"It’s the Music": Kent Finlay’s Cheatham Street Warehouse in San Marcos, Texas

Gregg Andrews

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 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.”

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. 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 back yard 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.

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The fast-rolling trains that shake and rattle Cheatham Street’s walls and tin sheeting may be too close-by for some folk’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 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) 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 Fifehire in Scotland. Since only about 50 people lived in Fife at that time, his earliest education took place in a one-room school house.

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Alvin Andrews: It's the Music
Produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2005

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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.

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 syncing 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. 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.

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 vocational training facility created in 1964. 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.

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 Knock, had bought Luckenbach in 1971. Finlay joined Gary P. Nunn, Jerry Jeff Walker, Dusty, Darrell Stanfill, 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 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.” 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.

The sight of “rednecks” and hippies gathering 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. 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
lived in Kerrville, Texas, he felt as if he had been to Mecca.5

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The relaxed atmosphere and sharing of songs had a big impact on Finlay’s songwriting 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.”8

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Journal of Texas Music History, Vol. 5 [2005], Iss. 1, Art. 3
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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. Daly, a young steel guitar player, began to hang out at Cheatham Street 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, Aideep 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 Daly as his steel guitar player, along with drummer Tommy Fote, lead guitarist Ron Caball, and bass guitar player Terry Hale to form a band, Stoney Ridge, that began to play regularly at Cheatham Street.

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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 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 KLRU-TV (now KLRT-TV) showcased the reunion of Bob Wills' 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.B. Stevenson, and Alvin Crow.

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." For the occasion, Kent had booked a "hippie country band," Freda and the Friedogs—Marcia Ball, John X. Reed, Steve McDaniels, David Cook, and Bobby Earl Smith. As Kent recalls, they sold out—and certainly didn't look like "country." At that time one of Austin's hot bands that played at the Armadillo World Headquarters, Broken Spoke, Soup Creek Saloon, and other Austin venues in the early 1970s, Freda and the Friedogs 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.

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 traditional country, rock, folk, and blues.

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From Willie Nelson, Ernest Tubbs, Billy Joe Shaver, Jerry Jeff Walker, Gary P. Nunn, Greenery Wheels, Flaco Jimenez, and Kinky Friedman, to Ray Willie Hubbard, Guy Clark, Gatemouth Brown, Joe Ely, Butch Hancock, Townes Van Zandt, Alvin Crow and the Pleasant Valley Boys, Ray Benson's Aideep at the Wheel, Doug Sahm, Augie Meyers, Eric Johnson, Joe Bob's Bar and Grill Band, Pony 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 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.

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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 Daly, Fote, Hale, and Caball to form the Ace in the Hole Band. Fote, 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 Fote 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.

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." 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
produced 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 Blaker's outstanding songwriting impressed Finlay and Strait, music, Dr. William Poole, a professor in the Department of History at Texas State University, who often went to a campus course in the history of country music. Dr. Poole's more traditional departmental colleagues on the senior 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. Everett Swinney, chair of the History Department, then worked hard to get administrative approval for the class. 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's request was approved, Finlay and a fellow department member took Dr. Ron Brown to audit the class regularly and file a comprehensive report, he hired Finlay to teach the class in the spring semester, 1971.

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 History Department when Finlay re-hired Finlay to teach it again in the spring semester, 1979.

After playing one night at Cheatham Street, Ace in the Hole Band members met singer-songwriter Clay Blair and his group, who walked into the honky-tonk looking to book gigs in the area. Blair was born in Honolulu 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, Blair moved back to Houston. Then, upon the advice of Glenn Schaller, his ex-guitar player who had left California to attend Texas State University, Blair went to San Marcos. He established friendships with Ace in the Hole Band members and sat on the Finlay's class. Finlay soon booked Blair at Cheatham Street. Meanwhile, the Ace in the Hole group helped Blair find up gigs in the surrounding Hill Country, and Blair used his contacts to help Ace in the Hole get gigs in Houston.

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For Blaker, Finlay's night club 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."

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. 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.

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 Daly, though, memories of the early gigs are still vivid. As 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

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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.” The band also 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.”

Through Cheatham Street connections, Whitbeck established friendships with members of the Ace in the Hole Band, particularly fellow bass player, Terry Hale, and guitarist Roe Cabal. In fact, about a year after Whitbeck moved to San Marcos, he, Hale, Cabal, Roy Rushing, Pete Denny, and Bennet Spievogel 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.

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him at Cheatham Street did not even mention his name. Daily reminded 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 coming out on your first night of a new band. We sounded pretty good and had some people dancing and everyone 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.

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 most of their 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. As Daily emphasizes, "Cheatham St. was only 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." Finlay remembers calling James White, owner of the Broken Spoke 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."

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Finlay wanted a good 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 decision to book the band was a turning point in his career. "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 Danny Staeidler, a south Texas songwriter who, at the time, was writing for Chappell Music. Staeidler 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 traditional marketplace. As Finlay recalls, "We already had this little thing, this little anti-mainstream country thing...in our minds, you know, and we were sick of it."

