There are no images or tables in the document.
Today, New York City’s sidewalks are underscored by the rhythms of English and black residents using iPads. People still love music as much as ever, but more often than not they recycle it, re-creating at a distance the sound of the past time. The difference is that long ago music rode from stage to crowd on waves of spotlight glare and breeze in a city whose musical geography was marked out by performance landmarks: The Savoy Ballroom, CBGB’s, the Fillmore East, and (before it burned down) the Apollo. By the mid-1970s, the Apollo re-issued for the theatre’s 70th anniversary—provides a decade-by-decade insider’s history of the Harlem theatre that defined African-American performance for much of the twentieth century. The story goes something like this:

None of Frank Schiffman’s success rates the pages. Theirs was a forty year love affair; yet, Shaver offers a surprising confession, “Did Brenda love me? I don’t think so. I’m not sure she did.” Shaver’s grandmother, Birdie Lee Collins Watson, learned that life is best met head on with honesty, hard work, and no complaining. Ms. Mabel Legg, a high school English teacher who recognized Billy Joe’s talent in the seventh grade, also offered advice he never forgot: “As long as you are honest with what you write, you will always have something to say.”

And this is one of the pleasures of Honky Tonk Hero. While the narrative occupies a mere seventy-two pages, the remaining one hundred-sixteen pages re-_create the complete lyrics to the recorded songs Shaver has written (up to 2004). Throughout, Ms. Legg’s advice comes through loud and clear. Over the course of fifteen albums (the last two not included here) and one hundred-plus songs, Billy Joe also proves that life is poetry. And he rightfully affirms, “To me the song is poetry—that’s all it is. It’s the way I describe the world around me.”

Another special feature of Honky Tonk Hero is the inclusion of a cache of photos, a family photo album if you will, which provide faces for his father Buddy, mother Tincie, grandmother Birdie Lee, and Brenda, along with pose with struck with companions such as Willie, Waylon, Robert Duval, and Kenny Friedman. Especially poignant are the shots of Billy Joe and Eddy taken over the years, reaffirming their loyalty to each other. Brenda can be seen holding a cigarette, as well as friends and musical companions.

The photographs on the dust jacket are worth mentioning, too. The front cover dust jacket shot comes courtesy of the legendary photographer Jim Marshall (“One of the best portrait photographers that ever lived”). A decade or so later, in the mid-1970s, he cleaned up his act only to have tragedy strike again in recent years. Within a period of a year, both his mother and wife Brenda succumbed to cancer, and his only son, Eddy, died of a heroin overdose. Shaver then found himself in mysterious circumstances. Still later, Shaver suffered a heart attack on stage and underwent quadruple bypass surgery. But he never stopped writing songs. If the story is largely a familiar one, it is because Shaver has repeated it in numerous interviews. This time around, though, he has the opportunity to tell things completely in his own words, natural and unvarnished, right down to the cuff links and English teacher who recognized Billy Joe’s talent in the seventh grade, also offered advice he never forgot: “As long as you are honest with what you write, you will always have something to say.”

And this is one of the pleasures of Honky Tonk Hero. While the narrative occupies a mere seventy-two pages, the remaining one hundred-sixteen pages re- create the complete lyrics to the recorded songs Shaver has written (up to 2004). Throughout, Ms. Legg’s advice comes through loud and clear. Over the course of fifteen albums (the last two not included here) and one hundred-plus songs, Billy Joe also proves that life is poetry. And he rightfully affirms, “To me the song is poetry—that’s all it is. It’s the way I describe the world around me.”

Another special feature of Honky Tonk Hero is the inclusion of a cache of photos, a family photo album if you will, which provide faces for his father Buddy, mother Tincie, grandmother Birdie Lee, and Brenda, along with pose with struck with companions such as Willie, Waylon, Robert Duval, and Kenny Friedman. Especially poignant are the shots of Billy Joe and Eddy taken over the years, reaffirming their loyalty to each other. Brenda can be seen holding a cigarette, as well as friends and musical companions.

In the 1960s, while still a student at the University of Texas, Shaver, along with his buddy Townes Van Zandt, Willie Nelson, Johnnie Wright, and Hot Tuna, began playing in local bars. The band, which Shaver describes as “almost a country band,” was called the Group, and as such might not have been taken seriously as a musical outfit. But Shaver’s smile and swagger, not to mention the belt buckle, are still the same.

Joe W. Specht

by Billy Joe Shaver, assisted by Brad Reagan (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

Honky Tonk Hero
America’s music. Big band jazz is the invention of Dizzy Gillespie or Duke Ellington, but Paul Whiteman gets the credit as the greatest bandleader. Screamin’ Jay Hawkins invents the wild theatrics of rock and roll, while Elvis sells millions of records.

The primary weakness of *Showtime at the Apollo* is perhaps unavoidable. It is so good at giving us a 360-degree tour of life in one theatre, that when America’s racial climate begins to change in the 1960s, we are left to view it with curiosity, from a distance, and without comprehension. Did the Apollo—the leading black theatre in America—help to cause the Civil Rights movement? Fox concludes that the “general acceptance of black culture into American popular culture was the beginning of something brand new, but it was also the beginning of the end for the Apollo Theatre… it is the final irony that the ultimate casualty of this revolution was the Apollo itself.” We are left wanting to know much more about exactly how this all happened, but we will have to settle for a description of one final performance—George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic in 1980, with pot smoke thick in the air, and the teenage crowd chanting along with P-Funk “one nation, united, under a groove.”

