

BEYOND THE TRACKS:
A HISTORY OF CHEATHAM STREET WAREHOUSE

HONORS THESIS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	vi
CHAPTER	
I. Introduction.....	1
II. Part One	6
About the Building.....	6
German Influence.....	7
Luckenbach.....	9
III. Part Two.....	11
Kent Finlay.....	11
IV. Part Three.....	16
Finlay Finds Cheatham Street.....	16
Progressive Country.....	17
The Grand Opening of Cheatham Street Warehouse.....	19
V. Part Four.....	22
George Strait and Ace in the Hole	22
VI. Part Five	26
The Early 1980s	26
The Songwriter Class of 1987.....	29
VII. Part Six	32

	Changes Come to Cheatham.....	32
	A New Era.....	32
	The Future.....	35
VIII.	Endnotes.....	39

ABSTRACT

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SUPERVISING PROFESSOR: GARY HARTMAN, Ph.D.

Since opening its doors as a music venue in 1974, Cheatham Street Warehouse has been an important facet in the development of Texas songwriters and country music. Although Cheatham Street was opened with the tradition of historical Texas dancehalls and honky-tonks in mind, the tin warehouse has created its own unique niche in the history of legendary music venues. The special place that Cheatham Street holds can be largely accredited to the performers who have used it as a launching pad for their early careers and, even more so, to the man who runs and owns the place, Kent Finlay. Their personal stories about memorable nights under the neon lights are sure to capture the distinct atmosphere of the venue and serve as a written testament to the role that Cheatham Street Warehouse has played in preserving and promoting Texas music for the past three decades

Introduction

The first time I heard the name “Cheatham Street Warehouse,” I was a junior in high school living in a small oil-patch town in West Texas. My friend and I were big fans of singer/songwriter Adam Carroll, and we had seen on his website that he was playing in San Marcos. It did not take long for the two of us to devise a plan to see him play. We emailed his manager and got his phone number, called him up and asked if we could “job shadow” him. On the phone he sounded confused as to why two seventeen-year-old kids wanted to drive across Texas to watch him strum a guitar, but he agreed to sign off on the forms that we needed to turn in for class. With Adam’s hesitant “sure,” we were ready to load the truck and leave the pump-jack dotted horizon in the rearview. It took a little more than six hours of nonstop driving before the caliche parking lot outside of Cheatham was crunching underneath my tires. I am not too sure what expectations I had of the venue, but I remember looking at the tin building for the first time and thinking that we might have gotten the address wrong. As dusk came on, a smear of setting sun glinted off the beaten metal walls as if to highlight the black, stenciled words: “Cheatham Street Warehouse.” We had made it.

When we stepped inside, it was as if we had just traveled to some other world where the present was pleasantly tethered to the past. Black-and-white photographs hung between neon signs collecting cobwebs and a thin layer of dust. The floor squeaked slightly beneath my boots, and the ceiling was not a whole lot higher than my head. On this particular night, instead of using the stage at the far end of the room, the guitars and

microphones had been set up to form a circle in the very middle. Kerosene lanterns were lit and hay bales were serving double-duty as seats and a way of enclosing the circle. Too young to order a beer, I bought myself a Big Red from the bar and took a seat just outside of the musicians' hay-bale ring.

Soon after, Adam Carroll took his place in the circle where his guitar was resting on its stand. The other artists playing that night also sat down and picked up their instruments. It was an all-star show that night, as Slaid Cleaves, Terri Hendrix with Lloyd Maines, and Kent Finlay all contributed to the music coming from the hay bales and kerosene glow. With the first strum, I might as well have been in some sort of a trance. I hung onto every word, every up-and-down stroke on the six strings before me. This was something I had never experienced before. The crowd was dead quiet except for a few whoops and hollers. People were there for the music — the type of music without the bells and whistles of a stadium packing spectacle, music that had not been polished by pitch-correcting software, music created by the individual playing it instead of someone scribbling songs inside a cubicle in Nashville. By the end of the night, I was hooked on *this* kind of music.

I was seventeen years old that night in the spring of 2006, but it was an event that has continued to shape my life ever since. I had been considering what university to attend for quite some time when I first walked into Cheatham Street Warehouse, but, at the time, Texas State was not on that list of potential candidates. After the trip to Cheatham, I was able to explore San Marcos and the campus. It was an almost immediate decision; Texas State is where I belonged. I figured I could get a good education at any of the great schools across the state, but only the university in San Marcos had Cheatham

Street Warehouse just down the hill.

Fortunately, that choice has been one of the finest I have ever made, and, four years later, I am a semester away from graduating with two degrees and have begun the capstone to my collegiate career — an undergraduate honors thesis. I was asked during my freshman year to begin thinking about which topic to address in my senior thesis. The criteria for selecting the topic included a passion for the subject, the ability to further (or start) the academic conversation, and, preferably, something that might aid me in furthering my personal, professional, or scholastic endeavors. It took only a short time to realize that a thesis covering Cheatham Street Warehouse would nicely infuse all three. Thus, I set to work.

The thesis that follows is one that grew directly out of a personal ardor for music, history, and people's stories. Cheatham Street Warehouse is a place teeming with all of these. I have spent many nights over the past three years scribbling notes while I sat on a barstool amidst the curling cigarette smoke listening to the band or observing the crowd. I have met many interesting personalities and have been fortunate enough to consider some of these characters friends.

At the heart of Cheatham Street, as well as this thesis, is the owner and “Godfather of Texas Songwriters,” Kent Finlay. His friendship and support has been invaluable as he has spent his much-demanded time talking with me about the venue and a host of other things. He was the professor of my History of Country Music class, and, in that role, handed me many of the tools necessary to conduct the work I have done on this project. It is only with the total life-commitment displayed by rare individuals such as Finlay who make it possible for venues like Cheatham to continue to exist. For his

devotion to the art of songwriting and perpetuation of Texas music, I am forever grateful.

As a history major, I have been able to study not only the history of country music, but also, under the instruction of my thesis advisor, Dr. Gary Hartman, the history of Texas music. This class, in particular, was a reassurance that my thesis work had a viable place in the world of academia. To study the history of music is to study the history of people and their culture. Since its opening in 1974, Cheatham Street has been an ideal place in which to watch the history of Texas music evolve. Within those tin walls, history is made nightly on the well-worn stage and also in the crowd where artists both famous and unknown mingle while drinking beer from mason jars. George Strait and the Ace in the Hole Band had their first gig ever in the venue and continued to play weekly until Finlay and Strait took an old van to Nashville to find a record deal (more on that story later). A young guitarist, Stevie Vaughan, used to play the blues in Cheatham before he became internationally renowned as Stevie Ray Vaughan. Other artists such as, Charlie Sexton, Bruce Robison, Todd Snider, Teri Hendrix, and Randy Rogers grew their musical abilities in the fertile soil of the Cheatham Street stage.

