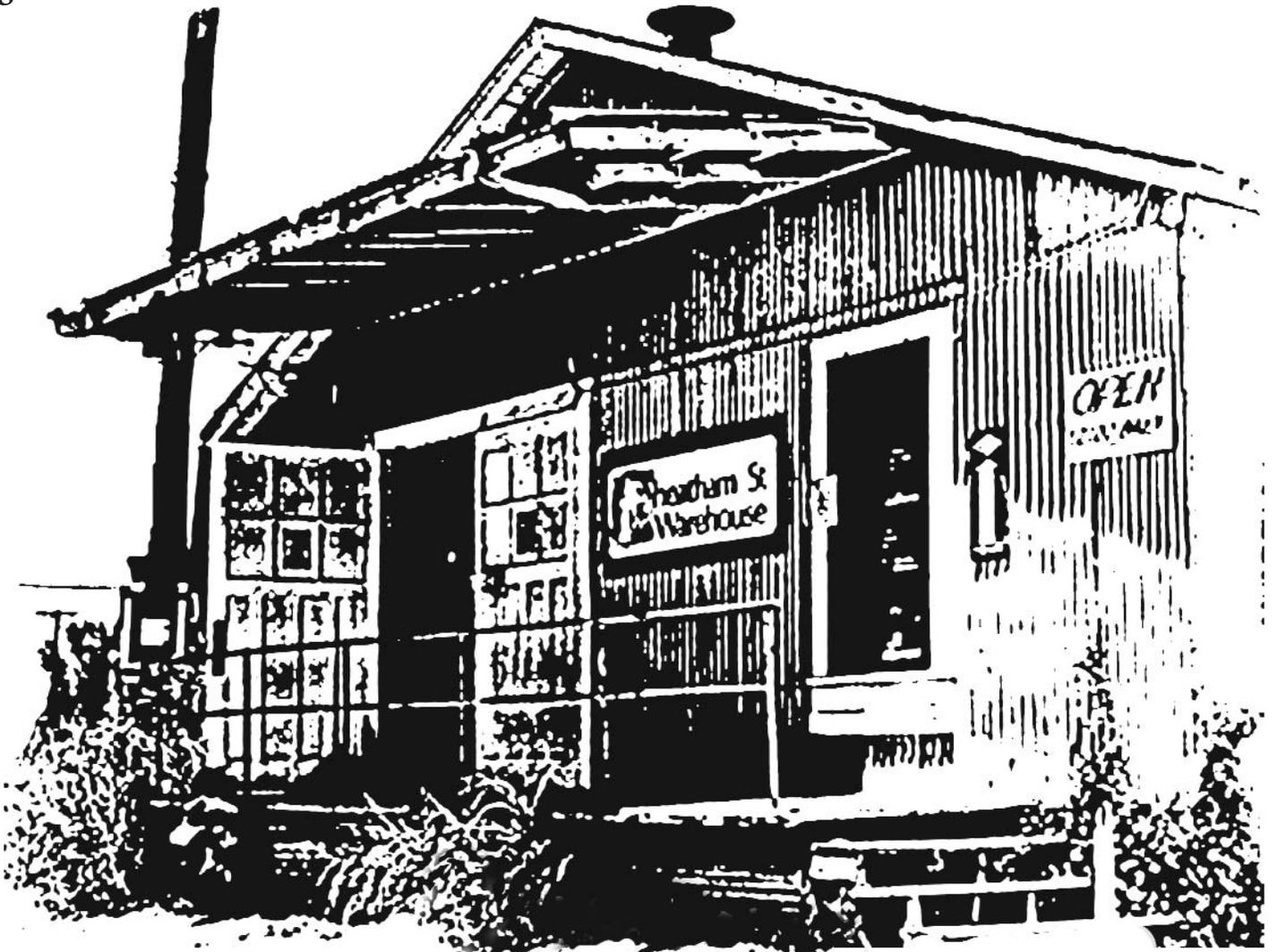


# **“It’s the Music”:**

## **Kent Finlay’s Cheatham Street Warehouse in San Marcos, Texas**

Gregg Andrews

Photo of Cheatham Street Warehouse, 1974. Courtesy, Nathan Allen



*As songwriters step inside Kent Finlay’s Cheatham Street Warehouse every Wednesday night in San Marcos, Texas, perhaps the most frequently asked question of the bartender and others gathered inside is, “Is the list out yet?” Of course, the “list,” which the bartender does not put out until eight o’clock (bar time), is a sign-up sheet for songwriters who hope to perform that night. Hopefuls eagerly check out the Budweiser Light clock behind the bar in anticipation, aware that their position on the sign-up sheet might determine whether they perform two songs or only one, depending on the number of names on the list.*

The weekly Songwriters Circle is the heart and soul of Finlay’s vision for the now legendary honky tonk that he opened in June, 1974. Seasoned songwriters are well-aware that Wednesday nights at Cheatham Street are much more than “open mic” nights. For historical purposes, Finlay carefully preserves the yellow legal pads that contain years of lists of Songwriters Night performers. As he often reminds the audience when he kicks off the show at nine o’clock, usually with his song, “I’ll Sing You a Story, I’ll Tell You a Song,” this

Canada, Australia, Mexico, Germany, Norway, The Netherlands, and other regions of the world, songwriters make the pilgrimage to Cheatham Street to sample the influences of this very special night of “church” under Kent Finlay’s creative ministry.

Although Songwriters Circle is Finlay’s real passion, it is only part of his broader vision of Cheatham Street—a vision that is rooted in his own personal evolution. He was born in Brady, Texas, on February 9, 1938, the oldest of five children (Barbara, Mike, Tommy, and Steve), to parents Grace (Short)

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***Although Finlay grew up in a farm family, it became apparent during high school that his future would be in music and education, not farming.***

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is “church,” and “we’re here to listen.” Little wonder, then, that Ace Ford has called Finlay the “Godfather of Texas Songwriters.” Al Barlow, Director of Music Programs and Community Relations at the New Braunfels Museum of Art and Music and a popular singer-songwriter who got his start at Finlay’s Songwriters Night, has observed that Cheatham Street “is kind of like the Ryman Auditorium for Texas songwriters.”<sup>1</sup>

The fast-rolling trains that shake and rattle Cheatham Street’s walls and tin sheeting may be too close-by for some folks’s comfort, but for songwriters and other musicians, the trains are an important prop. Located just a few yards from the railroad tracks, the honky tonk with its low ceilings and well-seasoned wood provides fabulous acoustics in a setting that fires the imagination of writers. Woven into the folklore of the old warehouse are numerous stories about the outside crashing sounds of rumbling trains occasionally picking off a stray car parked too closely to the tracks.

Except for newcomers who at times need to be reminded of the unwritten courtesy code that discourages talking, shooting pool, or distracting behavior while songwriters are on stage, writers and faithful members of the audience regard Wednesday nights at Cheatham Street with reverential awe. They appreciate that they are part of something culturally distinctive and inspirational. Whether from small Texas towns and cities, other parts of the United States, or

and James Finlay, Jr. As anyone who has heard Finlay sing, “I’m Hanging My Hat Just Down the Road,” an entertaining song about his wide travels in Texas, can tell you, he grew up in the tiny west Texas town of Fife in McCulloch County. Some of his ancestors gave Fife its name in 1882 to honor Fifeshire in Scotland. Since only about 50 people lived in Fife at that time, his earliest education took place in a one-room school house.<sup>2</sup>

Musical talent abounds on both sides of Finlay’s family, especially on his mother’s side. His father had a good singing voice, and his mother and her family played at house dances in the area. One of his mother’s cousins, “Sleepy” Short, was a great fiddler who played in a popular Western swing band, the Texas Top Hands. Kent and his family often sat in the backyard at night to watch the stars and play music. Since all of his brothers and sisters developed their talent and appreciation for music, family reunions usually featured music, primarily piano, guitar, and fiddle. Finlay took piano lessons as a kid but became

bored with the regimentation, quit, and began to play on his own and to try his hand at other instruments. During his freshman year of high school, he bought his first guitar in San Angelo while on a Future Farmers of America (FFA) trip. It was during high school that he had his first public gig.

Although Finlay grew up in a farm family, it became apparent during high school that his future would be in music



Charles Marshall (left) and Kent Finlay, FFA Talent Show, 1956.  
Courtesy, Kent Finlay



Willie Nelson, Jack Rogers, and Jerry Jeff Walker, c. 1976. Courtesy, Hal Odom

and education, not farming. During lunch breaks, he and his cousin, Winifred Short, often would rush in from the fields to gobble down their food quickly so that they would have a little time to play music before they resumed work. It was between the cotton rows that Finlay received “formal” voice lessons. His powerful vocals are partly a product of the training that he received as a teenager trying to sing above the loud popping of the tractor that he drove for hours on end on his family’s farm. Finlay remembers that on one particular occasion, he became so wrapped up in singing that he forgot to turn the tractor around at a designated point while planting cotton. The next thing he knew, his father was running across the field waving his hat desperately at him, trying to get him to stop the tractor.<sup>3</sup>

Thanks in part to his father’s strong emphasis on education, Finlay pursued writing in college. He attended San Angelo State University for the first two years, playing “slap” bass in a band that worked on a somewhat regular basis in West Texas. As a solo performer, he also played for beer parties at Lake North Concho, but in 1959 transferred to Texas State University-San Marcos (at that time, Southwest Texas State College), where he received his Bachelor’s degree in English in 1961 and later a Master’s degree in Education. He had developed a fondness for Texas State University when as a high school student he and his musical partner, Charles Marshall, won a regional FFA-sponsored talent show contest held on campus. They then went to the state finals

in Dallas, but lost to a group that did a blackface minstrel parody of Little Richard, lip synching to one of his songs. The fact that the group’s act, which Finlay regarded as “distasteful,” took first place in the competition had to do more with the pervasive racism of that era than with musical talent.

