

Dance Halls and Last Calls:

A History of Texas Country Music

By Geronimo Treviño III, (Plano: Republic of Texas Press, 2002).

The dance hall has been a prominent structure in many small towns across Texas for well over a century. Requiring nothing more than an open area for dancing and music, dance halls vary from small, simple structures to large, elaborate architectural statements. The dance hall serves as a communal gathering place, where people from the host town and from neighboring communities gather to socialize and to listen and dance to live music, usually country music. It has been a family-friendly gathering place, often the only other venue in town outside of church where people gather. Since the advent of the radio and of movies, and later the combination of the two into television, the dance hall has steadily decreased in popularity among an ever-modernizing Texas. Because of their historic popularity, Texas dance halls have shaped the development of country music in the state; formative Texas musicians from Bob Wills to George Strait began their careers in Texas dance halls, and the structures themselves symbolize the roots of country music in the state.

Dance halls are readily acknowledged in many music histories as an important site for exposing listeners and musicians to new styles of music. And yet, despite their important role in the development of country music, until now no one had developed an index of the dance halls in the state. *Dance Halls and Last Calls* is a strong addition to the healthy list of books chronicling the development of Texas music, but adds its own twist by focusing on the structure of the dance hall and its role in the community.

Geronimo Treviño is a working country music performer who has started a new career for himself with this book. *Dance Halls and Last Calls* is the culmination of ten years of research, interviews and photography. The publication of this book has led to new media opportunities through which the musician will promote his research. The book has inspired a forthcoming documentary to be released in the summer of 2003. A compact disc, organized by the New Braunfels Museum of Art & Music, has been released featuring selections of country

music which may have been commonly played in Texas dance halls. And a museum display of photographs, poster art, and other memorabilia of Texas dance halls will tour the state through 2003-2004. All three spin-offs share the same name as the book.

Dance Halls and Last Calls begins with a forty-eight page introduction to Texas music. The introduction serves as a quick chronology of musicians who have had influential periods in Texas and who have also affected the development of country music. Most of the musicians mentioned are singers or songwriters who work primarily in country music, but Treviño also includes musicians from other genres who have influenced country. The history of country music performers in Texas has been described better and in fuller detail in other sources, but this introduction does serve to briefly remind the reader of who's who in Texas country music.

After the introduction, Treviño moves into his index of dance halls across the state. While he admits that he may have overlooked some dance halls, the book does cover more than one hundred historic music venues in Texas, many of which are still standing and operating as dance halls.

The dance halls are listed in alphabetical order by name of the venue; most entries include photographs of the site, a few paragraphs on the structure and the community in which it stands, as well as mentions of important performances that may have happened there. The sketches of the dance halls are brief, engaging and extremely readable. They are loosely historical and, while Treviño is proud of his fact-checking, the book reads like a collection of memories rather than a compilation of data. The sketches occasionally include quotes from owners or performers, which is a nice touch. Treviño takes the time to highlight the unique things about each structure (architecturally and historically) when appropriate. And, when they are consistent enough to print, he includes the performance schedule of the clubs. Treviño has included both original and previously unprinted photographs. The book

has been criticized for overlooking some important dance halls, but the inclusion of so many smaller, and even destroyed dance halls makes the text admirable.

The photos make the book immediately engaging to a reader. Treviño includes great images not only of the structures themselves, but also of performers on the stage or in front of the buildings. He also includes signage and poster art, as well as photographs of the grounds of some of these dance halls. Most of the structures included in the book have photographs, even of those dance halls which have been destroyed or converted. Yet, several still-standing clubs curiously do not have photos. Also, some entries have great photographs of performers in the dance hall, but not pictures of the structures themselves. These omissions may be due to the inability to receive permission to use photos in the book, but for the sake of consistency, it would be nice to have photos of every structure, and then augment some articles with additional images. Another issue with the layout of the text that should be addressed in a future printing is that not every photo in the book is labeled. Because of the page breaks and variable lengths of text for each dance hall, without labels it is occasionally unclear which dance hall is pictured.

The index is cross-referenced, which is nice; the reader can research a dance hall by name of the venue, or by name of the town. This detail, combined with the directions to each dance hall conveniently included in each entry, makes the book particularly useful to keep in the car when road-tripping across the state. The index does not consistently include references to the introduction of the book, which is a shame; it would be useful to refer back to the introduction after reading about a dance hall, or while visiting a site, in order to see who had once played at that venue.

