



The Handbook of Texas Music, Second Edition

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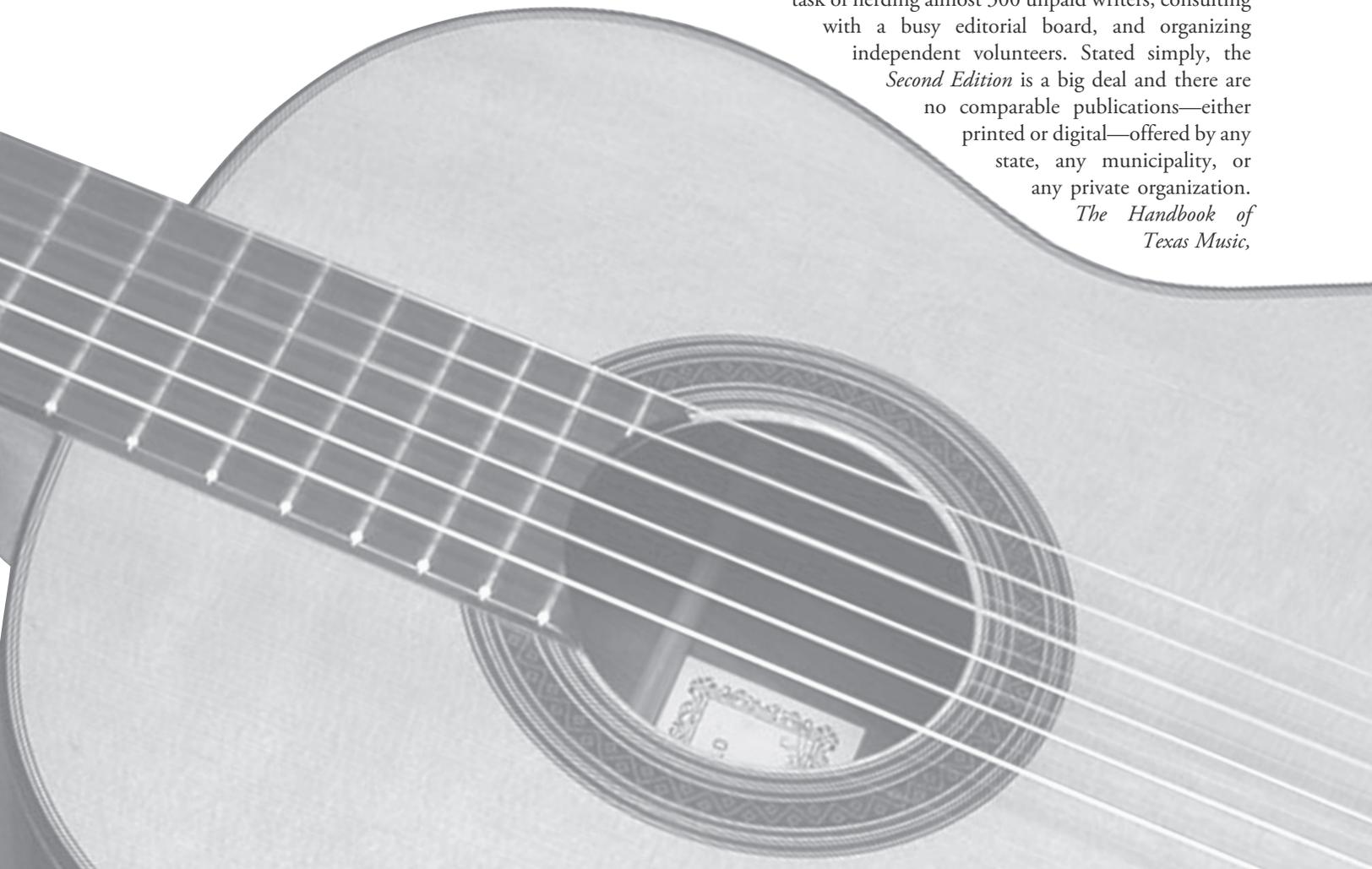
The Texas State Historical Association released *The Handbook of Texas Music, Second Edition* in March 2012. According to the TSHA website, this large new volume is built on the original 2003 *Handbook* and “offers completely updated entries [as well as] new and expanded coverage of the musicians, ensembles, dance halls, festivals, businesses, orchestras, organizations, and genres that have helped define the state’s musical legacy.” The website mentions that there are “more than 870 articles, including more than 410 new entries” coupled with “264 images, including more than 180 new photos, sheet music art, and posters that lavishly illustrate the text.” As was the original volume, this new TSHA publication is a partnership with the Texas Music Office and the Center for Texas Music History.

