

# CD Review: Houston Bernard Band's Knocking Boots



Full disclosure time: I am not a country music aficionado by anyone's definition. Don't get me wrong, my record collection contains more than a few selections from the likes of Johnny Cash, Gram Parsons and various rockabilly acts. But hardcore Western hillbilly is a gaping hole in my musical education. That said, it doesn't take the ghost of Hank Williams Sr. to figure out that today's crop of what passes for "country performers" just ain't country music! In fact, to my ears Carrie Underwood, Kellie Pickler, Keith Urban, et al present more like manufactured Hollywood pop stars (but for the occasional twang in the voice or slide from the pedal steel) than they do authentic Bakersfield or Nashville artists. Hell, the Country Music Association awarded Taylor Swift a Milestone Award!!?? Loretta Lynn would be rolling over in her grave... I mean if she were dead... which she's not.

Keeping all of that in mind, it was with a dubious ear that I recently listened to the new CD *Knockin' Boots* by the Boston-based country act the Houston Bernard Band. Three lines into the first track, "Country Crowd," and any doubts I had of whether these guys were true country artists worthy of the genre's rich musical heritage instantly vanished. In fact, their sound is the embodiment of what 21<sup>st</sup> century country music SHOULD be, rather than the steady stream of also-rans clogging the airwaves of today's Top 40 Country radio. And as the Houston Bernard Band's own mission statement declares, "Country music is better raw than fried."

It's no great mystery how this band gained such an authentic sound and genuine appreciation for country music when you take a look at their respective backgrounds. Frontman / vocalist Houston Bernard not only hails from Oklahoma, but also is directly related to infamous gunfighter and member of the outlaw gang The Wild Bunch, George "Bittercreek" Newcomb. That's some serious street-cred! His impressive lineage doesn't end there, boasting a musical father and uncle who performed in Nashville with the likes of Tanya Tucker and Sleepy LaBeef. The band is rounded out by Midwest native Patrick Dalton on drums, guitarist Sam Crawford, Jameson Stewart on bass and Canadian-born Ben Blanchard on keyboards.

*Knocking Boots* has all the trappings of a hit album, with tight musical performances and a glossy production that ties everything into a cohesive package any big name label would be proud to release. But of all the elements demonstrated by the Houston Bernard Band, nothing stands out stronger than their sensational songwriting, a key factor for all genres, but downright paramount in the competitive world of country music. The opener "Country Crowd" is a cleverly written bemoaning of our often obnoxious modern pop-culture, especially when juxtaposed to the simpler pleasures of your average country fan: *"I was wearing boots and all the guys were wearing loafers. They were selfie taking, photo taggin' chronic Facebook posters... Just wanna party in the USA. Turn that Miley Cyrus down, tonight it's Billy Ray."*

The title-track "Knocking Boots" is a rocking number, filled with equal parts sexual innuendo and attitude: *"Been looking for a girl who looks like you with your pink cammo and your cowboy boots. Chug another beer, come on show me that caboose girl - Slip the DJ some green to play your favorite song, got you bendin' over twerkin' see the top of that thong."*

The standout track for my money is the hilarious "Yoga Pants," which reminds me of some of Charlie Daniel's best work from back in the late '60s (when he was still an 'Uneasy Rider'). *"My god you're looking good, give your downward dog a bone - Namaste with me tonight, the way you wear them yoga pants I'll rock your world tonight."*

Without a doubt, the Houston Bernard Band is making an indelible mark on the New England music scene, country or otherwise. Their schedule is exhausting, whether headlining clubs, festivals, or opening for nationals like Scott McCreery and the legendary Pure Prairie League. And although I didn't have the pleasure of seeing them share the stage with the aforementioned headliners, based on what I've heard on *Knocking Boots*, I'd bet they outclassed everyone on the bill. To date I've never heard any band more deserving of household name status than the Houston Bernard Band. And mark my words they will achieve it.