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 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's administration 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 in the semester when the History department re-hired Finlay to teach it again in the spring semester, 1979.

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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 personal integrity and unselfish devotion to songwriting 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 songwriting, 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.

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 James 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 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...
Before long, Finlay invited Barlow to play several gigs with him. “I became hooked on entertaining,” Barlow explains, “Tuesday nights at Cheatham Street were magic. 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 andoller at me to shut up and go to bed. But my excitement just seemed to spill out everywhere.”

One of Barlow’s “favorite ‘regulars’” on Tuesday nights was Todd Snider, a recent high school graduate from Oregon who, in 1986, came to Cheatham Street to meet 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.” Soon, sixteen-year-old Sterling Finlay began to emulate Snider, who often played 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.” Soon, Kent gave Snider a gig and introduced him to the songwriting of Jerry Jeff Walker, Kris Kristofferson, John Prine, Billy Joe Shaver, and Guy Clark. In return, Snider brought his 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.”

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. “I didn’t get treated with such warmth and respect, even though I was an absolute beginner,” she remembers, “I wouldn’t have come back.”

What particularly impressed Hendrix was the way in which Finlay and other songwriters supported each other without letting egos, cliques, or musical 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. “Now a very dynamic performer and writer, Hendrix used the
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 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. “I was terrified to play in public.” Hendrix, since releasing her debut CD, Two Dollar Shoes, in 1999, as well as Boots and Sidewalks, which was released in 2004, 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.”

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

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Advertisement. San Marcos Citizen. Courtesy, Kent Finlay

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.”

Hendrix, since releasing her debut CD, Two Dollar Shoes, in 1999, has been highly productive, anchored by an outstanding band—Lloyd Maines (guitar, lap and pedal steel guitar, mandolin, dobro), Glen Fukunaga (bass), and Paul Peary (drums). In 1997, she released Wiley 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, San Marcos

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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: “I’d just

lean back, just feel it, you know. I don’t think I ever saw anyone that loved to play the guitar like Stevie.”

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

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.

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 reopening of Cheatham Street on New Year’s Eve, 1999, did Finlay once again return to operate the honky tonk.

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 Ab barnov, 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 Allen, 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.”

James McMurtry, John Arthur Martinez, Hal Ketchum, Justin Trevino, 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
Likewise, Martinez has never forgotten that he made his first trip to Nashville in 1987, it was Finlay who recommended him to a friend of hers who was then part of a successful artist/producer team. “It’s the Music” was the name of the show that Finlay produced and directed, and it featured some of the top songwriters in the country, including Darryl Worley, Lyle Lovett, and Kix Brooks. Martinez’s performance on the show was so impressive that he was offered a recording contract, and his first album, “Stand Your Ground,” was released in 1988. The album featured the hit single “I Love the Way You Make Me Feel,” which reached the top of the country music charts.

In recent years, Cheatham Street has provided a venue for several distinguished songwriters and musicians who are graduates of Texas State University, including Darryl Staudler, Colin Gilmore, Randy Rogers, and John Arthur Martinez. A Grammy Award winner, Martinez was attending Texas State University on a tennis scholarship when he and Finlay discovered the songwriters circle at Cheatham Street. “In a life-changing circle of creative minds,” he recalls, “they found the passion and drive to take their music to the next level.”

Martinez 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, and the Finlay Band. The Sunday shows featured a variety of styles, from bluegrass to rock, and often included a special guest who would join the band on stage. “It’s a great way to showcase the talent in our community,” says Martinez. “And it’s a lot of fun for the audience as well.”

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. “We love hearing new voices,” says Finlay. “It’s a great way to keep the tradition alive.”

The band’s hard work, along with Finlay’s steady encouragement and mentoring, soon paid off in increased attendance. In July 2004, the band played its first international gig at the Fleadh Festival in Ireland. Before a jam-packed crowd at Cheatham Street on August 26, 2004, they celebrated the release of their new CD, “Bells & Whistles.”

The new CD included tracks from Martinez’s second album, “Live at Cheatham Street Warehouse.” The album features Martinez’s signature style, with powerful vocals and intricate harmonies. “I’m really proud of this album,” says Martinez. “It’s a reflection of the hard work and dedication that we put into our shows.”

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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.” 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 Oldsmobile Cutlass. “He was a shy little kid and not at all self-confident, so I’d bring him back to where I was living,” Snider remembers.

During his time in San Marcos, Snider met Finlay, who introduced him to the songwriters’ circle. Snider recalls, “I spent the first year in San Marcos in a house with a woman named Linda, who took care of me like a mother. I had no place to stay, so she let me in her home. I remember her saying, ‘You’re going to be a songwriter.’”

Snider’s career really took off when he met Finlay, who encouraged him to pursue his musical dreams. Snider recalls, “One cold, rainy night, [he] 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.”