I reference this promotional information to illustrate the encyclopedic scope of the project. The *Second Edition* is an intrepid undertaking that highlights an array of topics defining the historical DNA of a grand Texas music scene. Much like an individual organism or an ecosystem, the music scene is an animated, interdependent affair that evolves by

embracing certain characteristics from its forebears. A typical scene survives and thrives by sampling its available gene pool. Whereas many states troll in the shallows of their musical reservoirs, Texas casts a wide net in an ocean of intrinsic creativity and innovation. This extended effort in the *Second Edition* yields a large catch of notable historical topics beyond the abbreviated list above; other topics include music teachers, schools, colleges, museums, research centers, and radio and television stations and their music related programs, as well as record producers, sound engineers, production companies, record labels, and comprehensive articles about our state’s multiethnic musical heritage. Taken as a whole, this vast collection of topics provides the fundamental components for a map of the Texas music genome.

The broad academic sweep of the *Second Edition* suggests a substantial logistical challenge. Consider the state-based triumvirate—the TSHA, the Texas Music Office, and the Center for Texas Music History—working together to facilitate the project, powered by meager budgets and the dedication of a core group of participants. They were charged with the task of herding almost 300 unpaid writers, consulting with a busy editorial board, and organizing independent volunteers. Stated simply, the *Second Edition* is a big deal and there are no comparable publications—either printed or digital—offered by any state, any municipality, or any private organization.

The Handbook of Texas Music,



Second Edition is a unique contribution to contemporary cultural historiography.

That said, there are certain nits I'd like to pick and alternative historical interpretations I'd like to offer. Why is jazz innovator Tony Campise—with six first-rate album releases and a Grammy nomination—completely overlooked? Why isn't there a specific essay on cowboy songs? There are numerous references to cowboy songs and Western ballads throughout the book, but a comprehensive treatment of the musical representations of the American cowboy—certainly one of the world's most powerful and ubiquitous mythological figures—would be most helpful. Progressive country, a media-generated label, is not a country-rock musical hybrid; it is more accurately described as a coalescence of folksingers and young rockers who shared a reverence for high-quality original compositions. Moreover, Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter was not a "blues great"; he was a "great songster" in the tradition of his contemporary Mance Lipscomb. My "nit list" goes on, but it's only one of many lists that inevitably follow a public offering that surveys the broad and controversial scope of Texas music.

Regarding "historical interpretations," I focus on a wonderfully compact and informative essay about Austin's iconic honky-tonk, The Broken Spoke. The essay is accompanied by a full-page reproduction of Micael Priest's 1975 poster advertising the Original Texas Playboys at the venue. Joe Gracey, the initial talent consultant for *Austin City Limits*, along with Spoke proprietor James White, produced this show to offset the band's expenses associated with their reunion and their appearance on the first season of *ACL*. The event at the Spoke was a huge success. The band more than covered its expenses, and the following night in Studio 6A on the University of Texas campus, the *ACL*

production crew captured the reunion of one of the most significant ensembles in Texas music history. The show at the Broken Spoke set an important logistical precedent. Musician's fees for this yet-to-be-broadcast television series were quite small during the incubation years, and Gracey reasoned that a lucrative support gig in Austin—then, as now, a hotbed of live-music activity—could be a determining factor in enabling certain acts to appear. I mention this episode to stress the combined historical significance of the show at the Broken Spoke, the poster, Gracey's practical ingenuity, and Austin's powerful live-music scene in the evolution of the longest-running live-music television program in broadcast history. This interesting side story might play well as a caption for Priest's 1975 poster in future volumes.