The historical contribution Cheatham Street has made to the world of music is undeniable, but history is more than big names on a marquee. In the short time that I have been able to regularly attend events at Cheatham Street, I have witnessed an extraordinary amount of memorable nights and unforgettable moments. Without some record, these great memories and stories well worth the telling will be lost. I have felt it necessary to include some of these stories in this work to offer a true glimpse into this honky-tonk world of music and those that make it. It is my hope that this thesis will be something that both the historian and the music fan will find enjoyable and informative.

No written account of Cheatham Street will ever be able to substitute for a night spent bathed in the glow of the neon lights, surrounded by folks tapping their feet to the music taking place only a few feet away. By the conclusion of this paper, I hope you have an itch to get out and see some type of live music played by the people who wrote and have lived the songs in one of the historical venues that have made Texas Music one of the most eclectic, important, and world-renowned genres that it is today.

PART ONE

About the Building

The tin building that stands only a few yards away from the railroad tracks at 119 Cheatham Street is one hundred years old this year. While most people know the building as the music venue, Cheatham Street Warehouse, it was originally built for a much different purpose. Erected in 1910, the first moniker bestowed upon the single-story, sheet metal was Reed Grocery Warehouse. The close proximity to the train tracks helped to serve its original function as a distribution center for local grocers. Supplies and goods were easily unloaded from stopped trains to the inside of the warehouse.

Today, the building exterior looks almost exactly as it did a century ago. In fact, about the only difference is a handicap access ramp that has been built leading to the red door that serves as the main entrance to Cheatham. The fact that the warehouse has seen little change is somewhat surprising given the dramatic change the city of San Marcos has seen since the ground was broken to lay the building's foundation. The city has grown tremendously in terms of population (over fifty-two thousand residents as of 2008), businesses, and national recognition as the home of Texas State University, with a current enrollment of over thirty thousand.

In the early 1970s when Kent Finlay, who had recently graduated from Southwest Texas State University, began looking for a suitable building to serve as a music venue, few people would have thought of the weather-beaten shack that had been used for little more than storing the city's Christmas decorations for the past few decades. However,

when Finlay stepped inside the dark, dust-filled building for the first time on a hot summer day in 1974, he knew that he had found his music venue.

German Influence

To fully understand the historical significance of Cheatham Street Warehouse, it is important to understand the context of the venue in relation to the history of other great music halls in Texas.

The story of Cheatham Street Warehouse begins in the 1830s, when the first German immigrants arrived in Texas. After Texas gained its independence from Mexico in 1836, the newly formed nation was looking to populate its vast lands and establish a solid economy. German people were particularly sought after to settle the land as they had a solid reputation of being well-educated and hard-working. In turn, the mid-1840s saw a huge influx of German immigrants as the *Adelsverein* (Society for the Protection of German Immigrants in Texas) helped make the continental transplant easier.¹

Certain push-and-pull factors can be directly attributed to the large influx of German immigrants. Many of the immigrants were being pushed from Europe during this time by the political and economic turmoil afflicting most of the German-speaking states of Central and Eastern Europe. The aristocracy had a long-history of imposing harsh taxes and severely limiting the freedoms of the lower-class. When the disenfranchised groups sought to reform these conditions, their efforts were often ruthlessly snuffed out. After several failed attempts at reform, many believed there was nothing left to do but flee to America.

The vast and fertile farmland of Texas was an obvious choice for German immigrants looking for a better life. Also, because of the sparse population, there was

plenty of room to establish communities that would be relatively isolated from the influence and friction of other cultures.² In 1845, Prince Karl von Solms-Braunfels became the leader of the *Adelsverein*, the largest society looking to assist the German settlers. Solms-Braunfels established the first settlement on March 21, 1845, when he bought 1,300 acres along the Guadalupe River in Central Texas.³ New Braunfels, as the settlement was known, was one of many successful communities established in Central and Eastern Texas. Many of these towns, including New Braunfels, remain small but thriving communities that still bear traces of their German origins.

There are particular reasons that these German communities have such a prominent role in the shaping of Texas history. For one, when German immigrants left for Texas, they often came as family units. By settling as families, there was an immediate sense of unity and familiarity. The settlements were also extremely tight-knit due to their efforts to retain their culture. Since most of their communities were fairly isolated, they were able to maintain their language and customs. A higher rate of literacy among these immigrants also meant that newspapers and books could be circulated to sustain their German identity. Another unique aspect of these settlers was their tendency to promote culture and unity through various organizations. German Texans established clubs for poetry, hunting, knitting, and music.

At the center of this “fortress of German heritage” was a building that served in a variety of ways as the community center. One of the primary functions of these buildings was to host live music. One could hear polkas, schottisches, and other German music pouring out of these buildings several times a week. Despite being built in the latter part of the nineteenth century, many of these community centers are still standing today.

However, the popularity of German music and culture was greatly diminished during the 1940s, as anti-German sentiment spread across America as a result of World War II.

These community centers slowly faded from popularity and many closed down and were boarded up. While these buildings no longer served as the hub of society, many were re-opened during the 1960s and 1970s but this time as live music venues hosting a wide variety of music from different ethnic groups. Some of these community centers that were given a second life as dancehalls are now nationally recognized venues, such as Gruene Hall located only a few miles outside of New Braunfels, as well as the legendary Luckenbach Dancehall just thirteen miles down the road from Fredericksburg, Texas.

Luckenbach

When it comes to the story of Cheatham Street Warehouse, the little town of Luckenbach is an important element. Kent Finlay has said many times, “If there was no Luckenbach, there would be no Cheatham.”⁴

Today, if you are able to find Luckenbach off the winding Ranch Road 1888, you are sure to pull up to quite a scene. Roosters are there to greet visitors; several Harley-Davidson motorcycles kick up dust on the dirt road leading into and out of the town; children sit atop a longhorn steer led around by a man with a handle-bar mustache; locals come in from nearby ranches with sweat-stained hats and dirty boots, and, almost always, there is music.