The two brief chapters toward the end of *Dance Halls and Last Calls* seem extraneous to the overall book. Treviño has included a two-page homage to smaller country music venues (bars, clubs, and other settings) and

Border Radio: Quacks, Yodelers, Pitchmen, Psychics, and Other Amazing Broadcasters of the American Airwaves.

By Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford. Foreword by Wolfman Jack. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002.)

a three-page section on “roadies” which reads more like a tribute to a personal friend of his than to the support and labor these individuals give to musicians. He is right to acknowledge that these venues and individuals also shape the development of country music and the lives of musicians; however, Treviño clearly notes that he is focusing on larger, family-friendly dance halls, and not on smaller venues or on individuals within country music. In a future edition, I would hope he would remain confident in the scope of his work and continue working in that direction rather than diluting his index with new subjects tacked on to the end of his book.

Treviño’s life on the road and his familiarity with so many prominent musicians gives the book a great personal touch filled with intimate stories of country artists. Treviño is able to include anecdotes that a reader would probably not have heard otherwise – recollections of first time performances, the image of Ernest Tubb riding a bike to a San Antonio radio station, and many stories of musicians being pulled over by the police. This book is a great read for fans of Texana, of country music history, and of architecture. I also recommend the book to anyone interested in traveling through the small towns across Texas.

Cathy Brigham

The so-called “border radio” stations, which blasted their signals from just across the Rio Grande in Mexico northward into the United States, Canada, and beyond from the 1930s through the 1980s, created a colorful, complex, and sometimes bizarre concoction of music, news, commercial advertisements, and evangelical outreach.

In this revised and updated edition of *Border Radio*, Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford explore this fascinating phenomenon in which technological innovation, religious fundamentalism, product promotion, and popular music blended together in a rather freewheeling and often improvised campaign to mass market goods, ideas, and culture to an increasingly consumer-oriented American public. By combining solid scholarship with a generous helping of humor and social insight, Fowler and Crawford offer a very enlightening and thoroughly entertaining look at this important aspect of American music history.

As radio stations began to proliferate in the 1920s, the airwaves quickly became filled with broadcasts ranging from high-browed music and educational programs to medicine-show quackery promoting miracle cures for a variety of ailments, both real and imagined. By the 1930s, the federal government, in collaboration with large, privately owned broadcasting companies, began regulating the airwaves, pressuring smaller stations to adhere to more uniform programming standards or forcing them out of business altogether.

In order to avoid what they perceived as heavy-handed government regulation, some maverick broadcasters set up stations just across the border in Mexico. This allowed them to continue their innovative programming with relatively little interference from U.S. authorities. Mexican law also authorized these stations to broadcast with a signal strength many times greater than that permitted in the United States, thus allowing these “border blasters” to reach an unprecedented number of listeners across the continent and around the globe.

Dr. John Brinkley was one of the pioneers of border radio. This Kansas doctor earned national notoriety in the 1920s by

transplanting goat glands into humans, ostensibly to restore male sexual potency. In 1931, he relocated to Del Rio, Texas, and opened his own radio station (XER) across the border in Ciudad Acuña. Now able to advertise his “miracle procedure” in millions of living rooms across the country, Brinkley was soon inundated with new patients. He expanded his radio programming to include music, a variety of commercial advertising, and spiritual guidance from such characters as astrologer and fortune-teller Rose Dawn, the “Star Girl.” Millions of Depression-weary Americans tuned in daily to Brinkley’s broadcasts, desperate for entertainment, health or financial advice, and the reassurance of hope for some kind of improvement in their lives.

Other colorful figures, including radio announcer and future Texas governor W. Lee “Pappy” O’Daniel, also took advantage of these powerful broadcasting facilities and their innovative formatting to promote themselves and their products. Such companies as Crazy Water Crystals and Hillbilly Flour sponsored very popular variety shows as an effective way to expand their customer bases. Some of America’s most beloved and influential musical figures of the time performed on border radio, including Woody Guthrie, Lydia Mendoza, Cowboy Slim Rinehart, Patsy Montana, and the Carter Family. Radio evangelists also used border radio to reach larger audiences than previously possible. By the 1960s, border radio allowed such “rebel” DJs as Wolfman Jack to break new musical ground and redefine mainstream popular music by broadcasting controversial or less well known rock and roll acts to a national audience.

The border radio phenomenon is as fascinating as it is important in helping shape American cultural history. *Border Radio* tells the story of this unique aspect of broadcasting history in a wonderfully entertaining way. Although scholars will probably lament the absence of footnotes, this is a well-researched and written book that will appeal to almost anyone interested in the development of American popular culture.

Gary Hartman