For an excellent example of "historical significance" in an essay, consider public historian Ruth Sullivan's piece on music historian/archivist, performer, and producer Tary Owens (1942-2003). Sullivan effectively assembles the fundamental "who, what, where, and when" of Owens's multi-decade career and then goes on to consider "why" these observations are important and "how" they flow into the larger currents of Texas music historiography. She illustrates, for example, how Owens's focus on the fledgling field of folklore at the University of Texas in the early 1960s led to a new phase in the ethnographic field recordings originally inspired by John and Alan Lomax. Owens's subsequent work led to the discovery of previously unknown or forgotten Texas fiddlers, songsters, and blues players. Sullivan then explains how Owens shaped this resurrection of roots music into a new wave of commercial recordings and a career renaissance for veteran musicians, such as T.D. Bell, Ervin Charles, and Snuff Johnson, as well as Roosevelt "Grey Ghost" Williams, Erbie Bowser, and Lavada "Dr. Hepcat" Durst, whom Owens cleverly labeled the "Texas Piano Professors." Sullivan does an outstanding job of depicting the strategic significance of Tary Owens's life on the Texas music trail.

The Handbook of Texas Music, Second Edition is an outstanding publication. It is an essential tool for students of Texas music history, an insightful interpretation of one of the world's most prolific and enduring music scenes, and a splendid adventure in American cultural history. It deserves our unconditional support and I encourage Texas music enthusiasts to buy the book and sing its praises (or simply brag about it) to friends, family, and music fans from all points of the compass.

Craig Hillis

Mojo Hand: The Life and Music of Lightnin' Hopkins

By Timothy J. O'Brien and David Ensminger

(Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013). \$29.95 cloth. 294 pp. ISBN 978-0-292-74515-5.

To listen to the country blues of Lightnin' Hopkins is to become intimately—achingly—aware of the past. There is an unmistakable and unmodern urgency to his voice and guitar playing; here is a man who has stories to tell, stories rooted strongly in a concept of person and place and time. This music is mostly what we have to remember Hopkins by.

Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins was born in 1912 in Leon County, Texas, into a musical family. At an early age he met and was influenced by fellow Texas bluesman, Blind Lemon Jefferson. Hopkins spent years working as a farm laborer before moving to Houston to devote his full efforts to music. As depicted in *Mojo Hand: The Life and Music of Lightnin' Hopkins*, Hopkins was a hard man to pin down, his life often hidden and opaque. Distrustful of authority, Hopkins preferred to work for cash up front. Pay him, and he would sit down and play a gig or make a record. Then he would move on.

Mojo Hand began as the master's thesis ("Sam Lightnin' Hopkins: Houston Bluesman, 1912-1960") and eventual doctoral dissertation of the late Timothy J. O'Brien. When O'Brien—obviously passionate about his subject—became gravely ill with cancer, his friend David Ensminger helped him complete the book and get it published. The professed goal of the authors is to show Hopkins as an important African-American voice in mid-twentieth century Texas, and to demonstrate Hopkins's influence on later generations of musicians. However, the academic ancestry of the book—and, perhaps, its dual authorship—leads to a flatness of tone and a distance from its subject. Therefore, the goal of the authors is not quite fulfilled.

The authors do stress Hopkins's importance and influence:

Although Hopkins was a blues singer by trade, in reality, he acted as a cultural ambassador and an educator whose music taught generations of listeners what being born black in East Texas near the turn of the twentieth century meant... Whether in youth clubs such as the Catacombs or psychedelic hippie joints like the Love Street Light Circus, Hopkins preached the African American experience, in the form of his blues songs, which transcended momentary "highs." For many teenagers, the drugs, alcohol, and need to satisfy hormonal desires may have been more important than the musical entertainment, but the history that Hopkins's songs and stage patter embodied was fertile and long-lasting.