Richard “Hondo” Crouch, along with Kathy Morgan and Guich Koock, bought the town of Luckenbach in 1971 for \$30,000. Hondo is considered by many as somewhat of a Texas legend, drawing comparisons to such figures as Will Rogers. Like Rogers, Hondo had a larger-than-life personality, and many of his Texas axioms are still well-

known today. Not only did Hondo save the old German community from becoming a complete ghost town and falling into ruin, he is also responsible for creating an atmosphere in the little five-person town that would draw musicians, songwriters, and all sorts of characters from miles around. “He would make people listen,” Finlay remembers. “I’d sing a song and he’d say, ‘Come on y’all, come over here and listen to this.’ He was just a big fan of life and Texas.”⁵

The entire town consists of a building that serves as a general store, souvenir shop, and beer-drinking joint — a dancehall complete with squeaking wooden floors and uncovered wooden-rafter ceiling, as well as the Luckenbach Feeding Store which serves hot dogs, chili, and nachos during special events or busy tourist days. A few dilapidated buildings also serve as a reminder of the town’s past. The signature building of Luckenbach today is the General Store. Inside, a tarnished metal, wood-burning stove serves as the only means of heat for those picking guitars in the winter, and, during the summer, an open door is the only means of fighting the Texas summer heat. It was in this cobweb-filled, squeaking-floored building or outside underneath the huge oak trees growing along the small creek that snakes around the town that Willie Nelson, Jerry Jeff Walker, and many others would come together to play music. They migrated in from Austin, San Antonio, and other places to be part of Luckenbach’s fledgling music scene. “That whole place was just magic, like a whole other world,” Finlay recalls. “It’s not exactly the same as it was back then, Hondo’s been gone for a while now, but you can still feel something special about that place.”⁶

PART TWO

Kent Finlay

One of the songwriters who made the pilgrimage to Luckenbach was Kent Finlay, born in Brady, Texas on February 9, 1938. Finlay is the oldest of James and Grace Short Finlay's five children, who also had three sons and a daughter. The family owned a farm located 18 miles north of Brady in McCulloch County near the small community known as Fife. The name of the farming settlement comes from Finlay's grandfather who immigrated to Texas from the Fifeshire area of Scotland.⁷ "There was a post office and a little store where you could buy a Coke or something. You'd have to go to Brady for groceries," Finlay recalls. "The biggest thing there was a graveyard, now it's the only thing left."⁸

The Finlay family depended on their farm to sustain them through the tough economic times of the Great Depression. Even as a boy, Finlay was responsible for performing certain chores to keep the farm running smoothly. Cotton was the primary crop and source of income, but the family also grew maize and raised sheep and cattle.

Finlay attended primary school in a one-room, one-teacher schoolhouse in Fife. Later, he rode the bus seven miles to the town of Lohn where he would finish his secondary education. His graduating class had a total of twelve students, which was larger than the average class. Finlay recounts the rural atmosphere of the school in Lohn. "One time I told the teacher, 'Hey, I got this new twenty-two [shotgun].' And he said, 'Well, go get it.' So, I walked out to my truck and brought it in to show him." During

high school, Finlay played six-man football among other extra-curricular activities.

“Everybody had to play sports,” he says laughing. “If everyone didn’t come out, we couldn’t play.” Despite being a good athlete, music was the young man’s true passion.⁹

Music had been an integral part of Finlay’s upbringing. His earliest memories of music are, as a three-year old, listening to KNEL, a 250-watt radio station out of Brady that played an hour of Hillbilly music five days a week. Grace, Finlay’s mother, would listen to each broadcast, and he can remember particularly enjoying the music. Finlay’s grandmother became an important figure in the shaping of his musical career when she brought him to Vacation Bible School in Fife. At the conclusion of the bible school, the seven-year old Finlay, along with three other boys, performed the traditional gospel song, “Do Lord,” to a whopping crowd of seven or eight people. Finlay recalls that it was after this performance that the music bug bit him. “People said it was good, and, man, I was hooked.”¹⁰

In third grade, Finlay began taking lessons on the piano that had long been a part of the family’s home. The formal atmosphere of the lessons and the old piano standards were not exactly suited to the young man’s taste. It was not long before the lessons ended. As Finlay recalls, “It was really boring stuff.” However, he returned to the keys in junior high after hearing the honky-tonk piano of Moon Mullican on the radio. Mullican’s music, in addition to Hank Thompson, Slim Whitman, Hank Williams, and Ernest Tubb, played an influential role in Finlay’s self-taught musical approach.¹¹

Also propelling this interest in song was his family’s deep appreciation for music. The Finlay home was often filled with the music of relatives, especially from his mother’s side, who played in bands throughout the area. His cousin, “Sleepy” Short

played fiddle in a popular Western swing band, The Texas Top Hands, while another cousin, “Easy” Adams Short, sang and played guitar for the group.¹² Music was a staple of family gatherings and was the main event of many nights spent under the West Texas stars.

Finlay was a freshman in high school when he got his first guitar. On a Future Farmers of America (FFA) trip to Big Bend, one of the students brought a guitar. Finlay soon found himself strumming the six-string in the back of the bus. On the way back to Lohn, the bus stopped in San Angelo for lunch. “I walked into a music store across the street from the restaurant, and there was this girl in there playing Webb Peirce,” Finlay recalls. After a short break into the aforementioned Webb Peirce song, he continues the story, “It was something just to get to touch those guitars. You couldn’t buy a guitar like that anywhere else.” Finlay took advantage of the opportunity and purchased a Regal for (approximately) \$13.50. Finlay concludes, “I was singing songs by the time we got home.”¹³

Back on the farm, Finlay’s new instrument never strayed far from his thoughts. He began playing with his cousins, Winifred and Maryland Short, who played piano and fiddle. “I’d be combinin’ and Winifred would drive over – we had an hour for dinner – so we’d gobble down some food just so we could play for twenty minutes,” Finlay says.¹⁴ At times, the newfound passion took precedence over the chore at hand, and there is at least one account of Finlay driving a tractor past the designated row until his father came “running across the field waving his hat desperately at him, trying to get him to stop.”¹⁵

Life on the farm was more than a nuisance between picking sessions; the hardworking lifestyle directly impacted him musically. “I learned how to sing plowing

the cotton fields. The tractor was so loud, I could sing as loud as I wanted and no one would tell me to shut up,” Finlay says. “I learned to write songs out there too. When you’re sitting on a tractor all day, with just rows of dirt and sky, it sure gives you a lot of time to think about things.”¹⁶ Little did the young man know it, but Finlay’s future legacy lay in songwriting.

“It wasn’t a real common thing,” Finlay says of writing songs in high school. “Back then, there was no ‘singer/songwriter’ label.”¹⁷ That did not stop Finlay from getting serious about writing and performing music. During his senior year, Finlay bought a Silvertone after selling his Regal to his schoolmate, Charles Mitchell. Together, he and Mitchell formed a duo with Finlay on lead guitar and vocals. The duo went to state after winning first place in an FFA talent show. The state competition would mark not only a major musical milestone, but would also be the first time Finlay visited San Marcos. There was little time for practice given the intense demands of their farming duties, but the duo managed to place second at the competition. First place was awarded to a black-face pantomime group parodying a Little Richard tune. Reflecting on the event, Finlay says, “I think we were better. I think they [the judges] would regret their decision today, but I don’t hold grudges.”¹⁸

Finlay left Fife and the farm behind to study writing at San Angelo State University in 1957. During his first two years as undergraduate, he continued to play music, both in bands as a “slap” bass player and as a solo performer.¹⁹ Finlay returned to San Marcos in 1959 to continue working toward an English degree at Southwest Texas State College (today, Texas State University-San Marcos). He graduated in 1961 and, after earning a Master’s degree in Education, began a teaching career that he has

maintained, in some fashion, ever since. Throughout this time, Finlay played music around the area and kept writing songs. Among other gigs, he played on weekends at Shakey's Pizza Parlor in Austin with the blind musician, Arthur Johnston.²⁰ Finlay took a full-time job teaching at Gary Job Corps, a vocational training facility founded in 1964, where he would continue to teach for the next six years.

