full-length studio album in seven years, following 2019's *American Love Song*.

Recorded at Grant Wilborn's 7013 Sound in Fort Worth, *They Call Us the Lucky Ones* is a collection that shows the alchemy of a world-class storyteller and a world-class band standing toe to toe in the studio. Bingham co-produced the album with his longtime sound engineer Wilborn, with sizzling instrumental contributions from The Texas Gentlemen's Ryan Ake (guitar), Dan Creamer (keys), Paul Grass (drums), and Scott Lee (bass), as well as Richard Bowden (fiddle) and Cody Huggins (Guitar). Together, they forge a sound that's inspired by the thousands of miles they've traveled, the long stretches of time away from home, and the transcendent nights when deep connections are created with the audience.

“The Lucky Ones,” which inspired the album’s title, is a majestic ode to the weary musician’s life of highs and lows. Bingham’s guitarist and longtime friend Cody Huggins penned the tune and Bingham felt this album was the perfect opportunity to record it with The Texas Gentlemen. “I always thought there was something special about that song,” Bingham says. “All of us coming together and spending so much time on the road together, we felt like it was just something that spoke to us and the life we’ve been able to create by staying in motion all these years.”

That same communal spirit animates the rest of the record. *They Call Us the Lucky Ones* plays like a celebration of their time touring together as well as a fitting continuation of Bingham’s authentic artistry. One of the most singular voices in American music, Bingham has been bringing his cinematic character studies to the world for two decades, having lived them firsthand by doing manual labor and competing in rodeo around the Southwest before arriving in spectacular fashion with 2007’s *Mescalito*. On *They Call Us the Lucky Ones*, he’s a little older and a little wiser, but still possesses the same uncanny knack for translating his lived experience into songs as profound and stirring as they are tuneful.

Bingham’s signature rasp and layered storytelling anchor a group of ten songs on *They Call Us the Lucky Ones* that range from the snarling, swaggering rock of “Let the Big Dog Eat” to the aching balladry of “Twist the Knife.” The Texas Gentlemen apply grit to the woozy “I Got a Feelin’,” lively jamming to the breezy “Relevance,” and groove to the loose, autobiographical “Ballad of the Texas Gentlemen.” “Some of my favorite records are loose and live and gritty and have a bit of soul. Some of those

imperfections are left in there,” Bingham says, noting their studio ensemble didn’t labor over every detail and just tried to capture magic in a handful of live takes with minimal overdubbing.

Bingham’s long history of bridging wide-ranging musical styles including folk, blues, country, rock & roll, and mariachi is a natural fit for The Texas Gentlemen, who have a similar ability to jump between regional styles at the drop of a hat. “That’s something that we all had in common,” Bingham says. “Even though we didn’t really discuss it, we just all had that unspoken understanding of what each song needed. We took it seriously, but not too seriously.”

The feeling of fun is evident all over *They Call Us the Lucky Ones*. In “Americana,” Bingham gives a satirical look at modern American life through the stoned eyes of an unemployed cowboy. It’s biting and funny in a way that the masters — some of Bingham’s heroes — did better than anyone. “Guys like Guy Clark and Terry Allen were big influences on me,” he says. “Some of those songs can be really deep, but really comical as well.”

In “Blue Skies,” Bingham is content and in love. “Wouldn’t trade a blue sky, honey/for the way I feel for you,” he sings, as The Texas Gentlemen supply a subtle backbeat to the sing-along choruses. “Sometimes my wife will say to me, ‘You got a lot of sad cowboy songs. You need some more glad cowboy songs,’” Bingham says. Later, with the album-closing “I’m a Goin’ Nowhere,” he sounds giddy over having found someone to while away the hours with, and the band joins him by breaking into a sunny barroom vamp to close things out.

This marks a shift from the past, when Bingham was trying to make sense

of tragedies and traumas that marred his young life and singing about them directly. The struggles and tragedies of existence are all still here, presented in striking detail, but Bingham also glimpses the future that lies on the other side. “At the end of the day, I just wanted every song on this album to at least have that glimmer of hope,” he says. “I wanted to have fun.”

These days, Bingham is more apt to write with some distance from himself, adding to the universality of his stories. “A lot of it is not going so deep inward, but just being able to step out and almost write as a spectator,” he says.

A prime example on *They Call Us the Lucky Ones* is “Cocaine Charlie,” in which Bingham spins his observations into a gripping, novelistic story of love and betrayal set amid the international drug trade. “We moved down to Laredo, Texas, when I was about 16 and spent quite a bit of time on the border down there. I’d go to Mexico quite often,” he says. “‘Cocaine Charlie’ is from my own experience living near that part of the world and based on some other stories that I heard.”

Ultimately, though, Bingham doesn’t like to give too much away about what he means in each one of his songs. That’s for listeners to sit with and figure out. “They’re all about something, but at the same time, I always love to let people interpret how they hear them,” he says. “I just try to go with the feeling, speak the truth, and see what shakes out at the end.”

With *They Call Us the Lucky Ones* and the instrumental heft of The Texas Gentlemen, Bingham does all of that. What’s more, he even has a good time doing it.

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