The authors' list of musicians influenced by Hopkins is impressive, beginning with Jimi Hendrix and continuing through Stevie Ray Vaughan, Albert Collins, Billy Gibbons, and many others.

Mojo Hand is a book heavy with facts—at times too heavy. For much of the book, the life of Hopkins is reduced to a listing of gig after gig and recording session after recording session. The proliferation of dates and places becomes numbing. For example, readers are often presented with street addresses for nightclubs that closed 50 years ago, and, at one point, we learn that Hopkins took Flight 959 from Houston to Los Angeles while on his way to Tokyo for a series of gigs in Japan.

The excessive details are no doubt a reflection of the meticulous research done by the authors, who have a deep regard and respect for their subject, but as they are presented in *Mojo Hand*, many of these facts lead nowhere. Other writers might make something of all this minutiae, perhaps producing a then-and-now narrative that situates Hopkins at a certain place in American cultural history. However, O'Brien and Ensminger are not—perhaps for reasons beyond their control—those writers. Thus a full picture of Hopkins as a musician is lost in a deluge of arcane trivia, and Hopkins as a person seems to be lost, too.

The book itself is an attractive object, well designed with an appealing cover. However, the design has flaws: there are a paltry 10 photographs included with the text, and only six of them feature Hopkins (or seven, if a photo of Hopkins's tombstone is counted). The book's index is rudimentary, with no listings for Hopkins himself or for his relations with other people—not even his wife. Perhaps the book's most jarring deficiency is the absence of a critical discography; with an artist whose output was as prodigious as Hopkins's—the authors say that 1,343 Hopkins tracks are available for download at Amazon.com—the casual reader, listener, or non-expert requires some guidance about where to start. Again, an opportunity to put the life and career of Lightnin' Hopkins into a larger context is lost.

Still, the authors emphasize Hopkins's lasting legacy:

Deep down in the blood-thickened grooves of his songs, listeners can catch glimpses, shards, and shadings of sorrow songs found on slave and sharecropper plantations, prison work fields, and infamous prison chain gang highways.... Hopkins's sorrow songs constitute a living fabric, a commanding version of history as his-story.

Despite its flaws, *Mojo Hand* is a useful and interesting book. Lightnin' Hopkins's rich though opaque life deserves to be documented and remembered. And beyond the book there is still his music—the guitar, the voice—speaking to us from the past.

Lowell Mick White

Our Contributors

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is the author of *Texas Trilogy: Life in a Small Texas Town* (University of Texas Press, 2002). He has written for the *Journal of Texas Music History* and other music and history publications. Hillis played guitar and recorded with Jerry Jeff Walker, Michael Martin Murphey, Steven Fromholz, and other prominent artists. He has recently published an in-depth guitar instruction book, *The Matrix Manual for Guitar*, and is currently working on a book about the “ruthlessly poetic” songwriters of Texas, as well as a book on the Austin music scene of the 1970s.

Mike Hooker

is a lifelong music collector who has owned or worked in record stores for nearly 20 years. In addition to running a reissue record label, he writes a blog spotlighting obscure records from his own personal collection, especially recordings by Texas artists. For years, Hooker has been researching the punk scene throughout Texas. His archive includes thousands of posters, records, fanzines, and other artifacts from the early punk rock era.

Alex La Rotta

has an M.A. in History with a focus on Texas music. An avid record collector and deejay, he managed the online database on Texas musicians at the University of Texas at San Antonio’s Institute for Texan Cultures. He also worked as a sound engineer for the PBS television series, *Austin City Limits*. His chapter, “Música Tejana Recording Pioneers,” will appear in the Texas Folklore Society’s forthcoming book, *Cowboys, Cops, Killers and Ghosts: Legends and Lore in Texas*, scheduled to be published by the University of North Texas Press in November 2013. La Rotta plans to pursue a Ph.D. in music history.

Lowell Mick White, Ph.D.

is a former Dobie-Paisano Fellow and the author of the novels *Professed* and *That Demon Life*. He is an Assistant Professor of English at Pittsburg State University, where he teaches creative writing and literature.