

When Ottoman Turks frontman and songwriter Nathan Mongol Wells steps outside of the band for his solo debut, *From A Dark Corner*, due out this year on State Fair Records, he doesn't present as one of the characters from the Ottoman Turks' uptempo songs -- the conspiracy-poisoned uncle, the insecure southern bro, the apathetic rocker stuck in a perpetual party, or the vengeful corpse of JFK. Instead, Wells' solo work feels more like it comes from the perspective of a man who spent all night arguing with those lunatics at a Dallas dive bar and just sat down in a quiet room of his house with a chilled glass of well tequila to quiet their voices in his head.

Beyond two wholly unique studio albums and 12 years worth of live performances numbering in the thousands, Ottoman Turks ([Rolling Stone](#), [Dallas Morning News](#)) gave the world the solo careers of the band's guitarist Joshua Ray Walker and bassist Billy Law. But the Turks are the brainchild of Wells, and while Walker went deeper into his country influences and Law put out a series of poignantly literal ballads, *From A Dark Corner* is the introduction to the man behind the Turks' cinematic universe. Less raucous, but still packing the internal chaos of the characters he previously created (Walker, who co-produced the album with John Pedigo, describes the debut project as "fervorous"), *From A Dark Corner* is more autobiographical than Wells' previous work.

"This is more traditional, more honest," says Wells, who adopted the moniker "Mongol" out of a high school obsession with the intercontinental auto-race the [Mongol Rally](#). "I think of it as me when I'm singing."

Still, there seems to be an unintentional aversion to the ordinary in everything that Wells creates that prevents even his solo work from fitting perfectly into the Americana genre. Never shedding a hint of menace in his voice, he has a knack for adding whimsy to the darker themes he writes about in a style that feels touched by Roger Miller.

Credit the juxtaposition to spending his high school years living on the outskirts of Deep Ellum, Dallas' historically eclectic musical neighborhood. Or a line of influences that somehow went almost directly from The Strokes to Tom Waits to Hayes Carll. Whatever it is, Wells admits that he might be too "antsy" to write songs designed to be played from a stool in a quiet room.

*From A Dark Corner* still touches on the same kind of themes that a Guy Clark devotee looks for and are delivered like a cold burst of wind through a closing door, giving the sense that the songs' runtimes are fleeting away, like Jerry Jeff Walker's rendition of "Desperado Waiting for a Train."

The album's opener and first song Wells wrote of the batch, "Beulah Land," is a slinking, sinister song about loss. "Rather than about a romantic relationship, it's about a friendship falling apart, which I think in many ways is more devastating," Wells says. Darkness engulfs the song "Taken For A Ride," as well, in which the narrator unconvincingly suggests the best intentions. Wells describes the song as being about "the turmoil of making promises you can't keep and figuring out what you want."

Wells' clever songwriting is perhaps best showcased on "First Day It's Warm," a celebration of winter's end in Texas. Between the childlike references ("freeze tag, dirty mags, Six Flags, and ice cream") and the reality that Texas winters are relatively forgiving to begin with, a message seems to emerge: You barely need an excuse to give in to your own personal impulses.

Written about his time living with Law and Ottoman Turks drummer Paul Hinojo in College Station, where the three went to school, in a small house referred to as "Turks' Mansion," "First Day It's Warm" references the elementary school the young band lived across the street from. Paying their bills with weekly plasma donations and playing wiffle ball while drinking Evan Williams bottles in the front yard, the school bell was sometimes their only sense of time.

"We drove the local housing prices down," Wells remembers with a laugh and hints of nostalgia and shame.

"Juarez" is the song that would fit most comfortably on an Ottoman Turks album. "Rather Go To Hell" is a modern take on Johnny Paycheck's anti-work anthem "Take This Job and Shove It." And "Honest Drinking" and "Two Heads" perfectly distill the anthem's winking nihilism.

Like Walker, Law and even other Dallas-Fort Worth self-starters like Charley Crockett, Old 97s, Toadies, Cliffs, Squeezebox Bandits and Eleven Hundred Springs, Wells' music is defined by a decade-plus of live performance.

"Performing is still the greatest thing in the world," Wells says.

No matter the grimness implied in *From A Dark Corner's* title, anyone that has seen Wells perform knows he'll find a way to get you to dance to the songs in a live setting. It's only paradoxical as far as you give yourself the time to think about it. But by then, Wells is already on to the next song.