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. “I had not been treated with such warmth and respect, even when I was an absolute beginner,” she remembers, “I wouldn’t have come back.”

What particularly impressed Hendrix was the way in which Finlay and other songwriters supported each other without letting egos, cliques, or 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.

“...the truth, I was more than a little nervous about singing and playing in front of the twenty-something folks gathered in the room. 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.” 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 bright-eyed 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).

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 Finley 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.”

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.” 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 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.”

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On June 17-20, 2004, Finlay celebrated the 30th anniversary weekend of Cheatham Street. As the Randy Rogers Band, Shelley King, Alvin Crow, and Texas entertainers from around the country performed over the weekend, friends stopped by to show Finlay 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, who opened the back door of the bandstand,” remembers Steve Finlay, “and playing Orange Blossom Special as he watched the train go by.”

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, where he lives in Plano, Texas, she continues to assist in the operations of Cheatham Street and Paper Napkin Music.
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, one of Finlay’s favorite writers—Adam Carroll, Terri Hendrix, Dub Miller, Randy Rogers, and Houston Marchman—have turned songs for broadcast play, 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 last Monday of the month. The Ice Cream Truck has been used for weddings, receptions, birthday parties, and to entertain Kids with Cancer. Finlay laughingly remembers that a beauty pageant was once held 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 Supplee, a banjo player, and his wife, Cathy Supplee, to play and sing on the historic stage.

In recent years, Cheatham Street has provided a venue for several distinguished songwriters and musicians who are graduates of Texas State University, including Darryl Staedler, Colin Gilmore, Randy Rogers, and John Arthur Martinez. A Grammy Award winner, Martinez was attending Texas State University when he was a second-year English major in mid-1980s when he discovered Songwriters Night. “I stumbled into a life-changing circle of creative minds,” he recalls, “spurred 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.”

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). 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 Hillbilly Village Community, where I met, in the men’s room, the legendary Harlan Howard–Mr. Songwriter in the eyes of many.”

Finlay has often cooperated with Texas State University faculty and students to allow the use of Cheatham Street for broadcast social 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 last Monday of the month. The Ice Cream Truck has been used for weddings, receptions, birthday parties, and to entertain Kids with Cancer. Finlay laughingly remembers that a beauty pageant was once held 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 Supplee, a banjo player, and his wife, Cathy Supplee, to play and sing on the historic stage.

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Finlay laughingly remembers how an excited Martinez came running out of the bathroom, telling him that 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.”

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. Martinez also has written songs that have been 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 Finlay’s couch, often returns to play at Cheatham Street as one of Kent’s favorites.

Lone Starry Nights, produced by Radney Foster, is Martinez’s second CD released in 2001. Martinez’s encouragement and mentoring, soon paid even more dividends. In July, 2004, the band played its first international gigs at various venues in Germany and France. Before a jam-packed crowd at Cheatham Street on August 26, 2004, they celebrated the release of their new CD, 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 various venues in Germany and France. Before a jam-packed crowd at Cheatham Street on August 26, 2004, they celebrated the release of their new CD, The...
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Earlier that month, Finlay quit his day job when he retired from the San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District in an effort 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 his children. “I like the idea of opening the back door at the bandstand,” remembers Steve Finlay, “and playing Orange Blossom Special as he watched the train go by.”

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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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 the truckers.

—Dave Teichroeb

songwriter-singer

"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 began his career, 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-operative appearance at the club the very first week. "It never has been a money maker night," he points out, "but it sure is a great night for keeping our integrity."
It’s late at night, I slip out back. The folk songs are sleeping, I’m well dressed in black. The place I’m going to is by the railroad tracks.

—Dave Teichroeb

Once upon a time, in Cheatham Street, music was king. The little bar and dance hall, situated in the heart of Lubbock, Texas, was a place where musicians, songwriters, and music lovers could come together and share their passion for the art. It was a place of refuge, a place of community, and a place where the spirit of the musical tradition lived on.

Kent Finlay, a music entrepreneur, was one of the main figures who helped to keep Cheatham Street alive. He not only managed the bar, but also produced a compilation CD, Kent Finlay’s Songwriters’ Circle, which contained songs by a number of writers who performed at Cheatham Street or had a connection with the venue.

As the years went by, Cheatham Street evolved, and its role in the musical community changed. However, the spirit of the place remained, and Finlay continued to play an important role in preserving and promoting the tradition of Texas music.

In this essay, I will explore the history of Cheatham Street and its significance in the musical community of Lubbock. I will also provide insights into Finlay’s contributions to the preservation of the tradition and his role in shaping the development of Texas music.

Music industry in Dallas

The role of the music industry in creating and shaping the development of country music is clear from the example of Cheatham Street. The venue was a place where musicians could come together and share their music, and it played a significant role in the development of the country music industry. The industry was instrumental in the creation and shaping of country music, and Cheatham Street was a place where musicians could come together and share their passion for the art.

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