In the early 1970s, Finlay started making the trip to Luckenbach to join in the circle of music. Afternoons slipped away under the shade of oak trees, as musicians such as Willie Nelson, Dotsy, Gary P. Nunn, and Jerry Jeff Walker played guitar and swapped stories. Most importantly, it was during this time that Finlay was introduced to the town's "spiritual leader," Hondo Crouch. Finlay remembers his time with Hondo fondly. "Hondo was a hero to me. There was just something about him that drew people to him; everybody liked him."²¹

Finlay was also enamored with the authenticity of the old town and the local German farmers who lived in the area. Finlay recalls a story about how humbling the atmosphere was. After one of the many domino tournaments between the Austin musicians and local farmers, one of the old German men got up to go. Hondo asked him if he was going to tell Willie, who had been playing, goodbye. The farmer, unaware of his domino opponent's celebrity status, whispered to Hondo, "Which one is Willie?"²²

Perhaps the most important connection between Luckenbach and Cheatham Street Warehouse is the example that Hondo set for Finlay. "Hondo was the center of my universe, that's how big his heart was," Finlay relates. "I learned how to think from Hondo."²³

PART THREE

Finlay Finds Cheatham Street

It was not long before Kent Finlay started looking for his own place to share the magic he felt at Luckenbach. At the time, San Marcos did not have a single live music venue operating on a normal basis. With the support of his business partner and drinking buddy, Jim Cunningham — a columnist for the *San Marcos Daily Record* — Finlay looked at several places in town before hearing about the old tin warehouse next to the railroad tracks.

“The first time I stepped inside, I knew – this was it!” Finlay says excitedly about the first time he saw the inside of what would become Cheatham Street Warehouse. “We had no idea there was wood inside, and, I mean, it was just perfect for music.”²⁴ The wood that frames the inside of the building would later be attributed to the venue’s great acoustics. Musician Doug Sahm said that those old wooden walls enhance the sound “like an old beloved fiddle.”²⁵

The two partners leased the building and went to work on cleaning out the Christmas decorations that the city of San Marcos had been storing inside, so that they could convert the place into a honky-tonk. “Boy, it was lots of work,” Finlay remembers. “I didn’t play any gigs for about three or four months. I was here every day, all day and all night. My brother was in school here at Southwest Texas and he would come over with a bunch of his friends and we would build tables. We bought a keg of Shiner, so anyone who came and helped, they got to drink beer.”²⁶

Finlay recalls the do-it-yourself nature of the project with a grin. “I was a pretty good barn building carpenter. We didn’t have any money. I mean, I took out a little loan, but we really had to do it on nothing. I found an old beer box that worked pretty good and, you know, just used stuff and stuff that had been thrown away.” Finlay found some packing crates in the warehouse’s attic and soon the heavy lumber was being transformed into the venue’s first bar. “They had stencils on them,” Finlay recalls. “We found just enough to make the top of the bar with. I put about six or eight coats of polyurethane on it so you could still see the stencils. It looked really, really ‘warehousey.’”²⁷

Only half-jokingly Finlay recounts that one of the reasons he was adamant about opening up a venue was to give his band, High Cotton Express, a place to play. “We did a lot of swing, a lot of straight-ahead country, and even a few rockabilly songs,” Finlay said of his band. “Dancing was in at that time with Western swing being the big thing. One thing I learned was, the bigger the dance floor, the less they listened. So, when we made the dance floor, I made sure to keep it pretty small.”²⁸

By June of 1974, Cheatham Street Warehouse was ready to open for business.

Progressive Country

At the time of Cheatham Street’s opening, a certain musical phenomenon was taking place throughout the Central Texas area. In the early 1970s, Austin became the epicenter of what would later be called the Progressive Country movement. This movement was the result of a unique blending of various genres including rock’n’roll, traditional country, R&B, blues, zydeco, and others. In addition to this merging of musical styles, the musicians and fans promoting Progressive Country were equally eclectic. Hippies, cowboys, bikers, university students, and people of different ethnic

backgrounds were coming together at such venues as the Broken Spoke, the Split Rail, Soap Creek Saloon, Threadgill's, the Skyline Club, Antone's, and the Armadillo World Headquarters. Sometimes called "Redneck Rock" or "Cosmic Cowboy Music," this eclectic scene was producing some of the most original music to come out of Texas since the 1930s introduced Western swing.²⁹

Some of the artists spearheading this movement were the same musicians who spent weekends hanging out in the shade at Luckenbach. Besides Willie Nelson who had relocated to Austin from Nashville, other important artists such as Townes Van Zandt, Marcia Ball (who was with Freda and the Fire Dogs at the time), Blaze Foley, Michael Martin Murphy, and Jimmie Dale Gilmore could be heard singing on any given night.³⁰ One of the most important bands to shape this scene was Asleep at the Wheel. This group, like other artists at the time, was melding new sounds with some of the traditional sounds of the past. Asleep at the Wheel was particularly well known for introducing a new generation to Western swing.

One of the best examples of how this new sound aligned with some of the almost forgotten "roots" music of the past is reflected in a story Finlay tells about how the legendary fiddler, Jesse Ashlock, came to be a part of High Cotton Express. Ashlock, who was an original member of Bob Wills's Texas Playboys, had retired to Claremore, Oklahoma, in 1975. Despite his professed retirement, Asleep at the Wheel's frontman, Ray Benson, contacted Ashlock about playing in his band.³¹ At first, Ashlock thought Benson was merely poking fun of him and his almost-forgotten style of music. The story took a turn when Ashlock's wife, Evie, saw the band playing in Fort Worth and told him that there really was a young band playing Western swing. Ashlock decided to check out

the band for himself, and, after attending one show, came home to announce to Evie, “Honey, start packing your stuff! We’re moving to Austin.”³²

The Grand Opening of Cheatham Street Warehouse

With such an atmosphere of excitement and unique music existing only 25 miles up the interstate from San Marcos, it became immediately clear that Cheatham Street Warehouse was going to join the ranks of popular Progressive Country venues.