Finlay emphasizes that despite racial segregation in Texas and the South, a significant degree of cultural integration and cross-fertilization took place in music. At the time he was really getting into music in the 1950s, he loved the rock-and-roll music of Chuck Berry and Little Richard, as well as the blues of Jimmy Reed and Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton.<sup>4</sup> Gospel music also had a significant influence on Finlay. As a kid, he participated in group singing during vacation bible school and at other church-related gatherings that were sometimes organized by his grandmother. He recalls at times sitting in cars outside Pentecostal tent revivals, listening to the music.

Although he was influenced by other genres of music, including conjunto, he preferred country and rockabilly. As a teenager, he was particularly fond of Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, Slim Whitman, Webb Pierce, Bob Wills, Gene Autry, and Elvis Presley. He often listened to the Louisiana Hayride on KWKH radio in Shreveport, and to “Red River Dave” McEnery’s show on WOAI radio in San Antonio. Finlay recalls that when he first made the pilgrimage to the house in which Jimmie Rodgers, the “father of modern country music,” had

lived in Kerrville, Texas, he felt as if he had been to Mecca.<sup>5</sup>

Finlay played music on the side as he pursued graduate work at Texas State University. After receiving his Bachelor's degree in English, he took a full-time teaching job in San Antonio but worked on his Master's degree in Education at nights, on weekends, and during the summer. He later took additional graduate courses in English and accepted a position at Gary Job Corps, a federal

Luckenbach that special magical feeling. "I always say that most of the songs I wrote at that time," Finlay recalls, "I wrote so I could go play them for Hondo."<sup>7</sup>

When Hondo died in 1976, Finlay mourned the loss of a legend who had been his musical mentor and spiritual godfather. Finlay's songs, "Christmas in Luckenbach," and "I've Written Some Life, I've Lived Some Songs," particularly evoke vivid images of his experiences and the song writing comradery that grew out of the culture nurtured by Hondo in those laid-back days in Luckenbach. Hondo's death, followed by the death of Finlay's father a month later, helped to inspire his haunting song, "I Never Will Get Over You."<sup>8</sup>

The relaxed atmosphere and sharing of songs had a big impact

## If there hadn't been a Luckenbach, there wouldn't have ever been a Cheatham Street.

vocational training facility created in 1964, where he taught for six years. At Gary, he made significantly more money than he had made in the public schools, and he enjoyed the

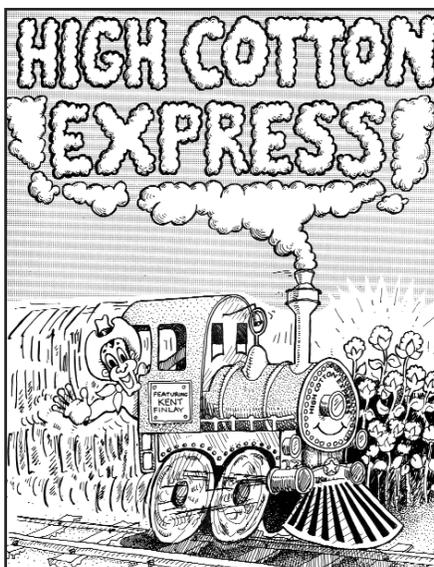
more flexible learning environment and innovative teaching methods. He continued to write songs, and on weekends played at Shakey's Pizza Parlor in Austin with Arthur Johnston, a graduate of the Texas School for the Blind.<sup>6</sup>

In the early 1970s, long before Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson recorded the smash hit song, "Luckenbach, Texas," Finlay would drive from San Marcos to Luckenbach several times a week to hang out with folk hero Hondo Crouch, who, along with partners Kathy Morgan and Guich Koock, had bought Luckenbach in 1971. Finlay joined Gary P. Nunn, Jerry Jeff Walker, Dotsy, Darryl Staedtler, Willie Nelson, and a number of musicians who regularly made the pilgrimage to Luckenbach to sit under the trees, swap songs and stories, crack jokes, pass the guitar around, and play dominos, sometimes in tournaments organized by Hondo in which area farmers would participate. As Finlay recalls, Hondo was a practical joker whose "eyes always sparkled." For Finlay, who regarded him as the "center of the world" and "our spiritual leader," it was Hondo who gave

on Finlay's song writing and decision to open his own honky tonk. As he emphasizes, "If there hadn't been a Luckenbach, there wouldn't have ever been a Cheatham Street...I learned how to think from Hondo."<sup>9</sup> He also credits Threadgill's in Austin, where he enjoyed going to listen to music every Wednesday night. Such Wednesday nights usually brought together university students, "rednecks," hippies, other Austin residents, and at times (until her death in 1970), Janis Joplin.<sup>10</sup>

The sight of "rednecks" and hippies gathered together in a small place just grooving to the music particularly impressed Finlay, who quit teaching to devote full-time to music. In June, 1974, he and his business partner, Jim Cunningham—a columnist for the *San Marcos Daily Record*—leased an old weather-beaten warehouse (originally, Reed Moving and Storage) on Cheatham Street along the railroad tracks in San Marcos, and converted it into a honky tonk. Previously, San Marcos had never had such an establishment devoted to music. Finlay muses that he opened the honky tonk in part so that he and his band, High Cotton Express, would have a place to play.<sup>11</sup>

Using a lot of volunteer help, Finlay and Cunningham busily cleaned up the building, built the stage, and performed countless tasks to get the honky tonk ready for its grand opening. Steve Finlay, Kent's youngest brother, was among those who pitched in to do whatever needed to



Advertisement for Kent Finlay's band, c. 1975. Courtesy, Kent Finlay

be done. Steve, who at that time was a student at Texas State University, recalls that "I first saw the warehouse a day or so after Kent rented the place. It was an old warehouse the city had stored Christmas decorations in." Along with friends George Wall, Danny Neal, and Grant Everidge, Steve helped to build

traditional country, rock, folk, and blues.<sup>16</sup>

One of the important products of this dynamic music scene in Austin was the creation of a new television music program, "Austin City Limits," in 1974, by program director, Bill Arhos, who was inspired in part by the publication of author Jan Reid's

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## Even a casual look at the pictures on the walls of Cheatham Street confirms the honky tonk's important role in nurturing the progressive country movement.

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tables, new bathroom walls, and the original bar-top from heavy crate material that Kent found in the attic. As Steve remembers, Kent and Jim provided barbecue, hamburgers, and a keg of Shiner and Pearl beer "to keep us coming back."<sup>12</sup>

To get the feel of what operating Cheatham Street would be like and to work out any logistical problems before a large crowd descended on the place, Kent Finlay and his business partner decided to open two nights before they had scheduled the first night of live music. Although they did not advertise the honky tonk's opening, they, along with employees and volunteers, were stunned by the rush of people through the door. At that time the maximum occupancy of the place was 364, but "we opened the doors, and let me tell you," Finlay laughingly remembers, "four hundred people rushed in...We didn't have a band...People had been watching us, you know, and the rumor was out."<sup>13</sup>

The grand opening was "unbelievable," Steve Finlay remembers: "At least 5 people behind the bar were selling beer as fast as we could open them. The beer box was soon depleted of cold beer and we kept icing down beer in an old bathtub behind the bar."<sup>14</sup> For the occasion, Kent had booked a "hippie country band," Freda and the Firedogs—Marcia Ball, John X. Reed, Steve McDaniels, David Cook, and Bobby Earl Smith. As Kent recalls, they sounded—but certainly did not look—"country." At that time one of Austin's hot bands that played at the Armadillo World Headquarters, Broken Spoke, Soap Creek Saloon, and other Austin venues in the early 1970s, Freda and the Firedogs broke up soon after the Cheatham Street gig. Since then, Ball has carved out an outstanding career as a vocalist, songwriter, and blues piano player, returning on many occasions to play at Cheatham Street.<sup>15</sup>

At the time Finlay opened Cheatham Street, "progressive country" music, or "redneck rock," was in full bloom, thanks in part to Willie Nelson's relocation from Nashville to the Austin area in order to gain greater creative control over his music. Although Nelson strengthened the progressive country movement, he did not create it. A vibrant culture of "Texas Outlaw" music was thriving at the time of his exodus from Nashville. This culture included a creative amalgam of

book, *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock*. The program's pilot performance by Nelson contributed to fundraising for the show, which was launched nationwide in 1976. The first season of Austin City Limits on Public Broadcasting affiliate KLRN-TV (now KLRU-TV) showcased the reunion of Bob Wills's Original Texas Playboys and several musicians who shaped the rise of progressive country music in the Austin area, including Marcia Ball, Jerry Jeff Walker, Townes Van Zandt, B.W. Stevenson, and Alvin Crow.<sup>17</sup>

Even a casual look at the pictures on the walls of Cheatham Street confirms the honky tonk's important role in nurturing the progressive country movement. From Willie Nelson, Ernest Tubb, Billy Joe Shaver, Jerry Jeff Walker, Gary P. Nunn, Greezy Wheels, Flaco Jiménez, and Kinky Friedman, to Ray Wylie Hubbard, Guy Clark, Gatemouth Brown, Joe Ely, Butch Hancock, Townes Van Zandt, Alvin Crow and the Pleasant Valley Boys, Ray Benson's Asleep at the Wheel, Doug Sahm, Augie Meyers, Eric Johnson, Joe Bob's Bar and Grill Band, Ponty Bone, Omar and the Howlers, Lou Ann Barton, Joe "King" Carrasco, and others, the small stage at Cheatham Street featured countless musicians who shaped the rise of the progressive country movement in Central Texas. Finlay remembers a particularly magical night when Guy Clark joined Townes Van Zandt on the Cheatham Street stage. Since San Marcos imposes a midnight closing time on club owners, all members of the



audience on that particular night voluntarily surrendered their beers at midnight in compliance with the law, remaining glued to their seats as Clark and Van Zandt continued playing long past closing time.<sup>18</sup>