Actually, though, there is a coda to the demise of the Apollo. Today, you can go up to 125th Street and see an occasional show—the Apollo was saved by private investors and government development funds in the 1980s. You can watch the amateurs of today strut their stuff if your local television station picks up *Showtime at the Apollo*. Now a cultural landmark, you can visit the Apollo gift shop, take a tour of the theatre, and imagine the night that James Brown showed up with his straw suitcase. Then, listen to *Live at the Apollo* on your iPod as you take the subway home.

Scott Gabriel Knowles

---

**Gregg Andrews**<br>is a Professor of History and Assistant Director of the Center for Texas Music History at Texas State University-San Marcos. He is an award-winning author of three books: *Insane Sisters: Or, the Price Paid for Challenging a Company Town* (University of Missouri Press, 1999); *City of Dust: A Cement Company Town in the Land of Tom Sawyer* (University of Missouri Press, 1996); and *Shoulder to Shoulder? The American Federation of Labor, The United States, and the Mexican Revolution* (University of California Press, 1991). A former Andrew Mellon Humanities Fellow and National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow, he is currently working on a book on labor and culture in Texas during the Great Depression. He is also a singer-songwriter who uses public performances, classrooms, and scholarship to integrate music and history.

**Allen Olsen**<br>is an adjunct history instructor at both San Antonio College and St. Mary’s University in San Antonio. His thirty plus years as a semi-professional guitarist, combined with his training as a historian, give him a unique understanding of popular music history. He is currently working on a full-length history of the West Side Sound.

**Joe W. Specht**<br>is director of the Jay-Rollins Library at McMurray University in Abilene. Specht has contributed to *The Encyclopedia of Country Music* (Oxford University Press, 1998) and *The Handbook of Texas Music* (Texas State Historical Association, 2003). He is also co-editor of *The Roots of Texas Music* (Texas A&M University Press, 2003).

**Scott Gabriel Knowles**<br>teaches history at John Jay College in New York City. He is a Founding Editor of purplestatesreader.com.
America's music. Big band jazz is the invention of Dizzy Gillespie or Duke Ellington, but Paul Whiteman gets the credit as the greatest bandleader. Screamin' Jay Hawkins invents the wild theatrics of rock and roll, while Elvis sells millions of records.

The primary weakness of *Showtime at the Apollo* is perhaps unavoidable. It is so good at giving us a 360-degree tour of life in one theatre, that when America's racial climate begins to change in the 1960s, we are left to view it with curiosity, from a distance, and without comprehension. Did the Apollo—the leading black theatre in America—help to cause the Civil Rights movement? Fox concludes that the "general acceptance of black culture into American popular culture was the beginning of something brand new, but it was also the beginning of the end for the Apollo Theatre...it is the final irony that the ultimate casualty of this revolution was the Apollo itself." We are left wanting to know much more about exactly how this all happened, but we will have to settle for a description of one final performance—George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic in 1980, with pot smoke thick in the air, and the teenage crowd chanting along with P-Funk "one nation, united, under a groove."

Actually, though, there is a coda to the demise of the Apollo. Today, you can go up to 125th Street and see an occasional show—the Apollo was saved by private investors and government development funds in the 1980s. You can watch the amateurs of today strut their stuff if your local television station picks up *Showtime at the Apollo*. Now a cultural landmark, you can visit the Apollo gift shop, take a tour of the theatre, and imagine the night that James Brown showed up with his straw suitcase. Then, listen to *Live at the Apollo* on your iPod as you take the subway home.

Scott Gabriel Knowles

---

**Gregg Andrews**

is a Professor of History and Assistant Director of the Center for Texas Music History at Texas State University-San Marcos. He is an award-winning author of three books: *Insane Sisters: Or, the Price Paid for Challenging a Company Town* (University of Missouri Press, 1999); *City of Dust: A Cement Company Town in the Land of Tom Sawyer* (University of Missouri Press, 1996); and *Shoulder to Shoulder? The American Federation of Labor, The United States, and the Mexican Revolution* (University of California Press, 1991). A former Andrew Mellon Humanities Fellow and National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow, he is currently working on a book on labor and culture in Texas during the Great Depression. He is also a singer-songwriter who uses public performances, classrooms, and scholarship to integrate music and history.

**Allen Olsen**

is an adjunct history instructor at both San Antonio College and St. Mary's University in San Antonio. His thirty plus years as a semi-professional guitarist, combined with his training as a historian, give him a unique understanding of popular music history. He is currently working on a full-length history of the West Side Sound.

**Joe W. Specht**

is director of the J. Jay-Rollins Library at McMurray University in Abilene. Specht has contributed to *The Encyclopedia of Country Music* (Oxford University Press, 1998) and *The Handbook of Texas Music* (Texas State Historical Association, 2003). He is also co-editor of *The Roots of Texas Music* (Texas A&M University Press, 2003).

**Scott Gabriel Knowles**

teaches history at John Jay College in New York City. He is a Founding Editor of purplestatesreader.com.