Freda and the Fire Dogs, a “hippie” band from Austin, played the first official show at Cheatham Street. On June 13, 1974, an article in the *Hays County Citizen* made clear what Finlay’s intention for the newly opened musical venue would be. “Cheatham St. Warehouse is a place where one can drink beer, play foosball or pool, listen to live music at night, and just have a ‘plain ole good time.’” The article continues, “Finlay wants San Marcos to enjoy the same popularity as Austin as a place for progressive country and western musicians to gather and play. Finlay stated that Cheatham St. does not intend to gain a profit from the cover. ‘The door money pays for the band.’”³³

The word had quickly spread about the new honky-tonk in San Marcos, and it was not uncommon for the warehouse to be packed past its original maximum capacity of 364.³⁴ Besides the good-sized crowds, figures such as Alvin Crow, a popular fiddler and frontman, Roger Crabtree, Waylon Jennings’s harmonica player, and Roger Harris, a British sound engineer, all showed up on the opening night.³⁵ It took no time for Kent Finlay to start booking the area’s top acts. The artists who played the little stage in Cheatham Street during the 1970s reads like a list of Progressive Country all-stars: Willie Nelson, Ernest Tubb, Billy Joe Shaver, Guy Clark, Flaco Jiménez, Gatemouth Brown, Jerry Jeff Walker, Kinky Friedman, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Joe Ely, Townes Van Zandt,

Dough Sahn, Augie Meyers, Joe Bob's Bar and Grill Band, Ponty Bone, Joe "King" Carrasco, and many others.³⁶

In addition to serving as a place for live music, Cheatham Street hosted a wide range of events during the early years. Finlay placed weekly ads in the *Hays County Citizen* which reflect the diversity of occasions. One of Sam Shepherd's plays, "The Unseen Hand," was performed inside the warehouse with a 1957 Chevy parked onstage.³⁷ The warehouse also hosted Bluegrass Nights, an appearance from the slingshot world champion, a Spring Prom (complete with complimentary carnations), a "pentathlon" which featured various indoor games, and a beauty pageant in which patrons voted for "Honky Tonk Angel of the World" by placing money in the jar that had a picture of the girl of their choice on it.

One of the characteristics of Cheatham Street that has remained unchanged since the beginning (at least while under Finlay's management), was the prohibition of distilled liquor. Although Finlay admits he is no 'teetotaler,' he says, "Whiskey gets in the way of listening to music." Finlay recalls that, at the time, the most popular Texas beer was not out of the Spoetzl Brewery in Shiner, as it is today. "Shiner was not popular yet," Finlay recalls. "When Shiner Bock came out, [the distributor] said he'd need help to get it going, so we put Shiner Bock on sale for 99 cents a pitcher, and we'd have four hundred people in here in the afternoons. We helped make Shiner Bock."³⁸ In addition to Texas beer, patrons could whet their appetites with pickles, pickled pigsfeet, pickled eggs, pickled Polish sausage, chips, beef jerky, or jalapeno lollipops.³⁹

At the same time, Finlay and his honky-tonk were influencing a lot more than Texans' taste buds. The fervor of the Progressive Country movement was spreading

further down the Interstate 35 corridor. Finlay remembers Pat Molak stepping into the warehouse to ask his advice about opening up his own dancehall in a nearby ghost town called Gruene. “[Molak] came in here around [19]76 and said he had just bought a venue. [Molak] said, ‘I just got the place 'cause it was a good deal, and it’s on the river.’ So, I said, ‘tell me more,’ and we rode over there.”⁴⁰

Gruene was not the booming tourist destination that it is today, and the dancehall had not been open for decades. Finlay said that when Molak first showed him inside Gruene Hall, “it looked like they had just closed up on a Saturday night and never opened back up. There was chicken wire across the side, to make sure people paid if they wanted to dance. That’s the only time I ever saw chicken wire in a honky-tonk.” Finlay lent some assistance to Molak in getting the old German dancehall operable. Soon, Progressive Country had another establishment to call home. “It was great,” Finlay said laughing, “I had another place for my band to play.”⁴¹

Although Finlay was enjoying the success of his newly opened venue, no one could have guessed that the modest little honky-tonk that shook with each passing train was about to become the launching pad for the most successful country artist of all time.

PART FOUR

George Strait and Ace in the Hole

Among the college kids packing into Cheatham Street during the peak of the Progressive Country era was a young steel guitar player, Mike Daily. It was at Cheatham Street that Daily was introduced to Jay Dominguez, who had a steady gig at the venue playing an acoustic set on Sundays. Dominguez soon asked Daily to play with him; with the inclusion of drummer Tommy Foote, bass player Terry Hale, and Ron Cabal on lead guitar, the lineup for Jay and Stoney Ridge was complete.⁴²

The band played regularly at Cheatham Street until Dominguez decided to quit the band. Determined to keep playing music, the members of Stoney Ridge decided to hold auditions for a singer. When a Southwest Texas student named George Strait came in for an audition, the band members knew they had found their new lead singer.

Strait was an Agriculture and Ranch Management major at the time of his audition. He had just recently returned from serving in the United States Army, where he had started playing guitar and singing while stationed in Hawaii. His singing style was more in the mold of traditional country, which made his presence in the burgeoning Progressive Country scene a bit of an anomaly. Luckily, Strait's vocals fit with the Western swing sound that Stoney Ridge had developed. To signify the change in the group's makeup, the members chose a new name — the Ace in the Hole Band.

The Ace in the Hole Band's first gig was on October 13, 1975 at Cheatham Street Warehouse. It was the first of what would be many performances on the little stage next

to the train tracks. The band became an instant success with the honky-tonk's crowd. As Finlay recalls, "Everybody danced to George. The place was always packed."⁴³ Finlay estimates the first fifty shows that Ace in the Hole played were at Cheatham Street.⁴⁴

It was not long before Ace in the Hole was booking venues all over the region. Pat Molak's recently-opened Gruene Hall and venues in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio also became regular gigs for the band. It was Finlay who originally called James White, owner of the Broken Spoke in Austin, to give the band a gig. To make sure the booking was successful, Finlay took part of the Cheatham Street crowd to watch the band play. The amount of faith Finlay had in Strait was evident. An article by Dr. Gregg Andrews quotes Finlay as saying, "I thought he would be a star, probably before he did."⁴⁵ The band continued to hone their sound while steadily drawing a larger crowd.

The Ace in the Hole Band released its first single in 1976 after Daily's father, Don Daily (son of Pappy Daily, the founder of "D Records" in Houston), arranged for the group to cut a record in Houston Heights at Doggett Studios. The band cut the Dallas Frazier tune "The Honky Tonk Downstairs" and one of Strait's own tunes, "I Just Can't Go on Dying Like This." Stations in Houston and Oklahoma gave the single some air play, but the release only gained regional attention. A year later, Bill Mabry joined the band on fiddle, and Ace in the Hole went back into the studio to record Clay Blaker's "Lonesome Rodeo Cowboy," along with another Strait original, "That Don't Change the Way I Feel About You." At this time, the band was also covering traditional country acts, such as Bob Wills, George Jones, Hank Williams, and Merle Haggard.⁴⁶

In 1977, Finlay loaded up his 1974 Dodge van to drive George Strait to Nashville. Strait had a demo recorded, and, with Finlay, who had made the trip to Music City

several times before, attempted to get some of the major record labels interested. The trip, however, was not immediately successful. The traditional country sound of Strait's music did not fit the new "pop" country music that labels were seeking.