For students and musicians such as Mike Daily, who was encouraged to enroll at Texas State University because of its proximity to Austin's progressive country music scene, Cheatham Street provided a great venue and training ground. Daily, a young steel guitar player, began to hang out at Cheatham Street not long after it opened. It "was a natural for us young players," he recalls, "to come and hear the top bands/artists and players in the area in that time period. We hung out there a lot, every night that we could...Joe Bob's Bar & Grill Band, Alvin Crow, Asleep at the Wheel, Marcia Ball, [and the] Bronco Brothers were a few of the main acts we liked to hear." Soon, Daily met Jay Dominguez, who at the time was playing a solo acoustic show at Cheatham Street on Sunday evenings. Dominguez then hired Daily as his steel guitar player, along with drummer Tommy Foote, lead guitarist Ron Cabal, and bass guitar player Terry Hale to form a band, Stoney Ridge, that began to play regularly at Cheatham Street.<sup>19</sup>

Stoney Ridge later split up when Dominguez left the band,

but his departure soon led to the debut of George Strait at Cheatham Street. At that time, Strait was a student majoring in Agriculture and Ranch Management at Texas State University who sang more traditional country music. In response to a notice posted on campus by members of Stoney Ridge, Strait successfully auditioned as lead singer and joined Daily, Foote, Hale, and Cabal to form the Ace in the Hole Band. Foote, who had moved to Houston after graduating from Texas State University in the summer of 1975, did not join the group until January, 1976. The other band members convinced him to return, although as Foote points out, once he heard Strait sing, "It did not take much convincing." Strait soon used the small, rustic Cheatham Street stage to launch a career that would bring him national and international celebrity status, including 50 Number One songs on the country charts.<sup>20</sup>

On October 13, 1975, Cheatham Street provided the setting for the Ace in the Hole Band's very first gig. "Kent was the first person we went to with the new Ace in the Hole Band," Daily recalls, "[he] didn't bat an eye, and said when we were ready, we could play."<sup>21</sup> At that time, Strait, who had done a little singing while in the United States Army in Hawaii, was unknown in the field of music. In fact, the poster that advertised the band's first gig with

Ace in the Hole Band's Debut, October 13, 1975. Courtesy, Terry Hale



him at Cheatham Street did not even mention his name. Daily remembers that the band’s expectations that night were modest:

I was really happy that we had a good crowd for that first night. I mean—nothing worse than having no one come out on your first night of a new band...We sounded pretty good and had some people dancing and every one seemed to enjoy it. I even saw a girl from one of my classes back by the pool tables, and I was hoping she would be impressed. But she never even saw me!<sup>22</sup>

Finlay recognized Ace in the Hole’s potential and continued to book them weekly, along with others, such as Alvin Crow and Asleep at the Wheel, who played more traditional country music along with western swing. “Simply put, Kent was the single biggest supporter we had in the early days...His faith in G’s talent never wavered,” recalls Foote.<sup>23</sup> As Daily emphasizes, “Cheatham St. was our *only* gig for a while until we branched out. But it was those first gigs...that helped us get our band started. We often played there twice a week.”<sup>24</sup> Finlay remembers calling James White, owner of the Broken Spoke

anniversaries were maybe the most special. I recall setting beer sales records on a couple of those dates.”<sup>28</sup>

It was Finlay, in fact, who, in early 1977, took Strait to Nashville in an attempt to get a record deal. At that time, Strait had some of his original songs, along with a few by Darryl Staedtler, a south Texas songwriter who, at the time, was writing for Chappel Music. Staedtler accompanied Finlay and Strait on the Nashville trip. Although Finlay believed that Strait had some impressive demos to shop around Nashville, none of the major record labels showed enough interest at the time to offer Strait a record contract. Strait’s determination to stick with traditional country music and western swing put him at odds with the prevailing commercial trend toward pop/country in the national marketplace. As Finlay recalls, “We already had this little thing, this little anti-slick country thing going...in our minds, you know, and we were sick of it.”<sup>29</sup>

The short-term results of the trip to Nashville were disappointing for Strait, who upon graduation from Texas State University took a job with an agricultural company in Uvalde, but the trip planted seeds that would later sprout. One of the individuals in Nashville with whom Finlay and Strait talked was

***“Kent—Thanks for your years of support, years of friendship, and for giving me and the guys a place to perform when no one else would.”***

*George Strait, 1981*

nightclub in Austin, trying to arrange a gig there for Ace in the Hole. When White booked the band for the first time, Finlay took part of the Cheatham Street audience to the Broken Spoke in order to make sure there was a good crowd. Finlay estimates that Strait played his first fifty gigs, however, at Cheatham Street. “I thought he would be a star,” Finlay later recalled, “probably before he did.”<sup>25</sup>

As the Ace in the Hole Band tightened their sound and gained experience on the Cheatham Street stage, they attracted a growing number of fans and booked gigs at Gruene Hall and larger venues in Houston, Austin, and the area over the next few years.<sup>26</sup> Thanks to Finlay’s work on the entertainment committee of San Marcos’s annual Chilympiad, Ace in the Hole opened for the original Texas Playboys one year at the Chilympiad. “That was such a great, great show,” Finlay recalls.<sup>27</sup> Cheatham Street featured Ace in the Hole almost every Wednesday night until its rapidly growing popularity and the demands of a touring schedule made it no longer feasible to continue the regular gig there. For Mike Daily, though, memories of those early gigs are still vivid: “A dance floor full of people, a packed house and of course Wednesday night—ladies free night was hard to beat. I would have to say that our first, second, and third year Ace In The Hole Band

Erv Woolsey, a business graduate of Texas State University who had worked in promotions for Decca and ABC Records before joining MCA Records in Nashville. Woolsey owned and operated the “Prairie Rose,” a club south of Highway 123 on the southbound access road along Interstate 35 in San Marcos, where Ace in the Hole also played for awhile. Thanks to Woolsey’s promotional work and extensive connections in Nashville, MCA Records signed Strait to a recording contract that, in 1981, led to his first album, *Strait Country*, which included his hit single, “Unwound,” and Staedtler’s “Blame It on Mexico.” In 1982, Strait also included Staedtler’s song, “A Fire I Can’t Put Out,” on his MCA album, *Strait from the Heart*. In 1984, Woolsey left MCA to become Strait’s full-time manager. When Strait gave Finlay a complimentary copy of his first hit record, he inscribed on it, “Kent—Thanks for your years of support, years of friendship, and for giving me and the guys a place to perform when no one else would.”<sup>30</sup>

Because of Finlay’s educational background and expertise in music, Dr. William Poole, a professor in the Department of History at Texas State University, who often went to Cheatham Street to listen to music, initiated the idea of hiring Finlay to teach a campus course in the history of country music. Dr. Poole’s more traditional departmental colleagues on the senior

leaving to find Joe Bob in San Marcos. Whitbeck ran into the house, got some of his stuff, told his family that he was going to San Marcos, and jumped into his friend's car. When they arrived in town, they went to the Ice House (now Joe's Crab Shack) and then jumped into the San Marcos River for a swim. That evening, as Whitbeck recalls, "We're just driving down

played Gruene Hall and other venues in the area until they broke up in early January, 1987. Joe Bob's Bar and Grill Band (more recently reconstituted as Big Square Sun) never achieved great commercial success, but as Finlay proudly proclaims, "they were always stars at Cheatham Street."<sup>38</sup>

Through Cheatham Street connections, Whitbeck

## Stevie (Ray) Vaughan and Double Trouble played to Cheatham Street audiences that often consisted of no more than thirty people, most of whom were other guitarists.

Hopkins Street and there's a guy with long hair walking down the street, and I said, 'Hey, [do] you know somebody named Joe Bob,' and he says, 'Well, he might be over to Cheatham Street'... We went, 'Where's that?'"<sup>36</sup>

When Whitbeck and Permenter stepped inside Cheatham Street, the place was packed with college students, and the Reynolds Sisters were playing on stage. After someone who worked there told them how to get in touch with Joe Bob Burris, they spent the night under the bridge near Herbert's Taco Hut. The following day, Permenter successfully auditioned for a spot in Joe Bob's Bar and Grill Band and prepared to move his belongings from La Porte to nearby Luling. After returning to LaPorte, Whitbeck received a phone call from Burris, who told him that his bass player, Hector Ramirez, had just quit. Burris then invited a jubilant Whitbeck to join the popular band, which played regularly at Cheatham Street, along with Ace in the Hole.

Initially comprised of Joe Bob Burris and Marion Quick, the band at that time included drummer Butch Burdette, later adding Cindy Burris (Joe Bob's sister) on vocals. Whitbeck fell in love with the town and music scene immediately after floating down the San Marcos River on the day of his arrival and after attending a taping of Austin City Limits. He vividly recalls the first night they played at Cheatham Street: "It just blew my mind. The place was packed...All these people, you know."<sup>37</sup> The band also

established friendships with members of the Ace in the Hole Band, particularly fellow bass player, Terry Hale, and guitarist Ron Cabal. In fact, about a year after Whitbeck moved to San Marcos, he, Hale, Cabal, Roy Rushing, Pete Denny, and Bennet Spielvogel also formed a blues band, The Razor Blades, that played at Cheatham Street every Monday night for about two years. For Whitbeck, it was particularly great to be so close to Ace in the Hole and then see George Strait reach stardom so

fast. "I remember the first gig when they actually had a bus, you know, a tour bus, it was really exciting to be around those days and to see that happen." One of Whitbeck's greatest professional thrills came in 1989, when at the suggestion of Terry Hale, Strait invited him to play with the band for a couple of gigs in Cheyenne, Wyoming, while Hale was with his wife and newborn child.<sup>39</sup>

In 1980, a young Austin blues singer and phenomenal guitarist whose career would soon skyrocket internationally, electrified Cheatham Street on Tuesday nights. Stevie [Ray] Vaughan and Double Trouble played to Cheatham Street audiences that often consisted of no more than thirty people, most of whom were other guitarists. On many occasions, the phenomenal, young Sexton brothers—Charlie (age 12) and Will (age 10)—opened for Vaughan and joined him on stage.

