

FRANKIE BALLARD
by Tamela Meredith Partridge
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Much like the mighty Rio Grande itself, Frankie Ballard’s new album, “El Rio,” has the wild river capacity to cut a defining path, defy rules, and dance to a rhythm all its own.

“El Rio simply means “The River” in Spanish,” said Ballard during a recent phone interview with The Times. “This album is a very special project for me. It’s exciting, because this is music that has really come from my heart. It’s a lot of things that I needed to get off of my chest, both musically and lyrically. Now it’s time to hand it off to the people.”

Ballard will perform 8 p.m. Friday, Sept. 9, at Sandwich Fair.
Visit sandwichfair.com for ticket information



Leaving Nashville behind, Ballard and his handpicked 5-piece band took a barebones approach to recording El Rio at the Sonic Ranch, the world’s largest residential recording studio complex located outside of El Paso, TX on a 1,700-acre pecan orchard which borders the Rio Grande River and Mexico.

“The river theme of El Rio all started in Muscle Shoals, AL, actually,” said Ballard. “We stopped along the way on our trip to El Paso, TX and rehearsed a few times. And one of the places we stopped was a recording studio in Muscle Shoals, which is a very famous music town. The native people from Muscle Shoals have always said, even before it became a music town, that there’s a song in the Tennessee River that runs right through Muscle Shoals. We just had a really magical experience there. We were arranging some songs and whatever mojo or voodoo that’s still left dripping on the walls in the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, I think we got some of it.”

The creative renegade vibe continued while recording at the Sonic Ranch, due in part to its large collection of vintage and modern equipment that captured Ballard's pure, energetic and unique musical swagger as an entertainer, songwriter, and guitarist.

"I was there in El Paso making the record that I wanted to make, being a musician, just so thankful, really so overjoyed, to be doing what I was doing," said Ballard, who still plays on the guitar he named after his beloved grandmother, Arlene. "And the juxtaposition hit me that I'm on this side of the Rio Grande River in the U.S., really living the epitome of my dream, while right on the other side of the river was a lot of people not living their dream. Not even close, really. And that put me in a real genuine introspective head space. The title of the album, *El Rio*, is not about one song. It's more about identifying, lassoing and wrapping its arms around all of the songs. It was something important that I was feeling along the way."

El Rio is Ballard's follow up to *Sunshine & Whiskey*, the 2014 breakthrough album that contained three consecutive No. 1 hits "Young & Crazy," "Sunshine and Whiskey," and "Helluva Life."

"I feel like I'm a story teller at heart," said Ballard. "I've also been somebody that has forever counted on music, really relied on it. If I was feeling bummed out, I would turn to music. If I needed to get energized, I would turn to music. If I was broken-hearted, I would turn to music. If I just wanted to have fun, I would turn to music. And I know that there's a lot of other people out there in the world that are like that too. Hopefully, as a music maker, my music affects them in that way. That's the connection and relationship I want to have with them."

Ballard, 33, co-wrote two out of eleven tracks on *El Rio*, and has released two singles from the project, "It All Started With A Beer" and "Cigarette."

"I've always wanted to be the guy with the fresh new sound," said Ballard. "But I've always been trying to make my sound better and what I do better. And I feel like *Cigarette* is a great example of what the new sound is. It's a small instrumentation. It's just a 5-piece band. The production is really old school in that way. Just 5 human beings, old school guitars, bass drums, and just trying to make it really happen. That's why I love *Cigarette* and that it's the new single because we're trying to stamp that sound out there."

El Rio also contains a cover of the Bob Seger cut, "You'll Accomp'ny Me."

"Bob Seger took me on tour with him back in 2012," said Ballard, who grew up in Michigan, Seger's home state. "He is one of my musical heroes. I look up to him in many, many ways as an artist and songwriter. We played all over the country in these big arenas, Madison Square Garden, The Staples Center in Los Angeles. And I got to accompany and open up for him. That's the biggest compliment I've ever got."

For Ballard, playing at events such as the Sandwich Fair is reminiscent of his strong Midwestern heritage and work ethic.

“I’m so happy to be coming to the Sandwich Fair,” Ballard said. “We’ve gotten to do a lot of fairs this summer and over the years. It’s inspiring to look out and see the families having a fun evening together. It’s like one more chance to let go, listen to some music, and say goodbye to summer. I’m so glad we’re going to be able to do it together.”