Several years passed before Strait and Finlay's trip to Tennessee proved to be worthwhile. Erv Woolsey, who had graduated from Southwest Texas and had previously booked Ace in the Hole at his venue the "Prairie Rose" in San Marcos, used his connections in Nashville to get Strait signed with MCA Records. In 1981, Strait's first album, *Strait Country*, was released which included his first hit "Unwound." The debut record also included the first of several songs by songwriter Darryl Staedtler, who was a regular in the Cheatham Street scene. Staedtler was one of several Cheatham Street songwriters who would enjoy the success of having Strait cover a song; Bruce Robison, a member of the Cheatham Street Warehouse Songwriter Class of 1987, had two of the songs he penned, "Wrapped" and "Desperately," reach number one on the charts.

The last time George Strait and Ace in the Hole played at Cheatham Street was sometime in the early 1980s. With the success of several songs on the country charts, the band soon began to pack stadiums and arenas nationwide. After the success of Strait's first album, Finlay received a copy on which Strait inscribed, "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."⁴⁷

Today, George Strait is one of the most successful artists of all time. As of 2010, George Strait has 57 Number One hits, the most of any artist in the history of music on any chart in any genre. The original members of Ace in the Hole are still with Strait, with the exception of Ron Cabal who passed away in 1996 after a hit and run accident. Terry

Hale and Mike Daily continue to play in Ace in the Hole, while Foote has been the road manager since 1983.⁴⁸ When Strait was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2006, Finlay posted a hand-written sign outside the warehouse which read, “I Told You So.”

PART FIVE

The Early 1980s

Although the peak of the Progressive Country movement is normally cited as the mid-1970s, Cheatham Street continued to be a place where blues, country, and rock'n'roll coexisted.

Texas writer Joe Nick Patoski recalls the eclectic sound that Finlay continued to promote. "At the time, it wasn't just progressive country or country, there were all kinds of music blowing up," Patoski said. "Kent kinda cherry-picked a lot of bands like Stevie Vaughan and Joe 'King' Carrasco that didn't really fit that countrified mold."⁴⁹

It was in 1980 that an up-and-coming blues guitar sensation from Austin booked a gig at the San Marcos venue. Stevie Vaughan, as he was billed at the time of his first show at Cheatham Street, impressed Finlay with his ability to play the Fender Stratocaster guitar. Finlay hired Vaughan to play weekly on Tuesdays, much like he had booked Strait and Ace in the Hole band years earlier. "He'd just lean back, just feel it, you know," Finlay remembers. "I don't think I ever saw anyone that loved to play the guitar like Stevie did."⁵⁰

Patoski, who penned the biography, *Stevie Ray Vaughan: Caught in the Crossfire*, said that the weekly gig at Cheatham Street was an important part of Vaughan's touring regimen. "In the early days of Stevie coming to the fore, [Vaughan's] steadiest out of town gig was at Cheatham Street," Patoski said.⁵¹

Finlay recalls that Vaughan never packed the house at Cheatham like other artists at the time did. "People don't believe me, but we really had a hard time getting people in," Finlay remembers.⁵² Despite the lack of a sell-out crowd, the weekly gig helped generate some income for Vaughan while he was working on what would become a seminal album of the electric blues, *Texas Flood*.⁵³

While playing in Austin at places such as the Continental Club and Antone's, Vaughan and other Texas musicians had taken the young Sexton brothers, Charlie and Will, under their proverbial wing. It was not long before the Sexton Brothers were driving down the interstate to play at the warehouse. Patoski said this was the natural thing for many artists, "Cheatham Street was basically an Austin gig, it just happened to be out of town."⁵⁴ The Sexton Brothers would often open for Vaughan at Cheatham Street and would sometimes join the guitar master onstage.

The crowd at Cheatham Street might not have been showing up for the relatively unknown Stevie Ray Vaughan, but they were certainly packing the warehouse for other acts. Marcia Ball and the Bronco Brothers, Joe Ely, Omar and the Howlers, Asleep at the Wheel, Eric Johnson, Alvin Crow, and Joe "King" Carrasco had the honky-tonk filled with fans.

Patoski, who managed Carrasco's band during this time, describes these nights at Cheatham Street as "wild." "Joe "King" Carrasco started to play Cheatham Street once he started hitting it big -- he was a recording artist -- so the times that Joe played there it was always a full house," Patoski recalls. "Compared to Austin, the one big difference was, they were some of the wildest audiences I'd ever seen. I mean, it was out of control. It was at a time that Southwest Texas was known as a party school. They were just wild!"⁵⁵

The cowboys, hippies, and college students that had long been the mainstay of the Progressive Country scene normally existed peacefully; occasionally, this was not the case. Finlay relates one story where the diversity in the Cheatham Street crowd was not well received.

One night, I hired Larry Mahan. Larry's a really nice guy, you know, but he's a rodeo cowboy, a "real" cowboy. So we had all these "real" cowboys and we had these "hippie" cowboys. The hippie cowboys were pretty peaceful, but the real cowboys, "that sumbitch over there with a cowboy hat, look at him." Guich Kooch was here that night and we were talking when this real cowboy and this hippie cowboy started this pushing thing. I grabbed one of 'em and Guich grabbed one, and, stupid, stupid, stupid, we took 'em both outside. The minute they got outside, they really got it on. And so here they all come piling out, all the hippie cowboys and all the real cowboys. We had twelve or thirteen fights all going on in the middle of the street. And I said, 'I'm calling the law!' Everyone just kinda stopped, you know. That was the only time we've ever really had a fight here, and I don't even think I saw one black eye. I can count the problems we've had here, like that, on my fingers.⁵⁶

Finlay emphasizes that any type of barroom fighting was rare. Booze, brawling, and bawdy crowds were the antithesis of the atmosphere Finlay wanted to create. He continued to make it a priority to nurture young talent and promote bands that he believed in. At the core of Finlay and the warehouse was the music itself.

Patoski credits Cheatham Street as being "one of very few institutions that not only harbored but nurtured Texas music." "It was *the* place in San Marcos," Patoski remembers. "I mean, there were other joints and other music rooms, but none of them had the reputation of featuring, not only progressive country, but "roots" music. No one else was doing that. It was cover band hell elsewhere in San Marcos."⁵⁷

Patoski remembers doing business with Finlay during the early 1980s when Patoski was still managing Joe "King" Carrasco. "[Finlay] is the unlikeliest club owner I've ever met," Patoski said. "No one has ever counted twenties off a roll slower and

more with more purpose than Kent did. I was used to dealing with hustlers who would count so fast that you'd you have to recount it 'cause you knew they were gonna screw you. Kent was the opposite. We both walked away feeling like we did a fair and square deal, which is pretty rare in that level of club business."⁵⁸

After over a decade of being open, Cheatham Street had maintained its focus on music. Finlay was still playing with his band, the High Cotton Express, and had continued to write original songs. He had married Diana Becker in 1978 and their son, Sterling, and daughter, Jenni were born by 1983. Around this time, Finlay sold the Cheatham Street business to Mike Willy, a booking agent, in order to devote more time to his own music and family. The business returned to its former owner in a short amount of time after Willy had financial trouble.⁵⁹

The Songwriter Class of 1987

Songwriters Night was a weekly tradition Finlay started soon after Cheatham Street opened. During the early days, six or seven songwriters would gather to share their original compositions, often in a circle around a wood-burning stove. The group would pass around the guitar and make comments about each other's songs. For Finlay, these nights devoted to songwriters and their craft became one of the most important elements of running the Cheatham Street business.