As Finlay looks back on these "magical nights," he vividly remembers how Vaughan would crank up the amplifier and really get into the blues: "He'd just



Stevie Ray Vaughan. Courtesy, Nancy Barnard

faculty did not show great enthusiasm for a course that in their eyes might lack academic rigor, but they consented because of steeply declining classroom enrollment at the time. Dr. Everette Swinney, chair of the History Department, then worked hard to get administrative approval for the class. As Swinney recalls, "Our misgivings were mild compared to those of the administration. I had to fight hard to sell the idea to [the] dean and vice-president, and won only on the condition that the class be monitored extremely carefully to insure academic rigor." After Swinney persuaded fellow department member Dr. Ron Brown to audit the class regularly and file a comprehensive report, he hired Finlay to teach the class in the spring semester, 1977.<sup>31</sup>

Strait and other members of the Ace in the Hole Band, Ron Cabal and Terry Hale, were enrolled in Finlay's class that semester when Kent took Strait to Nashville. Finlay remembers that he played Strait's demos to the class after they returned from Nashville. The university administration's concerns about the course were eased when Dr. Brown filed a very positive evaluation of Finlay's teaching. Twenty-one students enrolled in the course when the History Department re-hired Finlay to

to include Blaker's songs, including "Never Gonna Let You Go," "Lonesome Rodeo Cowboy," "We Must Be Lovin' Right," "She Lays It All on the Line," and "Need I Say More" on subsequent albums. Earlier, thanks to Strait's steel guitar player, Mike Daily, Blaker had recorded "The Only Thing I Have Left" and other songs on D Records, a Houston label founded by Daily's grandfather, H.W. "Pappy" Daily, in 1958, and passed down to Mike's father and uncle. Ace in the Hole, before Strait signed with MCA, had also recorded with D Records, which between 1958 and 1975 produced other well-known Texas musicians, including George Jones, Roger Miller, Willie Nelson, and the Big Bopper. As Daily recalls, "My dad was always looking for a big act to try to break and so he produced our first recordings...Some of Clay's stuff came out on it, too, because he was our good friend and unlike nowadays there wasn't just any label anywhere to put your records out on."<sup>34</sup>

Blaker liked the classic honky-tonk atmosphere of Cheatham Street, where there was always a good dance crowd, but he was particularly impressed with the great listening crowds on acoustic songwriter nights. "They had to listen," he laughingly recalls, "or Kent would throw 'em out." For Blaker, Finlay's

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teach it again in the spring semester, 1979.<sup>32</sup>

After playing one night at Cheatham Street, Ace in the Hole Band members met singer-songwriter Clay Blaker and his group, who walked into the honky tonk looking to book gigs in the area. Blaker was born in Houston but had moved to Hawaii before joining the early 1970s country rock scene in southern California, where Gram Parsons, the Eagles, and the Flying Burrito Brothers were popular. Soon attracted by the rise of outlaw country music in the Austin area, Blaker moved back to Houston. Then, upon the advice of Glenn Schalles, his ex-guitar player who had left California to attend Texas State University, Blaker went to San Marcos. He established friendships with Ace in the Hole Band members and sat in on Finlay's class. Finlay soon booked Blaker at Cheatham Street. Meanwhile, the Ace in the Hole group helped Blaker line up gigs in the surrounding Hill Country, and Blaker used his contacts to help Ace in the Hole get gigs in Houston.<sup>33</sup>

Blaker's outstanding song writing impressed Finlay and Strait, and Blaker's new friendship with members of Ace in the Hole helped him to get a foot in the door in Nashville. Strait soon covered one of Blaker's songs, "The Only Thing I Have Left," on his Strait from the Heart album in 1982, and he continued

personal integrity and unselfish devotion to song writing and music, in general, have been the ingredients that have distinguished Cheatham Street's role in the history of Texas music. Blaker has great praise for Finlay's song writing, and admires the way he has nurtured young songwriters, in particular. Blaker remembers seeing him reach into his own pocket on many occasions to pay musicians when the "door" was low on a given night.<sup>35</sup>

The mid-1970s were heady times at Cheatham Street. Bill Whitbeck, a singer-songwriter, former English teacher, and now a graduate student in the History Department at Texas State University who lives in San Marcos and plays bass guitar in the Robert Earl Keen Band, remembers the chain of events that first drew him to the honky-tonk. He was living in La Porte, Texas, when he and Jimmy Permenter, a steel guitar player in their local band, overheard a remark after a gig one night in July, 1976, that someone by the name of Joe Bob was looking for a steel player in San Marcos. The next morning, Whitbeck looked out the window of his family's home and saw Permenter, who lived across the street, loading gear and equipment into his old car. When Whitbeck went outside to ask him where he was going, Permenter replied that he was

goofy songs, and he told me I could play. To tell you the truth, I was more than a little nervous about singing and playing in front of the twenty-something folks gathered around the woodstove. The music I heard coming around the circle that night changed my life forever. After I sang a couple of my songs, the audience...asked for more. At last, I knew I had a venue—an outlet—for my songs. It was Kent Finlay who made this possible.

Before long, Finlay invited Barlow to play several gigs with him. "I became hooked on entertaining," Barlow explains, "Tuesday nights at Cheatham Street were magical. They really were. Sometimes I'd drive all the way back to New Braunfels after the show and wake my wife up to tell her about the magical evening I'd just spent...Sometimes, she'd chew me out and holler at me to shut up and go to bed. But my excitement just seemed to spill out everywhere."<sup>45</sup>

One of Barlow's "favorite 'regulars'" on Tuesday nights was Todd Snider, a recent high school graduate from Oregon who, in 1986, came to Songwriters Night to meet Finlay and ask for help in learning to write and perform. Finlay took Snider under his wing; in fact, Snider became an unofficial member of the Finlay family. As Snider recalls, "I had no place to stay, so he and his wife Diana gave me the couch for the summer."<sup>46</sup> Soon, six-year-old Sterling Finlay began to emulate Snider, who often picked him up and brought him home from Cub Scout meetings in an old Buick that had a CB radio. The two of them would sing all the way home. As Diana Finlay fondly recalls, "That was the moment Sterling discovered there was coolness in our world."<sup>47</sup> Soon, Kent gave Snider a gig and introduced him to the song writing of Jerry Jeff Walker, Kris Kristofferson, John Prine, Billy Joe Shaver, Guy Clark, Shel Silverstein, and others. "All those people, I'd never heard of them," remembers Snider. "Most of the people that I guess I pattern myself after I got from sitting around listening to them at Kent Finlay's house."<sup>48</sup>

Before long, Snider blossomed into one of the best

songwriters and most dynamic and entertaining performers in the nation. Kristofferson regards him as "a true songwriter, with the heart and humor of John Prine, the wild unpredictability of Roger Miller, and a fresh, original spirit and freedom of imagination that's absolutely his own."<sup>49</sup> Finlay makes clear, however, that despite Snider's talent, he put (and still puts) a lot of hard work into his writing and performance: "He was so dedicated, so determined." At Cheatham Street, Snider met and became friends with Eddie Shaver, who later played in Snider's band and toured with him. It was Finlay whom a distraught Snider called first on New Years Day, 2001, to tell him about Eddie's tragic death the night before. Snider played his haunting song, "Waco Moon," written in response to Shaver's death, for the first time at a Cheatham Street song swap, later including it on his CD, *New Connection* (Oh Boy Records, 2002).<sup>50</sup>

Now featured along with Kris Kristofferson, Janis Ian, Shawn Camp, Dan Reeder, and Steve Goodman (deceased) on John Prine's Oh Boy Records, Snider's recent CD, *East Nashville Skyline* (2004), as well as earlier ones, has received critical acclaim, but Snider's success has not diminished his relationship with Finlay and Cheatham Street. Having co-written songs with Kent, Diana, and their children, Snider often returns to the old Cheatham Street stage, occasionally making it back for a Wednesday night Songwriters Circle. As he makes clear, Finlay is still "the first person I play a new song for."<sup>51</sup>

Before Snider's career really took off, he had worked as a waiter at Peppers at the Falls Restaurant, where he met Terri Hendrix, an aspiring young songwriter who was also employed at the restaurant at the time. Hendrix, a new transfer student at Texas State University, overheard Snider and other waiters talking about Songwriters Night at Cheatham Street. She had written a few songs, but as she recalls, "I was terrified to play in public."<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, she

worked up the courage and one night stepped inside the front door of Cheatham Street.

Inside, Hendrix met Finlay and songwriters Al Barlow and Ike Eichenberg. Also there, of course, was Snider. As Barlow

Advertisement, San Marcos Citizen.  
 Courtesy, Kent Finlay

lean back, just feel it, you know. I don't think I ever saw anyone that loved to play the guitar like Stevie."<sup>40</sup>

Finlay also continued to play with his band, High Cotton Express, at Cheatham Street and other places in the area, including at Willie Nelson's annual Fourth of July picnic, but the demands of running a honky tonk were confining. Family responsibilities also took up an increasing amount of his time. In 1978, Finlay had married Diana Becker, a journalism major at Texas State University who also has co-written songs with him and other songwriters. By early 1983, two of the Finlays' three

in Cheatham Street. As Finlay emphasizes, the stove was there for more than just heat on those Tuesday nights: "We had gas heat in there, but we had wood warmth."<sup>43</sup>

Aaron Allan, a prolific writer, member of the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame and DJ's Hall of Fame who now hosts the Double A Show on KCTI-AM 1450 Radio in Gonzales, Texas, fondly recalls when he first started coming to Songwriters Night in 1983 or 1984. At that time, there would often be only six or ten writers there who would each perform four or five songs. "It was more intimate than it is now," he remembers, "we



Charlie Sexton and Kent Finlay, c. mid-1980s. Courtesy, Kent Finlay

children had been born. In order to focus more on his own music and family, Kent sold the Cheatham Street business to Mike Willey, an Austin resident, former student of Texas State University, musician, and booking agent.<sup>41</sup>

Because of the new owner's financial problems, however, the Cheatham Street business ended up back in Finlay's hands within a relatively short period of time. Finlay continued to operate the honky tonk until nearly the end of the 1980s, when he again sold it. For a brief period under new ownership, the business featured mainly Tejano bands. Not until the grand re-opening of Cheatham Street on New Year's Eve, 1999, did Finlay once again return to operate the honky tonk.<sup>42</sup>

The idea to create a special night for songwriters at Cheatham Street grew out of Finlay's desire to provide writers with a chance to showcase their work. He then discussed the idea with Alex Abravenel, a writer living in San Marcos who "was part of getting it all started." In the summer, writers performed on stage with the aid of a sound system, but during the early days, they sat around an old wood stove in the winter, even though there was gas heat

just sat around the old wood stove in a semi-circle of chairs and passed the guitar back and forth." What Allan, who for several years served as the master of ceremonies at Willie's annual Fourth of July picnics, particularly enjoys about Songwriters Night at Cheatham Street is the listening atmosphere that Finlay has nurtured: "That's what I like about San Marcos...it's kind of like a church, so, it's a listening thing."<sup>44</sup>

James McMurtry, John Arthur Martinez, Hal Ketchum, Justin Treviño, Jimmy Collins, Al Barlow, Jimmy and Tommy Ash, and a number of other budding songwriters who later developed important careers in music also came to Songwriters Night during those years. Barlow vividly recalls his first trip to Cheatham Street on one of those "magical" Tuesday nights:

I'd never experienced anything like it. We walked into the smokey room and took a seat around an old woodstove blazing in the center of the room. Of course, Kent noticed my old guitar and asked me if I was a songwriter. I told him I had a few little old

rich legacy. John Michael Whitby, Asleep at the Wheel’s piano player, stepped in to help continue the tradition on Monday nights for awhile, but more recently, Finlay has booked the South Austin Jug Band to play every Monday night.<sup>59</sup>

In 2000, when Randy Rogers, a promising young writer and Mass Communications and Public Relations major at Texas State University who performed regularly at Songwriters Circle, expressed interest in getting a gig at Cheatham Street, Finlay told him that, if Rogers put together a band, Finlay would stay open on Tuesdays so they could have a regular weekly gig. As Rogers recalls, “It just blew my mind that I’d be able to have a night of my own there. It lit this fire in me to put it together, and to practice, and to get a band together. Kent changed my life.”<sup>60</sup>

After discussions with Eddie Foster, a steel player in San Marcos, Rogers and Foster put together a band that debuted at Cheatham Street on October 3, 2000. By December, just a few months later, the Randy Rogers Band, which soon attracted large audiences in the area, had produced its first CD, *Live at Cheatham Street*. In 2002, when the reconstituted band produced its first studio CD, *Like It Used to Be*, Rogers and

songwriters—brothers Jimmy and Tommy Ash. For years, Jimmy and Tommy, two of Finlay’s most highly respected songwriters, have helped to raise the bar for performers at the weekly Songwriters Circle.<sup>62</sup>

Since re-opening at the end of 1999, Finlay has often used Tuesday and Thursday nights to support song swaps and other up-and-coming writers, most notably, Colin Brooks, Adam Carroll, Shelley King, Jeff Plankenhorn, Floramay Holliday, Ruthie Foster, Angie McClure, Adam Kay, Dub Miller, Colin Gilmore, Trish Murphy, Django Walker, Ryan Turner, J.R. Castro, Jason Beckett, Jackson Parten, and Foscoe Jones. In addition, veteran writers—among them, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Willis Alan Ramsey, Clay Blaker, Aaron Allan, Lisa and Roberta Morales, Gary P. Nunn, Bob Livingston, Shake Russell, Slaid Cleaves, Susan Gibson, Jack Ingram, Walt Wilkins, Davin James, Hayes Carll, Max Stalling, and Australians Bill Chambers and Audrey Auld—have joined Finlay on occasion for a special songwriters’ show, “Kent and Friends.” In turn, some of Finlay’s favorite writers—Adam Carroll, Terri Hendrix, Dub Miller, Randy Rogers, and Houston Marchman—have

## Since re-opening at the end of 1999, Finlay has often used Tuesday and Thursday nights to support song swaps and other up-and-coming writers.

fellow band members—Brady Black (fiddle), Geoffrey Hill (lead guitar), Les Lawless (drums), and Jon Richardson (bass) began to expand their fan base throughout Texas and the Southwest.

The band’s hard work, along with Finlay’s steady encouragement and mentoring, soon paid even more dividends. In July, 2004, the band played its first international gigs at major festivals in Italy and France. Before a jam-packed crowd at Cheatham Street on August 26, 2004, they celebrated the release of their new CD, *Rollercoaster*, produced by Radney Foster. The new CD includes one of Finlay’s songs, “They Call It the Hill Country.” By this time, Rogers had attracted the attention of several major record companies. On July 30, 2005, he signed a major record deal with Mercury Records. Despite the band’s growing stature on the charts in major markets, Rogers makes clear how he feels about the small place that launched him, about Cheatham Street’s important role in Texas music history. “You walk in there and get chills...that’s how I feel about it.”<sup>61</sup>

Finlay also decided to open on Sundays from four to eight o’clock p.m., usually featuring top local bands, such as the Grant Mazak Band, Island Texas, Big Square Sun, the Ash Family, and others. In the case of the Ash Family, Finlay showcases a large family band that not only demonstrates rich vocals and complex harmonies, but also features great

returned to Cheatham Street to record live CDs.

Recently, Finlay has received recognition from the Center for Texas Music History, the City of San Marcos, and the New Braunfels Museum of Art and Music for his longstanding contributions to Texas music history. On October 2, 2003, the New Braunfels Museum of Art and Music held its annual dinner with Finlay as its guest of honor. Several songwriters performed that evening, including the Blue Grass Nibblers, Willis Alan Ramsey, Allison Rogers, Ponty Bone, Susan Gibson, Aaron Allan, Randy Rogers, Van Wilks, Foscoe Jones, Monk Wilson, Denim, Geronimo Treviño, Michael O’Connor, Craig Hillis, and Al Barlow. Charlie Gallagher, Executive Director of the museum, presented Finlay the museum’s first annual “Lone Star Arts Award.”

Finlay has often cooperated with Texas State University faculty and students to allow the use of Cheatham Street for broader social, artistic, and educational purposes. Graduate students in the Creative Writing program at Texas State University have read their short stories to happy-hour audiences, and university and community groups have held plays on the legendary honky tonk’s stage. In addition, Cheatham Street has been used for weddings, receptions, birthday parties, and to entertain Kids with Cancer. Finlay laughingly remembers that a beauty pageant was once held

recalls, "One cold, rainy night, [she] walked in the place with her guitar in tow. She was a shy little woman, and not at all the self-confident entertainer she is today. But she'll be the first one to tell you that it was Kent Finlay's encouragement, and the opportunities he presented her with, that ignited that spark in her."<sup>53</sup> Although Hendrix was very nervous when she performed that night, she received a warm reception and fell in love with the nurturing warmth of the songwriters' culture. "Had I not been treated with such warmth and respect, even though I was an absolute beginner," she remembers, "I wouldn't have come back."<sup>54</sup>

What particularly impressed Hendrix was the way in which Finlay and other songwriters supported each other without letting egos, cliques, and competition get in the way. In fact, she believes that one of Cheatham Street's most enduring characteristics is the "lack of ego" on Kent's part. "He doesn't have any bags he's trying to get rid of," she fondly observes.<sup>55</sup> Now a very dynamic performer and writer, Hendrix used the

she had met at Songwriters Night on her first trip there, to perform a rousing *a cappella* rendition of "Old Man River." Hendrix remembers that Bowen, a regular at Songwriters Night over the years, had offered her encouraging words after her very first performance. She also laughingly recalls that her trip to Songwriters Night had other historical significance: "Rick gave me my first beer my first night at Cheatham Street."<sup>57</sup>

Although Hendrix is an astute businesswoman who handles all aspects of her own business, she particularly appreciates the non-contractual basis on which she and Finlay operate when she plays at Cheatham Street. She attributes this to his honesty and integrity. "When we play there," she emphasizes, "I don't have a contract with Kent. I shake his hand."<sup>58</sup>

When Finlay re-opened Cheatham Street on New Years Eve, 1999, he did so with renewed purpose and a clear commitment to showcase good song writing and Americana roots music, in particular. Still working his "day job" as a teacher in the San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District at the time,

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***"When the annals of Texas Music are finally written, I have no doubt that Cheatham Street Warehouse will be compared to Washington-on-the-Brazos...A humble little shed by the railroad tracks, it has nurtured, raised, and showcased the greatest musicians this state has had to offer for the past three decades."***

**-Joe Nick Patoski**  
*Texas writer, 2003*

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Cheatham Street stage as a springboard for a career that has brought her critical acclaim around the nation. Finlay remembers that when Hendrix first asked him for advice, he told her "to get hungry." Her hard work and productivity have since really impressed him. As he stresses with a smile and sense of pride, "She got hungry."<sup>56</sup>

Hendrix, since releasing her debut CD, *Two Dollar Shoes*, in 1996, has been highly productive, anchored by an outstanding band—Lloyd Maines (guitar, lap and pedal steel guitar, mandolin, dobro), Glen Fukunaga (bass), and Paul Pearcy (drums). In 1997, she released *Wilory Farm*, followed by *Live at Cibolo Creek* (1999) and *Places in Between* (2000). To honor the important historical role that she believes Cheatham Street has played in setting a precedent for other area venues, she returned to the small stage there to record her next CD, *Live in San Marcos*, which was released in 2001. Although *The Ring* (2002) and *The Art of Removing Wallpaper* (2004) have since enhanced Hendrix's national Grammy-winning stature, she has never forgotten the culture of Songwriters Night at Cheatham Street. To open one of her many shows at Cheatham Street, she invited Rick Bowen, a classically trained baritone singer whom

he intended to open Cheatham Street from Wednesday through Saturday only. Wednesday nights, of course, would feature Songwriters Night (re-named Songwriters Circle), and the other nights would showcase top Americana artists in an attempt to balance honky-tonk shows with acoustic songwriter performances.

Although Finlay planned to remain closed on Sundays, Mondays, and Tuesdays, his plans soon changed. After a phone call from Ronnie Huckaby, he agreed to set up a "jam" night on Mondays when Huckaby (keyboards) and Mike Daily (pedal steel), both current members of George Strait's band and residents of San Marcos, would anchor a weekly show in which they and other musicians would play a set and then allow other performers to join them on stage for a couple of songs each. Jam nights often drew some of the most outstanding musicians in the area such as Redd Volkert, Bill Whitbeck, Brian Duckworth, Justin Treviño, Al Quaid, Levi Mullen, Phil Dalmolin, and Ricky Turpin, along with aspiring singers and musicians who put their names on a sign-up sheet each Monday night at the bar. Although Huckaby and Daily have since discontinued jam night at Cheatham Street, they left behind a

Susan Gibson, Shelley King, Houston Marchman, Al Barlow, Floramay Holliday, Randy Rogers, Jenni and HalleyAnna Finlay, Adam Carroll, Foscoe Jones, Phil Pritchett, Nathan Hamilton, Island Texas, River Train, and the Grant Mazak Band entertained the crowd for nearly ten hours before Todd Snider came out to close the special Sunday night show. In a performance that was nothing short of spectacular, Snider electrified the audience on behalf of the man who had played such an instrumental role in his career. Following Snider’s performance, Kent Finlay, who was only a few weeks away from his bone marrow transplant, then prepared to express his appreciation to the crowd. There was hardly a single dry eye in the house when Kent, weak but determined, picked up his guitar and slowly worked his way to the stage. After struggling at first to find his voice, he then broke into song, lifting the audience on the power of his vocals and spirit. At the end of the song, he promised to come back healthy once he recuperated from the transplant.

Finlay has not allowed cancer, a recent divorce, or the unpleasant, tedious tasks involved in operating a honky tonk—such as fixing a stubborn leaky roof or dealing with plumbing problems—to dampen enthusiasm for what he still hopes to accomplish in the years ahead. “I go home thrilled every night,” he points out. Rather than rest on his laurels, he looks forward to achieving even greater things down the road. When asked to name what he believes is his greatest contribution to the history of Texas music, he replies with characteristic modesty: “I’m still working on that. I haven’t done it yet...I hope that I’ve

encouraged some people to write better songs...and I hope I have a few songs of my own that people enjoy.”<sup>70</sup>

For musicians, Finlay’s role in Texas music history goes far beyond his own modest assessment. “I don’t believe there is a more dedicated person than Kent,” stresses Mike Daily, who still plays steel guitar in George Strait’s band, “in keeping the focus on Texas Music and the belief in the bands and artist, and trying to give everyone possible a chance. Money and profit always seemed to be secondary to the music.”<sup>71</sup> For Tommy Foote, formerly a drummer in Ace in the Hole but now Strait’s road manager, Finlay “was the first club owner I knew who put the music above his profit margin...I never thought of Kent as a club owner but a singer-songwriter who happened to own a club...[his] contribution cannot be overestimated.”<sup>72</sup> Bill Whitbeck regards Finlay as “a total champion of the songwriter,” and sees Cheatham Street as a “great training ground for young writers.”<sup>73</sup> John Arthur Martinez agrees. Of special importance to him is Finlay’s generous support for “struggling artists” who write well. By giving writers an opportunity to hone their craft and gain performance experience on the Cheatham Street stage, Kent “has helped create an environment of creativity in the corridor between Austin and San Antonio, an area which has become the heartbeat of the Texas music scene.” As Martinez emphasizes, “Many of us have taken the passion for songwriting, nurtured at Cheatham Street, back to our home communities across Texas and the U.S., so his influence is much bigger than any of us can measure.”<sup>74</sup>



Kent Finlay’s signs honoring George Strait outside Cheatham Street Warehouse. Courtesy, Anita Miller

there to crown "Miss Honky-Tonk Angel of the World." He also allowed the Newton Street Regulars with the late Texas State University President Jerry Supple, a banjo player, and his wife, Cathy Supple, to play and sing on the historic stage.<sup>63</sup>

In recent years, Cheatham Street has provided a venue for several distinguished songwriters and musicians who are graduates of Texas State University, including Darryl Staedtler, Colin Gilmore, Randy Rogers, and John Arthur Martinez. A Grammy Award winner, Martinez was attending Texas State University on a tennis scholarship in the mid-1980s when he discovered Songwriters Night. "I stumbled into a life-changing circle of creative minds," he recalls, "spearheaded by a humble professor of country music history, Kent Finlay...We songwriters would circle an old wood-burning stove while the listeners formed an outer circle around the writers."<sup>64</sup>

After graduating from Texas State University with a degree in English, Martinez taught English and coached tennis at Marble Falls High School before devoting himself to a career as a singer-songwriter and performer. After getting considerable radio airplay with his second CD, *Stand Your Ground* (2001), Martinez's successful appearances on the television show, *Nashville Star*, led to his signing a major deal with Dualtone Records in Nashville to produce his recent CD, *Lone Starry Nights* (2004).<sup>65</sup>

When Martinez made his first trip to Nashville in 1987, it was Finlay who went with him. "I'll never forget that trip," Martinez recalls, "because we wound up at a funky place called 'Professor Munchies,' not far from the creative Hillsboro Village Community, where I met, in the men's room, the legendary Harlan Howard—Mr. Songwriter in the eyes of many."<sup>66</sup> Finlay laughingly remembers how an excited Martinez came running out of the bathroom, telling him that inside he had just met Howard. Also there that night were songwriters Ed Bruce and Mickey Newbury. For Martinez, this was a particularly memorable experience: "I couldn't contain my excitement as a guitar pull broke out with these fine folks."<sup>67</sup>

Martinez and Finlay have co-written more than a dozen songs, including "A Girl Named Texas" on Martinez's *Lone Starry Nights*, as well as "Spinning Our Wheels," on his debut CD, *Spinning Our Wheels* (1998). Finlay recalls that they used to meet in Austin or at the Blanco State Park to write songs together. Martinez, one of several writers who have slept on the Finlays' couch, often returns to play at Cheatham Street as one of Kent's favorites.<sup>68</sup>

Likewise, Martinez has never forgotten

how the songwriters culture nurtured by Finlay shaped his growth. "Well, I didn't want to show up to writers night empty handed so it inspired me to try to write something new to share...Kent would point out the good in what I was doing and he would ignore the bad...He always told me that we have to write better songs than they're writing in Nashville." On one of those nights Martinez met songwriter Darryl Staedtler, who gave him an important piece of lasting advice. As Martinez recalls, "He told me to take the fisherman's approach to songwriting, hook, line, and sinker. He said you have to start with a great hook idea, often the title. He and Kent both agreed that...then you need a great first line that is strong enough to hold the listener from the start. And, finally, you need to leave the listener with something significant which sinks into their memory so they'll know what to request on the radio or at the stores."<sup>69</sup>

In particular, Finlay has been a big supporter of the Center for Texas Music History (CTMH) at Texas State University, sponsoring benefit concerts on its behalf. On March 23, 2000, for example, in conjunction with Rod Kennedy and the CTMH, Cheatham Street hosted Kerrville Folk Festival "On the Road," a benefit concert for the CTMH. Finlay's daughter, Jenni, formerly worked for the CTMH, in fact. In the fall semester, 2004, at the invitation of Dr. Gary Hartman, CTMH Director, Finlay once again taught a course, "The History of Country Music," in the Department of History after a hiatus of about twenty-six years.

On September 21, 2003, musicians, friends, supporters, and family gathered at Cheatham Street for a special benefit to help raise money for a bone marrow transplant for Finlay, who had been diagnosed with bone cancer about four months earlier.

With the important help of singer/songwriter Shelley King, in particular, Cheatham Street employees Angie McClure, Jenny Doyle, and Sage Allen, along with many volunteers, set up a wonderful night of music that brought back many of Finlay's friends and employees from the early days. Monica Andrews, one of the original bartenders at Cheatham Street when it opened in 1974, helped to organize a silent auction with many items donated by Texas musicians, including a guitar donated by Monte Montgomery, who has been playing at Cheatham Street since before he entered his teens.

On that emotional night, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Shake Russell, Jack Ingram, Terri Hendrix, Chris Wall, Lars Albrecht,



For many musicians and songwriters, Finlay's own writing and performance skills have been underappreciated by the music business. His songs are masterfully crafted, and he delivers the lyrics and expresses emotions in the stories so cleverly and powerfully. "He deserves a lot more credit than he's gotten," emphasizes writer Aaron Allan, "I have great respect for him as a writer and as an artist, too."<sup>75</sup>

On June 17-20, 2004, Finlay celebrated the 30th anniversary weekend of Cheatham Street. As the Randy Rogers Band, Shelley King, Alvin Crow, and Island Texas entertained festive audiences over the weekend, friends stopped by to show Finlay

oldest of the Finlay children, was influenced by Marianne, a folk singer who had played in Kent's band and with Shake Russell. As Jenni's mother recalls, Jenni at an early age emphasized that she wanted "to write songs like Daddy and sing like Marianne."<sup>77</sup>

Kent and Jenni, who learned to play the guitar, saxophone, and fiddle, played together while she was in elementary school. They performed at Austin's South by Southwest Music Festival in 1989 and again on other occasions. They also played at the Democratic National Convention in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1988, where a ten-year-old Jenni sang a song co-written by Kent and

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**Not surprisingly, Finlay's three children (Jenni, Sterling, and HalleyAnna) are also musicians and songwriters who, having "grown up on the Cheatham Street stage," continue to play an important role at the honky tonk and in the Texas music industry.**

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their appreciation for the years of enjoyment he has provided. Many in the audience shared old memories and stories, especially on the 19th when Crow and his band played in front of a Texas flag on the same stage where they played thirty years earlier. "I recall Alvin Crow opening the back sliding door at the bandstand," remembers Steve Finlay, "and playing Orange Blossom Special as he watched the train go by."<sup>76</sup>

Earlier that month, Finlay quit his day job when he retired from the San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District to devote more of his creative energies to Cheatham Street, recording, and his own writing. Among his goals is to build on the success of his song writing publishing company, Paper Napkin Music, Inc., to create his own independent record label and to showcase the work of songwriters, in particular. He and Gary Hickinbotham, a well-known sound engineer who teaches in Texas State University's Sound Recording Technology program, have developed a longstanding cooperative relationship to pursue this goal as well as others. Among their goals is to explore the possibility of live radio broadcasts from Cheatham Street that would be available on the world-wide web, and to make Finlay's songs more widely available to the public.

Not surprisingly, Finlay's three children (Jenni, Sterling, and HalleyAnna) are also musicians and songwriters who, having "grown up on the Cheatham Street stage," continue to play an important role at the honky tonk and in the Texas music industry. As toddlers, Jenni and Sterling learned to sleep on the pool tables while musicians played. By the time they began elementary school, they had written their first song and performed, along with Marianne Miller and her daughter, Emily, in the Martindale Fish and Tackle Choir. Jenni, the

Todd Snider. She played a hot fiddle breakdown at the end of the song. Afterward, a man impressed with Jenni's performance came up to her, complimented her, and introduced himself as a fellow musician who played the saxophone. Neither Jenni nor Kent knew who he was at the time. However, when the man later got up to address the convention delegates, they both realized that it was then-Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton.<sup>78</sup>

After Jenni graduated from Belmont University in Nashville in 2001, she returned to San Marcos and worked temporarily for the Center for Texas Music History at Texas State University while helping her father manage Paper Napkin Music. She now works for Brad Turcotte's thriving indie label, Compadre Records. Although she lives in Plano, Texas, she continues to assist in the operations of Cheatham Street and Paper Napkin Music.

Sterling, who grew up idolizing Todd Snider, likewise got an early start writing songs and performing. As a kid, he played with Snider at the Blue Pearl (now The Coffee Pot) in San Marcos. Like Jenni, he was a drum major in high school, and he played in the high school mariachi band. A singer-songwriter, he began to play electric bass with Jackson Parten's band in 2002 and with Foscoe Jones in early 2003. He has also played bass with Susan Gibson, Jeff Plankenhorn, the Sidehill Gougers, the Ash Family, and other top musicians in Texas. More recently, he has fronted his own band, Sterling's Starship. He, too, continues to play an important role in the day-to-day operations of Cheatham Street.<sup>79</sup>

HalleyAnna, the youngest of the Finlay children and currently a freshman at Texas State University-San Marcos, has also gained valuable experience on the Cheatham Street stage. She wrote her first song and learned to play the guitar as a very young kid, and in the eighth grade began playing happy hour gigs at Cheatham

Street. She, too, performed at the Blue Pearl. Influenced heavily by the songs of Jewel, Kasey Chambers, and Slaid Cleaves, she plays cover songs along with originals. Kent used to take her with him when he and Cleaves would meet to co-write songs at the playscape in the children's park in San Marcos. HalleyAnna, who at times works at Cheatham Street, performs at Songwriters Circle, and plays bass guitar in Sterling's Starship, intends to remain involved with her father's honky tonk.<sup>80</sup>

Whatever Finlay's future endeavors, Songwriters Circle will

It is also clear from an old picture of Finlay, Hondo Crouch, and Jim Cunningham in Terlingua that hangs behind the bar that the spiritual influences of Hondo will continue to give shape and character to the old warehouse along the tracks in San Marcos. At the end of every Songwriters Circle, when Finlay pulls up a chair out in the audience and listeners move in closer to hear him finish the show with a few of his songs, it is quiet enough to hear a pin drop. For those who close their eyes and perhaps allow themselves to be transported back in

***"It's late at night, I slip out back. The folks are sleeping, well, I'm dressed in black . The place I'm going to is by the railroad tracks."***

**—Dave Teichroeb**

singer-songwriter, "Cheatham Street," 2003

continue to be at the core of his plans. That night holds a special place not only in his heart, but also in the hearts of songwriters who, in turn, regard Finlay with special affection. To honor him and raise money for Finlay's medical fund, Dave Teichroeb, a singer/songwriter from Guelph, Ontario, who lived in San Marcos and performed regularly at Cheatham Street at the time Finlay underwent his bone marrow transplant, produced a compilation CD, *Kent Finlay's Songwriters' Circle*. The CD contains songs by a number of writers who often perform on Wednesday nights. It surprised no one that Finlay, after recuperating from his transplant, made his first post-transplant appearance at Cheatham Street on a Wednesday night. "It never has been a money maker night," he points out, "but it sure is a great night for keeping our integrity."<sup>81</sup>

time, they might well find themselves sitting out under the stars with Finlay, Hondo, Willie, Gary P. Nunn, Dotsy, and Jerry Jeff Walker in Luckenbach. As the audience sings softly with Finlay on the final verse of his mournful song, "They Call It the Hill Country," a sense of loss permeates the warehouse. The audience is left to reflect on more than the environmental consequences of so-called economic progress in Central Texas. One senses that Finlay is also mourning the passing of a cultural era shaped significantly by Hondo. As Dave Teichroeb puts it so well in his song, "Cheatham Street," it may well be, however, that the ghost of Finlay's spiritual guru from Luckenbach still haunts the creaky warehouse every Wednesday night: "At this old honky-tonk down Cheatham Street, yeah, you can still hear old Hondo tapping his feet."<sup>82</sup> ■

#### Notes

1. On the quotes by Ford and Barlow, see [www.cheathamstreet.com](http://www.cheathamstreet.com).
2. "Fife, TX." The Handbook of Texas Online. <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/FF/hnf18.html> [Accessed Wed June 9 9:45:34 US/Central 2004].
3. Kent Finlay, interview with author, June 25, 2002.
4. Gary Hartman, "The Roots Run Deep: An Overview of Texas Music History," in Lawrence Clayton and Joe W. Specht, eds., *The Roots of Texas Music* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 3-36, provides an overview of Texas music history that stresses its diversity and cross-fertilizing cultural influences. See also Bill C. Malone, "Texas Myth/Texas Music," *Journal of Texas Music History* 1 (Spring 2001): 4-11. George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), ch. 13, discusses the class-based roots of rock-and-roll in the blues and country music—traditional musical forms of black and white working-class communities.
5. Kent Finlay, interview with author, June 25, 2002. On the broader context in which the country music industry thrived as Finlay came of age in the post-World War II era, see Bill C. Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, second rev. ed., 2002), chs. 7-8, and Joe W. Specht, "Put a Nickel in the Jukebox: The Texas Tradition in Country Music, 1922-1950," in Clayton and Specht, eds., *The Roots of Texas Music*, ch. 3. Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), emphasizes the role of the music industry in creating and shaping the development of country music. For a class-based analysis of country music in the South, see Bill C. Malone, *Don't Get Above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), and Jeffrey J. Lange, *Smile When You Call Me Hillbilly: Country Music's Struggle for Respectability, 1939-1954* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004). The best, most well-researched treatment of the role of Jimmie Rodgers in the growth of country music in the 1920s and 1930s is Nolan Porterfield's *Jimmie Rodgers: The Life and Times of America's Blue Yodeler* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979). On West Texas, see also Porterfield's "'Sandstorm': Reflections on the Roots of West Texas Music," *Journal of Texas Music History* 2 (Fall 2002): 39-44, and Joe Carr and Alan Munde, *Prairie Nights to Neon Lights: The Story of Country Music in West Texas* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1995).
6. Interview with author, June 25, 2002; "Kent Finlay is back at Cheatham Street to stay," *San Marcos Daily Record*, December 30, 2001.
7. Kent Finlay, interviews with author, June 25, July 30, 2002; Diana Hendricks, conversation, October 28, 2004. For a brief history of Luckenbach, see Glen E. Lich and Brandy Schnautz, "Luckenbach, Texas," in Roy Barkley, Douglas E. Barnett, Cathy Brigham, Gary Hartman, Casey Monahan, Dave Oliphant, and George B. Ward, eds., *The Handbook of Texas Music* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 193-94.
8. Kent Finlay, interviews with author, June 25, July 30, 2002. For the history of Luckenbach, see Glen Lich, "Luckenbach, Texas." The Handbook of Texas Online. <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/LL/hn148.html> [Accessed Jun 10

- 20:08:03 US Central 2004].
9. Kent Finlay, interview with author, July 30, 2002.
  10. For a brief biographical sketch of John Kenneth Threadgill and his role in Texas music history, see Alan Lee Haworth, "John Kenneth Threadgill." The Handbook of Texas Online. <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/TT/ft58.html> [Accessed Jun 10 19:58:12 US/Central 2004].
  11. Kent Finlay, interview with author, July 30, 2002. See also Laurie E. Jasinski, "Cheatham Street Warehouse," in Barkley, et al, eds., *Handbook of Texas Music*, 48-49.
  12. Steve Finlay, e-mail to author, July 27, 2004.
  13. Kent Finlay, interview with author, July 30, 2002.
  14. Steve Finlay, e-mail to author, July 27, 2004.
  15. Kent Finlay, interview with author, July 30, 2002.
  16. On the origins of the progressive country movement, see Jan Reid, *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock* (Austin: University of Texas Press, New Edition, 2004).
  17. Ibid., 280-285; Damon Arhos, "Austin City Limits," in Barkley, et al, eds., *Handbook of Texas Music*, 10-11. For a discussion of the relationship between "redneck rock" musicians, especially Willie Nelson and Jerry Jeff Walker, and a number of well-known Texas literary outlaws in the late 1960s and 1970s, see Steven L. Davis, *Texas Literary Outlaws: Six Writers in the Sixties and Beyond* (Fort Worth, Texas: TCU Press, 2004), passim.
  18. Kent Finlay, telephone conversation with author, July 13, 2004.
  19. Mike Daily, e-mail to author, January 9, 2005.
  20. Kent Finlay, interviews with author, June 25, July 30, 2002; "Kent Finlay is back at Cheatham to stay," *San Marcos Daily Record*, December 30, 2001; Tommy Foote, e-mail to author, February 1, 2005.
  21. Mike Daily, e-mail to author, January 17, 2005.
  22. Kent Finlay, interviews with author, June 25, July 30, 2002; "Kent Finlay is back at Cheatham to stay," *San Marcos Daily Record*, December 30, 2001; Daily, e-mail to author, January 9, 2005.
  23. Foote, e-mail to author, February 1, 2005.
  24. Daily, e-mail to author, January 17, 2005.
  25. Quoted in "Kent Finlay is back at Cheatham Street to stay," *San Marcos Daily Record*, December 30, 2001. On the role of the Broken Spoke in Texas music history, see Tanya Krause, "Broken Spoke," in Barkley, et al, eds., *Handbook of Texas Music*, 38.
  26. On the history of Gruene Hall, see Brandy Schnautz, "Gruene Hall," in Barkley, et al, eds., *Handbook of Texas Music*, 126.
  27. Kent Finlay, interview with author, July 30, 2002.
  28. Daily, e-mail to author, January 17, 2005.
  29. Kent Finlay, interview with author, July 30, 2002.
  30. Ibid.; Daily, e-mail to author, January 11, 2005. For Strait's discography, see his internet website: <http://www.georgetraight.com>.
  31. Ev Swinney, e-mail to author, July 8, 2004.
  32. Department of History Personnel File, James Kent Finlay, and Class Rosters File, Spring 1979, Department of History Archives, Texas State University, San Marcos; Kent Finlay, interview with author, July 30, 2002.
  33. Clay Blaker, telephone conversation with author, May 16, 2003; Daily, e-mail to author, January 11, 2005; Foote, e-mail to author, February 1, 2005.
  34. Mike Daily, e-mail to author, January 11, 2005. For Blaker's discography, see his internet website: <http://www.clayblaker.com>. On D Records, see Linda Hellinger, "Pappy Daily," in Barkley, et al, eds., *Handbook of Texas Music*, 75. See also the internet website of the Glad Music Company, a publishing company created by Pappy Daily in 1958: <http://www.gladmusicco.com>.
  35. Blaker, telephone conversation with author, May 16, 2003.
  36. Bill Whitbeck, interview with author, August 19, 2002.
  37. Ibid.
  38. Kent Finlay, interview with author, July 30, 2002.
  39. *Bill Whitbeck, interview with author, August 19, 2002.*
  40. Kent Finlay, interview with author, July 30, 2002. On Vaughan's career, see, for example, Joe Nick Patoski and Bill Crawford, *Sievie Ray Vaughan: Caught in the Crossfire* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993).
  41. Kent Finlay, interview with author, June 25, 2002; Tad Hershorn, "Cheatham Street switches hands," *San Marcos News*, March 20-26, 1983.
  42. Jasinski, "Cheatham Street Warehouse," 48.
  43. Kent Finlay, interview with author, July 30, 2002. For a collection of interviews with some of Texas's most distinguished songwriters, see Kathleen Hudson, *Telling Stories, Writing Songs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).
  44. Aaron Allan, interview with author, June 30, 2002. Allan, whose songs have been covered by Stoney Edwards, Claude Gray, Chet McIntyre, Willie Nelson, the Osborne Brothers, Charley Walker, and others, recently held a party at Cheatham Street to celebrate the release of his CD, "Time Is" (2005). On Allan's career, see Jim Gramon, *Legendary Texas Storytellers* (Plano, Tx.: Republic of Texas Press, 2003), 136-150, and Tony Wilson, "Aaron Allan likes to keep it simple: 'Me and My Guitar,'" *San Marcos Daily Record*, January 28, 2005.
  45. Al Barlow, e-mail to author, February 2, 2005.
  46. Ibid.; Todd Snider Road Journal, Volume 5, May 2003, [http://www.toddsnider.net/journal\\_may03.html](http://www.toddsnider.net/journal_may03.html); John Arthur Martinez, e-mail to author, October 25, 2004.
  47. Diana Hendricks, conversation with author, October 28, 2004.
  48. Quoted in Richard Skanse, undated interview with Todd Snider, <http://www.lonestarmusic.com>.
  49. For Kristofferson's quote, see: <http://www.ohboy.com>.
  50. Kent Finlay, interview with author, July 30, 2002.
  51. Ibid.; Todd Snider Road Journal, Volume 5, May 2003, [http://www.toddsnider.net/journal\\_may03.html](http://www.toddsnider.net/journal_may03.html).
  52. Terri Hendrix, interview with author, August 29, 2002.
  53. Barlow, e-mail to author, February 2, 2005.
  54. Hendrix, interview with author, August 29, 2002.
  55. Ibid.
  56. Kent Finlay, interview with author, July 30, 2002.
  57. Ibid. For Hendrix's discography, see her website, <http://www.terrihendrix.com>. See also Rob Booth, "Terri Hendrix—No Tacky Wallpaper Here," *The Texas Rising Star 2* (July 2004): 7.
  58. Hendrix, interview with author, August 29, 2002.
  59. Kent Finlay, interview with author, July 30, 2002; Rose Marie Eash, "An art gallery for Texas music: 27 years of nurturing Lone Star sounds," *San Marcos Daily Record*, June 2, 2001.
  60. The quote is from an interview with Randy Rogers on the Texas Troubadours website, <http://www.texastroubadours.com>.
  61. <http://www.randyrogersband.com>. For the quote, see <http://www.texastroubadours.com>. See also Jeff Walker, "No Place Like Home: Rising Country act Randy Rogers returns to Cheatham Street to play with his mentor Kent Finlay," *San Marcos Daily Record*, October 27, 2004.
  62. The Ash Family recently released a CD, "Bread and Wine" (2004), engineered and mixed by Gary Hickinbotham at the Firestation Studio, produced by Jim and Tommy Ash and Gary Hickinbotham, and mastered by Jerry Tubbs at Terra Nova Digital Audio, Inc., Austin, Texas.
  63. Kent Finlay, telephone conversation with author, July 13, 2004.
  64. "JAMsession with John Arthur Martinez," *Austin Songwriter*, September, 1999, 3. I would like to thank songwriter Regan Brown for calling my attention to this interview with Martinez. See the biography section on Martinez's website, <http://www.johnarthurmartinez.net>.
  65. John Arthur Martinez, e-mail to author, October 25, 2004.
  66. Ibid.; Kent Finlay, telephone conversation with author, July 22, 2004.
  67. Ibid.; <http://www.johnarthurmartinez.net>; Diana Finlay, interview with author, October 28, 2004.
  68. John Arthur Martinez, e-mail to author, October 25, 2004.
  69. Kent Finlay, interview with author, July 30, 2002.
  70. Daily, e-mail to author, January 17, 2005.
  71. Foote, e-mail to author, February 1, 2005.
  72. Whitbeck, interview with author, August 19, 1902.
  73. John Arthur Martinez, e-mail to author, October 25, 2004.
  74. Aaron Allan, interview with author, June 30, 2002.
  75. Steve Finlay, e-mail to author, July 27, 2004.
  76. Quoted in Diana Finlay, conversation with author, October 28, 2004.
  77. *Austin American Statesman*, February 10, 1989; Kent Finlay, interview with author, June 25, 2002.
  78. Diana Hendricks, conversation with author, October 28, 2004.
  79. Ibid.
  80. Ibid.
  81. Kent Finlay, interview with author, July 30, 2002. The compilation CD, which was conceived, recorded, mixed, and mastered by Teichroeb at Peach Tree Studio, contains songs by Rick Bowen, Gregg Andrews, Becky Purcell, Mel Mason, Regan Brown, Stan Harlan, Angie McClure, and Teichroeb.
  82. Teichroeb's recent CD, *Canadian Whiskey*, Peach Tree Studio, 2004, is largely the product of a three-year stint in San Marcos during which he performed regularly at Cheatham Street and was influenced by the singer-songwriter culture nurtured by Kent Finlay. For a full discography, see his website: <http://www.Davet.ca>