By the late 1980s, Songwriters Night had attracted several talented songwriters. Aaron Allan, James McMurtry, John Arthur Martinez, Hal Ketchum, Justin Treviño, Jimmy Collins, Al Barlow, and Jimmy and Tommy Ash were all participants in the church-like atmosphere created by the semi-circle of serious tunesmiths. Each of these artists has continued on to successful musical careers.⁶⁰

Al Barlow was one of the many curious songwriters who had heard of the fabled Songwriters Night at Cheatham Street and decided to investigate. “I didn’t know about Songwriters Night when I first moved here in 1980,” Barlow recalls. “I was singing for some friends one day, and they said, ‘you’ve gotta go to Kent Finlay’s Cheatham Street; he’s got this songwriter thing.’ I had never sang or played in public before, but I went over to Cheatham Street. When I got there — I mean, it’s not too much to look at, just a little ole barn next to some train tracks — I went in not knowing that it would change my life.”⁶¹

Songwriters Night was the place where many artists like Barlow found the courage to play their first chords in front of someone other than a close friend or family member. Inside of that circle of established artists and first-time performers, Finlay emphasized that everyone was an equal. This positive, welcoming environment encouraged guitar pickers to pen new tunes.

Barlow recalls that during the mid 1980s when he started attending Songwriters Night, it was held on Tuesdays. “I got to where I was going up there every Tuesday night,” Barlow said. “It inspired me to write new songs. I mean, you don’t want to be playing the same old songs.”⁶²

The ever-present talent in the group also held standards high for new tunes. Barlow remembers that besides wanting to keep up with the steady output of his peers, there was also an amount of positive criticism exchanged on those nights. “I could tell whether I had written a hit or whether it was a dud – you could tell from the others’ input,” Barlow said.⁶³

Toward the end of the 1980s, a special group of songwriters began to frequent the now well-established Songwriters Nights. This particular ensemble of songwriters has since been coined “the Songwriter Class of 1987” and includes Barlow, Todd Snider, Terri Hendrix, John Arthur Martinez, Bruce Robison, James McMurtry, Hal Ketchum and, of course, Kent Finlay.

Besides successful careers in the music business, these musicians have kept ties to the warehouse. In 2007, a reunion was held in which all of the songwriters returned to play their tunes again. This time, instead of stealing away from day-jobs as waiters or busboys, each returned as recording artists toting various awards, such as Hendrix’s Grammy award and McMurtry’s two Americana Music awards.

Their success as artists, and particularly as songwriters, is perhaps one of the best reflections of Cheatham Street’s wide reaching influence on the modern country/folk scene. John Arthur Martinez, who recently won CMT’s hit TV show, *Nashville Star*, has been able to reach a nationwide audience with some of the same songs that he penned with Finlay. Martinez said, “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.”⁶⁴

PART SIX

Changes Come to Cheatham

In 1988, only a year after the amalgamation of the now legendary “Class of ’87,” Finlay sold the Cheatham Street business. The Finlay family had recently grown to five with the birth of their youngest daughter, HalleyAnna. Finlay felt it necessary to leave the honky-tonk in order to spend more time with his family and on his own songwriting. Cheatham Street Warehouse, for the first time since 1974, was no longer *the* place in San Marcos for Texas country music.

However, live music continued to ring inside of the tin warehouse. The new management began booking mostly Tejano bands, and the venue continued to serve as a place for drinking and dancing throughout this time. Also during this tenure of new management, the dirt parking lot that had long been sending dust into the San Marcos sky was paved and the wood-burning stove that had warmed the hands of many strumming songwriters was removed.

When Finlay heard that live music had been replaced by a DJ, he immediately set to work on reacquiring his old honky-tonk. On New Year’s Eve 1999, Cheatham Street Warehouse held an official grand re-opening with the marquee announcing “Under Old Management.”⁶⁵

A New Era

Despite a decade long hiatus, Cheatham Street by and large picked up right where it had left off. Finlay began booking both prominent and promising Texas artists; soon,

the warehouse was filled once again with the lonely twang of steel guitars, the sweet melody of fiddles and mandolins, and the thump of an upright bass. Texas music and its most avid supporter of the genre had returned to San Marcos.

It did not take long for the word to get out that the little warehouse next to the train tracks was once again a haven for those with a pocket full of rhymes and a six-string. Randy Rogers, who was a student at Southwest Texas State at the time, made his way from the campus to one of the weekly Songwriters Nights, which had been renamed “Songwriters Circle” and moved to Wednesday nights.

Rogers would be the first of a new era of Cheatham Street Warehouse prodigies to find his roots in the fertile soil of the creaking wooden stage. After his debut public performance at Cheatham Street, Rogers, like many before him, became a regular at these “listening” evenings. Soon after, Finlay offered him a regular weekly gig, as he had done for other artists who caught his ear years before. After Rogers put together a band, which was Finlay’s only stipulation for the weekly slot, it was only a short time before he and his band were packing the house every Tuesday night.

The Randy Rogers Band recorded its first album in the warehouse, aptly titled, *Live at Cheatham Street*. In the decade that has followed, Rogers and the band have released six full-length albums and signed a deal with major record label Mercury Records in 2005. They have made appearances on *The Late Show with David Letterman* and the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Another indicator of the band’s success is their title of number one most-downloaded country album on iTunes in 2006.⁶⁶

Although Rogers and his band might be the most commercially successful artist to come out of Cheatham Street since the Songwriter Class of ’87 or even since George

Strait, he is most certainly not the only singer/songwriter making waves. Other songwriters who have honed their craft on the Cheatham Street stage since the 1999 re-opening include Adam Carroll, Ryan Turner, Floramay Holliday, Dub Miller, Shelley King, Trish Murphy, Jeff Plankenhorn, Ruthie Foster, J.R. Castro, Angie McClure, Foscoe Jones , and Adam Kay. Other “veteran writers” who have joined Finlay in his “Kent and Friends” song-swaps include “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.”⁶⁷

In 2003 when Finlay was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a bone marrow cancer, many of the artists that had once relied so heavily on his encouragement and support turned out to give back to the man behind the honky-tonk. A benefit concert held at Cheatham lasted for ten hours as one artist after another took the stage to help raise money for the expensive bone marrow transplant that Finlay was soon to undergo. In addition, Threadgill’s in Austin, where Finlay had once regularly watched shows from his seat on the concrete floor with other “hippie cowboys” during the 1970s, held a show in his honor to raise funds.

The love and admiration put on display for the longtime venue owner, songwriter, and friend was obvious as people all across the country sent money to a fund set up by Dr. Gregg Andrews. After successfully undergoing the transplant, Finlay first returned to Cheatham Street for a Songwriters Circle. His place at the warehouse has not waived since.

The Future

Over the past few years, one of Finlay's biggest projects has been the preservation of the venue through the creation of the Cheatham Street Music Foundation. As one historic music hall after another is leveled to make way for high rises and strip malls, it has become a chief concern of Finlay and the members of the CSMF Board that the warehouse remains untouched by the far-reaching impact of urban sprawl.

As for the venue itself, Cheatham Street still actively promotes Texas music almost every night of the week. Some nights this consists of a local songwriter playing to a quiet audience of other artists, and other times it is a wall-to-wall sell-out crowd. At the center of this tiny but important universe is the man whose vision has carried the music hall through three decades of live music.

Finlay has been recognized by the Center for Texas Music History and the City of San Marcos for his longstanding contributions to Texas music history. In 2003, the New Braunfels Museum of Art and Music presented Finlay with its first "Lone Star Arts Award." In addition, McCulloch County, Finlay's birthplace, has proclaimed an official "Kent Finlay Day." However, if you ask Finlay what date this official holiday is, he will tell you that he has no idea.⁶⁸

This type of modesty is something those who know Finlay have become familiar with. When speaking with others about the "Godfather of Texas Songwriters," as Finlay is often called, there is normally an obvious sense of respect and profound admiration for the man. If you mention the title to Finlay, however, he almost seems uncomfortable as he grins and turns his normally steady gaze away. "You know, it's nice to have things

like that said about you,” Finlay said, “but I don’t know how I could possibly deserve that. I guess I’ve still got a lot of work to do.”⁶⁹

Anyone who steps inside Cheatham Street on a Wednesday night for Songwriters Circle can see that that work is still being done. A cowbell hung from the cobwebbed rafters is rung as a blank yellow legal pad is set down on the bar – always at 7:50, or 8 o’clock bar-time. On most nights, a line of eager tunesmiths stand in line itching to get to the pen and scribble their names on one of the seventeen slots. Some folks have driven hours to participate in this “sacred” event, and others walk to the venue every week to share their songs.

Today, the creaking stage is lit by neon lights, and a Texas flag hangs as a backdrop. When Finlay removes his sunburst Gibson from its case and makes his way to the microphone, the crowd goes silent. This is the moment everyone has been waiting for. After a brief introduction explaining what Songwriters Circle is and is not about, Finlay starts off the night of tunes with his original, “I’ll Tell You a Story, I’ll Sing You a Song.”

One by one, those lucky enough to have gotten their signatures on the list take the same stage on which George Strait and Todd Snider first performed. Whether the person beneath the neons has a record deal or is someone who has never strummed a guitar in front of anyone, the crowd treats them all with church-like respect. There is a sense that the audience acknowledges the deep-seated past that informs the tradition of this night from Finlay to Hondo to the cowboys who once sang on lonesome prairies. The history of greatness is framed on the walls, captured in black-and-white photographs, reminding the

listeners that the “next big thing” might be the nervous looking college student about to take the stage.

Each yellow page is saved at the end of the night. Finlay likes to keep them for posterity’s sake, and, probably, for bragging rights. But putting names on marquees is not Finlay’s goal. At the end of the night, Finlay pulls out a chair to the middle of the tiny wooden dance floor. He might take a request or he may launch into one of his many songs. A glass of red wine normally sits quivering on the table next to him as he clears his throat and looks at each of the hushed patrons who have gathered close to watch the master of ceremonies deliver his message.

Finlay’s goatee is now more salt than pepper, but behind the shade of a wide-brim hat his eyes still sparkle like a sixteen-year-old kid trying to sing above the sound of his tractor’s popping engine. “It’s been a great night of songs,” Finlay will often say. “Just another night of magic.” It is easy to pick up the sincerity of his words; you believe him; the ‘magic’ seems almost tangible.

The night begins to draw to an end when Finlay lets his hand drop to strike the first chord of “They Call it the Hill Country.” As Finlay begins the last chorus, he tells the small crowd that it is their turn. As if prompted by some preacher to sing from a hymnal, the warehouse is suddenly full of voices singing each word of Finlay’s mournful song about the high price of “progress.” This heartbreaking finale seems strangely appropriate for a place that has withstood the test of time for a century.

On most nights, a few songwriters stick around even after Finlay has packed away his guitar and the bartender has finished collecting the mason jars from the ash-covered tables. If a person lingers long enough, it is almost guaranteed that, out of the night, a

train will come thundering down the tracks. To experience the passing of one of these midnight trains is to feel something deep down in your guts, your bones even. It is a haunting reminder of our own brief journey through the world of night, and, yet, somewhere in that lonesome rumble, there is hope that something better awaits us, beyond the tracks.

Endnotes

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- ⁴⁴ Andrews, "It's the Music," 14.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Grant Mazak, "Ace in the Hole," *Texas Music History Online* (accessed October 12, 2010) available at <http://ctmh.its.txstate.edu/artist.php?cmd=detail&aid=310&start=0&letter=.html>.
- ⁴⁷ Andrews, "It's the Music," 14.

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- ⁴⁸ Mazak, "Ace in the Hole," online.
- ⁴⁹ Joe Nick Patoski, interview with author, November 27, 2010.
- ⁵⁰ Andrews, "It's the Music," 17.
- ⁵¹ Joe Nick Patoski, interview with author, November 27, 2010.
- ⁵² Kent Finlay, interview with author, June 4, 2010.
- ⁵³ Richard Skanse, "Cheatham Street Warehouse," *Texas Music Magazine*, Spring 2005, 26.
- ⁵⁴ Joe Nick Patoski, interview with author, November 27, 2010.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
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- ⁵⁷ Joe Nick Patoski, interview with author, November 27, 2010.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ Andrews, "It's the Music," 17.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Al Barlow, interview with author, November 30, 2010.
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- ⁶³ Ibid.
- ⁶⁴ Andrews, "It's the Music," 22.
- ⁶⁵ Skanse, "Cheatham Street Warehouse," 30.
- ⁶⁶ Frank Phillips, "Fanbase Continues to Grow for Randy Rogers Band," *Monroe News-Star*, 18 September 2008, (accessed November 11, 2010) available at <http://www.umgnashville.com/artist/detail.aspx?nid=3718&aid=198>.
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- ⁶⁸ Kent Finlay, interview with author, February 22, 2010.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid.