Delbert McClinton: One of the Fortunate Few
“Amarillo By Morning”: The Life and Songs of Terry Stafford
Homegrown: Austin Music Posters 1967 to 1982

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Texas State University
601 University Drive
San Marcos, TX 78666

512.245.3749
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**Administrative Assistant**

Kris Bigley

**The Journal of Texas Music History**

Editors

Gary Hartman
Alan Schaefer
Jason Dean Mellard

Art Director/Designer

César Limón

Contributors

Diana Finlay Hendricks
Alan Schaefer
Joe W. Specht

Reviews

John Cline
Kenti Hempfll

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Delbert McClinton, award-winning singer, songwriter, musician, and bandleader, is, as described in his song, “One of the Fortunate Few.” Born in Lubbock and raised in Fort Worth, the Texas artist has risen to international acclaim, playing professionally for most of the past six decades. He has had a backstage pass to the evolution of Texas and American music, and most importantly, has played a significant role in helping shape that music. However, a major part of McClinton’s legacy, which often goes unrecognized, is the fact that he has always ignored racial and ethnic cultural boundaries and blended together a wide range of musical styles into his own distinct sound.

In many ways, Delbert McClinton’s career reflects the rather unique musical history of his home state. Situated at the geographical and cultural crossroads of Latin America, the Deep South, the American West, and the Great Plains, Texas has long been a confluence zone for a remarkably diverse array of ethnic groups who settled in the area over the past 500 years, interacting in ways that have left a distinct cultural imprint on the Lone Star State. Even at a young age, McClinton was absorbing the broad array of musical influences found throughout the Southwest and starting to combine them in innovative ways that allowed him to not only develop his own style, but also to break down many of the musical, racial, and cultural barriers that existed around him at the time.

The evolution of Texas music reflects the long, complex, and, at times, tumultuous history of the American Southwest. Dozens of different Native American groups, each with its own musical traditions, had lived in the region for thousands of years before the first Europeans (Spaniards) began establishing permanent settlements in the 1500s. By the early 1800s, a variety of other ethnic groups were moving into the area, including Anglos, Irish, Scottish,Welsh, French, Germans, Poles, Czechs, and African Americans, all of whom contributed their musical influences to the larger cultural landscape of the Southwest.

Often these immigrant communities kept mostly to themselves in order to preserve their own traditions and culture. In other cases, certain ethnic groups, especially African Americans and Mexican Americans, were forcibly segregated from white European settlers and discriminated against in a number of ways. Despite the legal, social, and political divides separating different groups of Texans throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, music often transcended these artificially imposed barriers, as musicians, whether consciously or unconsciously, appropriated the musical traditions of others.

Texas music is filled with examples of this type of “cultural cross-pollination,” in which musicians from various ethnic and racial backgrounds borrowed freely from each other. Scott Joplin, the so-called “Father of Ragtime,” was born the son of a former slave near Linden, Texas, in 1868. Joplin combined African American influences with American marching band music and European classical piano training to help create “ragtime,” which laid the foundation for the emergence of jazz in the early twentieth century. By the 1920s, Texas-Mexican musicians...
had incorporated the accordion and the polka dance step (both brought to the region by Czech and German immigrants) into a popular style known as conjunto, which can still be heard throughout Texas today. During the 1930s and 1940s, Bob Wills and other white musicians in the Southwest were combining blues, jazz, swing, mariachi, and other styles with fiddle hoedowns to create “Texas Swing,” now known as “Western Swing.”

Those who chronicle Texas music have long recognized this hybridization of diverse musical traditions throughout the American Southwest. Author Joe Nick Patoski describes some of the most prominent ethnic groups found in the Lone Star State, each of which has contributed significantly to the region’s musical culture:

It’s tri-ethnic, based on the Big Three heritages—African, Mexican, and Anglo-American. Say it’s organic or independent or not made in the traditional business center. It is contrarian and individualistic, and it wield a lot of different things together at odd angles to make a cohesive sound. It’s stealing from the Germans and the Mexicans. A lot of people say it’s crazy. And some people don’t like it. But it works here. And it is always evolving. No state has the kind of region with the distinctive sounds of Texas. It’s Texas Music.

In his book, Segregating Sound, historian Karl Hagstrom Miller notes that although scholars rarely include it in their studies on racial segregation in the United States, music (along with musicians and music business professionals) has played a vital role in defining and dictating the boundaries of segregation. At the same time, Miller also points out that music has been instrumental in bridging divisions among different ethnic and racial groups, thereby helping to eventually undermine racist attitudes and segregationist policies.

For many Americans, long-held attitudes about segregation began to change during the 1940s and 1950s, in part because World War II exposed millions of citizens from different racial and ethnic backgrounds to each other’s cultures and traditions and embodied African Americans and other marginalized groups to demand greater legal, political, and economic equality. President Truman’s successful push to desegregate the U.S. military in 1948 also served as an important catalyst in helping ignite the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

In addition to these and other changes taking place in American society during the post-World War II period, an emerging “youth culture,” fueled in part by a new sound that came to be called rock and roll, helped inspire a younger generation of Americans to reject the racist and segregationist attitudes of the past. Many of these post-war “baby boomers” were eager to create a new social identity that openly mixed ethnic and racial cultural traditions. Music was at the forefront of forging this new “collective identity” among American youth of this era. Journalist Mark Kurlansky argues, “There has never been an American generation that so identified with its music, regarded it as its own, the way the Americans who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s did.”

Delbert McClinton came of age during this post-World War II period of social upheaval and the redefining of American youth culture. Although he welcomed the new, more open attitudes regarding the mingling of ethnic and racial cultures, as many others of his generation did, he was born and raised in a southern state that was still racially segregated by law and by custom. Despite this, McClinton defied prevailing segregationist attitudes and policies of his time and helped bring together diverse musicians, fans, and musical genres, in effect helping to “desegregate” the state’s music scene. He makes it clear, however, that race relations were the last thing on his mind at the time. Instead, he was focused primarily on developing a unique sound and performing style that have carried him through more than sixty years on stage.

McClinton’s determination to forge his own distinct sound and achieve success in the music business has certainly paid off. In addition to building a worldwide following, he has won two Grammys and earned numerous accolades from fellow musicians and others throughout the music industry. However, as historian Gary Hartman mentions in The History of Texas Music, more important than awards and record sales is the fact that “McClinton helped pave the way for other successful white blues and R&B performers, most notably fellow Texans Jimmie Vaughan and Stevie Ray Vaughan.”

**I’ve Got Dreams to Remember**: The Early Years

Delbert McClinton was born on November 4, 1940, in Lubbock, Texas, to Herman and Vivian McClinton. Like countless other West Texas musicians, McClinton grew up absorbing the diverse musical genres that filled the airwaves throughout the region. However, McClinton’s musical influences also drew from well outside of his immediate West Texas environment. One of his earliest memories is traveling by train to Alexandria, Louisiana, to visit his father, who had been injured in an Army boot camp and was recovering in a nearby military hospital. While in East Texas and Louisiana, the young Delbert was exposed to a variety of musical styles, including Cajun, country, and songs about the war. After the family returned to Lubbock, and his parents became avid square dancers, McClinton’s musical horizons continued to expand. “I was too little to be left alone and too old to play with the little kids,” he shrugs. “So, I went to square dances. In fact, the first song I ever sang on stage was a square dance call. I think I got hooked on performing for people that day.”

Historians, musicologists, and music fans have long debated how and why West Texas, a largely barren and sparsely populated area, has produced such a large number of influential musicians. Bob Wills, Buddy Holly, Roy Orbison, Vikki Carr, Waylon Jennings, Tanya Tucker, Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Butch Hancock, Bobby Keys, Lloyd Maines, and Angela Strehli are just some of the artists who hail from the area. As to the question regarding why Lubbock, and West Texas in general, have produced so many talented musicians, McClinton responds:

“I don’t know, but I always loved music. It was everywhere out there. As a kid, Bob Wills was the big deal. My parents would go dancing at the Cotton Club and we kids would play in the cotton fields next to the parking lot, throwing chuds at each other and such. Kids weren’t allowed to go inside, so we’d hang in the windows at the Cotton Club and listen to the music and watch the band, intrigued by the fiddler, the trumpet, and the drummer. That sound really made an impression on me. And you could hear Bob Wills everywhere. The drug store had speakers right over the door and they always played Bob Wills music out onto the sidewalks. The radio stations were on all the time, and we could just hear music everywhere. I don’t know. There’s nothing else to do out there. You either go crazy or play music in Lubbock. There just wasn’t a hell of a lot to do.”

McClinton likes to talk about his musical influences. “I listened to old 1940s country and pop. Bob Wills, Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, anything by anybody who did Johnny Mercer songs. And there was always conjunto (a lively, dance-oriented sub-genre of Texas-Mexican music that incorporates accordion and polka beats) around. That has always been a part of Texas music with those popping horns and hot rhythm sections. In 1944, I was four years old. I remember seeing people everywhere in uniform. All the talk was war news. It was everywhere. It was national. It made us all part of something bigger. That music was the soundtrack of my childhood. The radio was on all the time. And on Saturday night, I loved those Johnny Mercer songs of hope and blue skies,” he recalls.

Herman and Vivian McClinton also took their children to some of the traveling tent shows that passed through Lubbock. “Those big Harkey Sadler traveling tent shows that came to town every year were a big deal. I didn’t care what kind of music they played, we went. And like I said, Lubbock being what it was, there wasn’t a damned thing to do, so we looked forward to it. It was always kind of a big deal.”

As to the attitudes about raucus music in Lubbock and such. It was interesting. I don’t know if it’s been documented, but Lubbock was a real free-for-all back then,” he said, “but we saw brand new things in all parts of town every day.”
The Cost of Living: Fort Worth

In 1951, when he was eleven, McClinton’s family moved to Fort Worth, Texas. His father’s old military injuries had developed into nearly debilitating back issues from driving a city bus for long hours over rough roads throughout Lubbock, so he took a job on the Rock Island railroad line as a brakeman and was soon promoted to switchman.

The move from Lubbock allowed Delbert McClinton to roam freely around the Fort Worth railyards by day, while at night, he was exposed to a whole new range of musical styles broadcast on radio stations streaming from the Dallas-Fort Worth area north and eastward to Chicago, Memphis, and south to the Texas-Mexican border, where largely unregulated “border radio” stations blasted an eclectic mix of country, blues, R&B, conjunto, gospel, and rock and roll across the country and as far north as Canada. “XERF — Border Radio,” he recalls. “Even today you can hear those Mexico border stations. They have always been a big thing in Texas, and I was exposed to a whole new range of musical styles. I heard those Mexico border stations. They have always been a big thing in Texas, and I was exposed to a whole new range of musical styles.”

Worth area north and eastward to Chicago, Memphis, and Nashville, and south to the Texas-Mexican border, where largely unregulated “border radio” stations blasted an eclectic mix of country, blues, R&B, conjunto, gospel, and rock and roll from the Fort Worth railyards, north and eastward to Chicago, Memphis, and south to the Texas-Mexican border.

Despite any public school curricula he may have missed, McClinton was experiencing a different type of “education” on the streets and byways around Fort Worth. He and his pre-teen friends camped in the railyard and spent time exploring drainage pipes and shortcuts around the tracks. “After school, my friends and I would take off for the tracks and play out there till dark or later, like kids used to do,” he says. “We would ride our bikes to the edge of town, cross the tracks to the ‘hump,’ or the switching yard. Sometimes we’d camp out and get to sleep listening to the workers make up trains. We’d camp out like hobos and build a campfire and shoot .410s. We could cut through this big drain tunnel without walking across the tracks or climbing between the trains and get to the other side of the yard.”

It was on one of those adventures through the tunnel that McClinton’s life changed forever:

I was eleven. We had been shooting cans with our .410s out at the Fort Worth railyard. I came up out of the tunnel. We were cutting across to Old Stove Freindly Road. I remember shooting cans into the air, and when you don’t really have any place to go. We would walk this black barbecue joint with trays on the car windows and big speakers blasting loud music. I heard “Honey, Hush,” by Big Joe Turner for the first time. I felt something that started in my ears and ran through me like an electrical shock. It wasn’t like anything I had ever heard before. I migrated toward that sound. That day, that moment, that song, that voice, that music. It was my first conscious attraction to music. I touched my soul.

Before long, McClinton’s lifelong interest in music, combined with his more recent exposure to a wealth of new musical experiences, helped inspire him to try his hand at performing:

I was in junior high. Both my brothers had friends who came into our house on a regular basis, carrying guitars. But the magical day was one afternoon when I came in from school and heard someone singing a Hank Williams song, right there in our house. We lived in a shogun duplex. I came into the house and he had a guitar and stood straight to the sound. There was my brother Jack’s friend, Ray Harden. He was on the floor, leaning against the wall with his feet up on the door jamb like a hammock, playing an old guitar with a hole in the neck size of a fist heated in it. He told me he stepped on it once a week when he was drunk. Man, I even thought that was cool … The second time was when my brother, Randall, brought his friend, Joe Don Sanders, over with a guitar. Joe Don taught me how to play. Then Randall and I decided we needed a guitar so we pooled our money and came up with $3.45. We bought an old Stella, the sorriest guitar ever made. The strings down by the hole were so far off, we couldn’t hint that thing. Our fingers bled … and by that time, I was looking to put a band together.

Soon McClinton’s persistence began to pay off, as he and his bandmates moved from practicing in private at home to performing in public:

I was fronting my first band in junior high. We were not very good, but we played our hearts out. It was me and my brother Randall and Joe Don, three guitars, no bass. We had a drummer, Ray Clark, who only had a snare and a ride cymbal. We couldn’t play worth shit. So, we decided to add another guitar player. We got Joe Don’s older brother, Gatemouth, and we were the Mellow Fellows. Our biggest show was fronting Jerry Lee Lewis on a package show at the Sporatorium in Dallas, a big coliseum usually used for wrestling matches. It was going to be Jerry Lee’s first time in Dallas. We played first on a Big D Jamboree package show of about five or six bands. We played a thirty-minute set, early rock and roll, rockabilly, Echoes, Elvis stuff, Coasters, “Goodnight, sweetheart, it’s time to go…” I was playing rhythm guitar and we weren’t any good, but we didn’t know any better, and the crowd didn’t know any better. We loved them, and they loved us.

By the summer of 1957, Delbert McClinton was almost seventeen. Rock and roll was fast becoming the most popular music among American youth. Construction had begun on President Dwight Eisenhower’s new Interstate Highway System, and talk was that car travel would never be the same. That summer, McClinton’s aunt and uncle came to Fort Worth to visit and invited him to ride back home with them to Cocoa Beach, Florida. “My Aunt Billie Rae Gregory may have been the first person to truly believe in me and my music. She took me to the Starlight Motel on Cape Canaveral. They had a talent show every Wednesday. I got up and sang ‘Going Steady’ by Tommy Sands and ‘That’s All Right, Mama’ by Elvis. It went pretty good,” McClinton recalls. The Starlight Motel invited McClinton back to perform again, so his aunt rented a small Martin guitar from the local music store and dyed his hair jet black. She enjoyed playing rock and roll “dressed up” with her nephew, and he played along.

McClinton also performed at the motel whenever he could. Through his railroad job, Herman McClinton was supposed to be sending his son a free train ticket home, although it was understood that this might take a couple of weeks. McClinton remembers that, in those days, “No one called long distance unless someone had died, but we had a way to hear the system by calling person to person through the operator. So every few days, I would call home and ask the operator to let me speak with ‘R.I. Ticket.’ And they would not take the call, which was code for ‘there is no ticket here.’ So I kept playing that little guitar and going to the Starlights on Wednesday nights.”

It was Delbert McClinton’s first time away from home, and he could see that the world was changing before his eyes. He got to witness an early space missile test launch along the Florida coastline. “We were just teenagers,” he says. “My uncle’s son, ‘Look way over there,’ and we saw the thing blast off into the sky.”

McClinton’s personal world was changing, too, as he began to experience the ups and downs of the music business through his own touring experiences. “When I was a first thing blast off into the sky. We went first on a Big D Jamboree package show of about five or six bands. We played a thirty-minute set, early rock and roll, rockabilly, Cherries, Elvis stuff, Coasters, “Goodnight, sweetheart, it’s time to go…” I was playing rhythm guitar and we weren’t any good, but we didn’t know any better, and the crowd didn’t know any better. We loved them, and they loved us.

Delbert McClinton:
The Cost of Living: Fort Worth
education. Still needing half a credit in English to earn his high school diploma, he went back at the age of 21 for one final attempt at finishing his degree. “Over and over, my dad said, ‘Without that high school diploma in your back pocket you won’t amount to a hill of beans.’ And a hill of beans is not very tall.”79

He never did complete the coursework to earn a diploma, but McClinton’s passion for music continued to grow. It would be years before he developed the sound and performance style for which he became famous. However, McClinton already was demonstrating his eagerness to adopt it’s dynamic and constantly being reshaped, redefined, and supercharged to become McClinton’s musical career. He began writing poetry in high school, first publishing his work in the Arlington Heights school newspaper, The Jacket Journal, on December 19, 1957. “Everyone in my English class had to write a Christmas poem for a contest. I won. It was published on the front page — ‘Christmas to the Blind’ — and it described … a blind person … and the excitement surrounding Christmas. ‘To a boy whose sight was withdrawn, / the spirit of the season has an extra meaning / to a boy whose sight was withdrawn, / the spirit of the season has an extra meaning’,” he recites from memory.80

McClinton began writing songs about that same time. At first, his songwriting was a patchwork quilt of different styles and genres, since he had not yet learned to blend those influences seamlessly into his own sound. In an interview with Texas music historian Kathleen Hudson, McClinton said, “I’ve probably been influenced by everybody I’ve heard because I like a little bit of everything. The only conscious direction that I believe I’ve ever taken is that I’m not trying to copy anybody else.”81

Gregg Andrews points to McClinton as an example of the type of songwriter who creates “Texas music,” as opposed to music that is simply made in Texas.82

Right to Be Wrong: Coming of Age in a Texas Roadhouse

By the late 1950s, Delbert McClinton was establishing a reputation around Fort Worth as a dynamic performer who combined a wide variety of musical styles into his repertoire. Two of his early bands, the Straitjackets and later the RonDels, played regular shows at Jack’s Place and other local roadhouses on the Jacksboro Highway, which ran northwest out of downtown Fort Worth. The Jacksboro Highway (Texas State Highway 199) was notorious for its rowdy roadhouses and illegal gambling parlors, several of which were owned and/or frequented by organized crime figures. It was a tough environment for a bunch of young, struggling musicians, but it also provided an opportunity for McClinton and his bandmates to grow as performers and build a following. “We played a lot of Jimmy Reed, B. B. King, Haunted House, Bobby Bland, New Orleans Rocking Pneumonia kind of stuff. As will happen with young bands, the Straitjackets broke up after a time, and we reinvented the band as the RonDels, were the house band at Jack’s but they were the only white band that ever played at Jack’s but they didn’t sound white. They played backup for the stars who came through on weekends and were the house band the rest of the week. Delbert’s first record, a cover of Sonny Boy Williamson’s ‘Wake Up Baby,’ had so much soul, it was the first white single to be played on KNOK, Fort Worth’s black radio station.”83

Carwright continues, “By the late ’50s, McClinton’s band, the Straightjackets, were the house band at Jack’s Place. I think they were the only white band that ever played at Jack’s but they didn’t sound white. They played backup for the stars who came through on weekends and were the house band the rest of the week. Delbert’s first record, a cover of Sonny Boy Williamson’s ‘Wake Up Baby,’ had so much soul, it was the first white single to be played on KNOK, Fort Worth’s black radio station.”83

McClinton’s raspy, ferocious voice carries in it the history of Nashville Trouncer music writer Michael McCall says, “McClinton’s raspy, ferocious voice carries in it the history of Nashville Trouncer music writer Michael McCall says, ‘McClintons raspy, ferocious voice carries in it the history of American popular music. There’s the down-home rhythm and testifying punch of gospel-based R&B, the aggressive snarl of...”84

Delbert McClinton: One of the Fortunate Few
McClinton is referring to another time when he was sitting backstage with Buster Brown and Sonny Boy Williamson drinking a fifth of Old Grand-Dad whiskey. “I was sitting in between them on the couch there, and double-shooting it. Every time the bottle passed by, I took a shot. I missed that show too,” he shakes his head. While those drinking incidents may have been part of a youthful rite of passage, alcohol did not seriously disrupt his career trajectory or prevent him from gaining the attention of Bruce Channel, especially Major Bill Smith, a Fort Worth record producer.

Major Bill, as he was commonly called, was a former Army Air Corps bomber pilot, shot down and wounded over Germany. After the war, he became a public relations officer at CaroWell Air Force Base near Fort Worth and soon became involved in the budding Texas music industry. Major Bill Smith, who was once described as a “relentless self-promoter who was disinclined to let the facts get in the way of a good story,” set up a studio in the basement of the old KFJZ radio station in Fort Worth. KFJZ began in the 1940s as a country station, but by the early 1960s, it was broadcasting what it needed to be the primary session musicians for the studio. McClinton recalls that “if there was any time left on the clock after [others were finished recording], he would give it to me. We did a few covers, like Sonny Boy Williamson’s ‘Don’t Start Me Talking,’ and on one of those extra times we recorded one of my songs, 'You Really Want Me To, I’ll Go.'”

In 1961, Marvin “Smokey” Montgomery, longtime member of the popular Texas band the Light Crust Doughboys, met a promising young singer named Bruce Channel from the Dallas suburb of Grapevine. Channel was only twenty-one, but he already had experience as a vocalist, along with a growing ambition to become a professional songwriter. Channel says, “I would hear songs that I liked and look up the people who wrote them and learn their songs. I wanted to be a songwriter. I was always more influenced by the writers than the singers. But you have to get out there and play those songs for someone,” he explains. So, Channel put together a band and played local dances and sock hops, eventually performing on the popular Dallas-based radio program the Big D Jamboree. He then landed a six-month regular spot on the Louisiana Hayride. Following that, Channel returned to the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

Marvin “Smokey” Montgomery introduced Channel to Major Bill Smith, and soon the young singer was recording in the KFJZ basement studio. McClinton recalls, “That kid could sing his ass off, and Major Bill called me and my band to back him on a couple of songs. I remember that session like yesterday — or the day before yesterday. Jimmy Gordie played guitar, Bruce (Channel) played rhythm. Jerry Foster played drums, and I played harmonica. ‘Hey Baby’ was the A side and we backed it with another of Bruce’s songs, ‘Dream Girl.’”

Channel also remembers the day clearly:

“I walked into the studio with Marvin Montgomery and saw a friendly face, Bob Sullivan, who had been the engineer on the Louisiana Hayride. … I played through my songs, just me and the guitar, and McClintons band, the Strayjackets, listened. Then, just like that, McClinton kicked off ‘Hey Baby’ with his harmonica — with that intro you know so well. McClinton is just a virtuoso with that thing — all he has to do is hear what you are doing and he will find the key and play it — he just kicked it off with that harmonica — and his band jumped in and knew what to do. We recorded it once, twice, and then Marvin came in and put some piano on it the third time and that was history. Delbert’s harmonica intro was so true. It was what identified the song. It was different. Everyone knew the song with that first harmonica lick, and I guess you’d have to agree that little song has stood the test of time.”

McClinton recalls, “Major Bill had about six labels, but Smash was the offshoot of a major label. Major Bill got a deal with Smash and (‘Hey Baby’) became a worldwide hit. We all made five dollars for that session. We always made five dollars a session; it was just ‘roll and play’ recording — no overdubs, nothing fancy, but I guess that five dollars took me a long way.”

In the spring of 1961, “Hey Baby” became a No. 1 hit in Billboard Magazine, remaining at the top of the charts for three weeks. Soon, Bruce Channel went on a national tour with Fats Domino, Brook Benton, Don and Juan, The Impressions, and The Duke of Earl (Gene Chandler). “We started in New York and went down the East Coast and then across and up to Denver and ended in Houston,” Channel says. “They had a tour band for the whole show, so I went out as a single, and they tried to replicate McClinton’s harmonica part with horns.”

Although racial segregation was still common throughout the country at the time, Channel believes that audiences were not bothered by black and white musicians sharing the stage on that 1961 tour. He says, “When you look back at it, the music really was a universal language that brought people together. The audience wasn’t looking at our music as black or white. It was either good or bad. When we were on stage, we were the show. We had mixed audiences and they were there for the music. Crowds came in for the same thing night after night, to hear good music. It was the new sound of our generation. We liked Frank Sinatra, but Elvis broke the flood gates between the races. And Bill Haley, playing ‘Rock Around The Clock,’ — that was rock with a steel guitar! Everyone was doing something different and breaking the mold, and we were all looking for ourselves in our music. In ‘Hey Baby,’ Delbert and I found ourselves on top of the world.”

Delbert McClinton and John Lennon

“Hey Baby” soon blasted across the Atlantic, and concert promoters wanted Bruce Channel to perform in England. Channel recalls, “So, they had a British band ready to back me up — Johnny Kidd and the Pirates. I told Major Bill that I just could not do it without McClinton. I could not have done it with just that British band, and, boy, he saved our baizon over there. Everyone loved that harmonica. Everybody loved Delbert”. And because Bruce wanted that harmonica
The Beatles were opening for us on the tour. They would open the show, then I would play three songs or so, and then Bruce would come out and we would do the headline set. John wanted me to give him some tips on harmonica. The story’s been romanticized. I didn’t really teach him. I showed him what I did. When to suck and when to blow. Nothing really more than that … although it was a great moment in time. I did hang out with John a few nights when we were off. The Beatles were playing regular gigs at the time at The Cavern, an underground old cellar in an old building. The club was pretty empty when we got there, and I sort of looked at John and thought, “what the —?” Then, in no time, the place filled up, body to body. On one of our nights off, John came by the hotel with a friend of his, and they took me out and showed me things I never imagined. Beams at joints, bean bag chairs, and people just laying over in the corner [having sex], you know? I mean they sure didn’t do that in Fort Worth. It was that European intensity in the 60s. It was weird but it was something to see.”

McClinton continues:

It got to be every night on the (six week) tour, somebody from another band would come to the dressing room because there wasn’t that much harmonica going on in anything but blues music. It wasn’t going on in rock and roll. And they wanted me to teach them how I did it. Well, you can’t teach anybody, but you can kind of show them. And that’s what I did. And, yeah, one night it was John. He wanted to know how I did that, and we shot the shot on that and hung out and then … [y]ears later, somewhere along the line he mentioned to some reporter that he was influenced by the harmonica on “Hey Baby,” and it’s become “I’ve taught him everything he knows.” It’s been romanticized a great deal, as those stories are, but that’s exactly what it was. We were both twenty-two. We were both twenty-two. We were on common ground. We were just two guys who couldn’t get enough of it. Wanting to learn everything we could about this crazy business.”

Back in Texas

Following the British tour, Delbert McClinton returned to Texas and continued playing with legendary blues musicians still lived in Fort Worth, and, for the time being, McClinton seemed content to stay close to home. He may have been staying put, but he was not standing still. Important changes were taking place in his life. McClinton had married and now had a son, Monty, but the marriage did not last long. He says about this first marriage, “It wasn’t quite the hell that it soon became. It was not good, but it wasn’t dangerous yet.”

McClinton continued to grow and develop as a musician. Already a fan of Texas country singer Ray Price, McClinton remembers the first time he heard Jerry Lee Lewis’s version of Price’s classic tune “Crazy Arms.” Hearing Jerry Lee Lewis rock that traditional country shuffle made McClinton realize that he, too, could take a song and reinterpret it with his own rhythm, phrasing, and style in order to “make it his own.” Like many other musicians of his generation, Delbert McClinton was quickly discovering that long-standing boundaries which separated different genres of music in commercial radio could be ignored. This allowed artists an unprecedented freedom to blend seemingly disparate styles, reinterpret old standards in any way they wished, and redefine the boundaries of popular music. This creative breakthrough would prove valuable as McClinton began an important new phase in his musical career.

The California Years

In 1972, Delbert McClinton relocated to Los Angeles to try and further his musical career. Although it would be a difficult time for him personally, it also was a productive time in terms of evolving as a songwriter and performer. McClinton’s move to the West Coast was prompted by his longtime friend and musical partner, Glen Clark, another Fort Worth musician who had played keyboard off and on with the singer for years. Clark made the move to Los Angeles in 1969, and wrote to McClinton, encouraging him to head west. Clark’s father was a song leader in a Fort Worth area Church of Christ congregation. Music had a near constant presence in the Clark household. Everyone in the family played piano and sang, and Glen Clark was somewhat of a child prodigy. He successfully auditioned for the Texas Boys Choir when he was 10 years old and within weeks was touring with the group. “It was a pretty big deal at the time,” Clark says.

Glen Clark was about seven years older when he first heard secular music being performed live. He was spending the night with his friend, Vaughn Clark (no relation). Vaughn’s father had been a drummer for Lawrence Welk and had long cultivated an interest in music among his children. Vaughn’s fifteen-year-old brother, Ray, “was playing drums in a band with some of his high school friends. Delbert was the bandleader. He was already rocking. Man, I wanted to be just like that guy,” Glen recalls. “The Texas Boys Choir was a little too regimented,” he admits. “I got out of it pretty quick. Here I was singing Latin masses with the Texas Boys Choir. I discovered black radio stations and country radio stations, and I hear high school kids I know playing this great stuff that made my hair stand up on end. I went to my classical piano teacher and asked her to teach me that. She just couldn’t teach me to play with soul. So I made the switch from classical to rock and blues and country.”

Glen Clark started performing in bands regularly at the age of 16, playing piano with the popular Bobby Crown and the Capers, a blues and R&B group. Bobby Crown, McClinton, and Bruce Channel all were inspired by that same Texas blues shuffle that became an integral part of what some were calling the “Fort Worth sound.”
Clark says, “Everyone wanted to do that music, but Delbert made it in his own. Even back then. He had his own spin on the music. He respected the styles, learned from them and built on them. Delbert has always been a master of that. He can take a combination of sounds from different bands and styles and make it his own. He has always kept that edge that made you know you were listening to something you wouldn’t forget.”

Clark started performing on keyboards regularly with McLinton in 1968, playing a few regular gigs and an after-hours weekly show at Fort Worth’s Colonial Club, near the General Motors plant. “It was plain awful. We thought it was not a priority.”

McClinton rented their own apartment together. McClinton remembers, “It was hard work, but, man, we were living the dream, or working toward it.”

The relationship with Maggie did not last long. The day she left, McClinton sat on the mattress in that dank black apartment and wrote a song about sweeping out a warehouse in West Los Angeles. In 1978, “Two More Bottles of Wine” became a Number 1 hit on the country charts for singer Emmylou Harris and marked a major milestone in McClinton’s evolution as a songwriter.

I'm sixteen hundred miles from the people I know
Been doing all I can but opportunity comes slow
Thought I'd be a star by today
But I'm sweeping out a warehouse in West L.A.
And I've got two more bottles of wine.

Less than ten years after writing those lines, McLinton talked to journalist Gary Cartwright for an interview in Rolling Stone magazine. McLinton recalled that he felt better after the song was finished. “I'd hate to think I have to suffer like that every time I wrote a song,” he said. “I don’t ever want to be that depressed again, but I want to be an interpreter of those feelings… a telling of the things I’ve done, not the things I do.”

Delbert McLinton and Glen Clark attracted some attention in the L.A. music scene and remained active writing songs, but they kept their day jobs. Clark recalls, “We would go to work at Sharpie and Vejar and sweep and pack boxes and unload 100 pound sacks of dog food from boxcars like a fire brigade. Sometimes the Feds would show up at the gig and want all of our money. I never thought of doing anything else.”

Daniel and made a three song demo which led to a showcase and a record deal as ‘Delbert and Glen,’ with Clean Records, a subsidiary of Atlantic. Looking back, it seems like it was overnight, but it wasn’t really.”

Delbert and Glen made two albums for Clean Records, blending together all of those Texas sounds that they had grown up hearing. Los Angeles music critic Richie Unterberger reviewed their first, self-titled album, describing it as “very much a Texas record, despite their California transplantation, blending blues, country, soul, gospel, and rock & roll. The feel of the album is very much that of a seasoned bar band, albeit a bar band with mostly original material.”

Those Texas roots would continue to show through in McLinton and Clark’s music, despite their transformation from Fort Worth blues prodigies to West Los Angeles hippies.

Delbert and Glen enjoyed modest success on Clean Records, but they soon began following separate career paths. In 1974, McLinton signed with ABC, but, as luck would have it, all of the label’s top executives were fired the following week. “So, nobody knew I was on their label for the first year,” he says in an interview with blues historian Alan Govenar, “but I ended up doing three albums for them. I was going to be their ‘Progressive Texan.’ After the third album, ABC went out of business. So, I went with Capricorn, who had done well with The Allman Brothers, but that was petering out too. I had two albums with them, and the week I had a song go into Billboard Top 100, Capricorn declared bankruptcy, and all the telephones were disconnected.”

**From Texas to Tennessee**

Delbert McLinton left L.A. and went home to Texas, met his second wife, and had his second son, Clay, in the fall of 1974. They lived in Fort Worth for a while before moving to Austin to check out the Progressive Country Music scene that was attracting national attention at the time. However, McLinton and his family soon relocated to Nashville to focus on the ABC Records project. In 1975, he released his first solo project, Victim of Life’s Circumstances. For the rest of the decade, McLinton produced a string of successful albums and songs. By 1980, he had signed with Capitol Records and released his Top Ten hit, “Givin’ It Up For Your Love,” which had been recorded at Muscle Shoals Sound studios.

Changes in tax laws and a lack of sound tax advice caused McLinton (and his friend Willie Nelson) problems with the Internal Revenue Service during the early 1980s. McLinton did not receive much media attention during those years, but he remained active musically. “I wasn’t lost. I know where I was,” McLinton says. “I was working for the IRS. They decided that I owed them several hundred thousand dollars. So, I was playing for $700 a night and traveling with the band, in a pickup truck with a camper shell and a U-Haul trailer. We had the mattresses I was born on under a camper shell in the back of the pickup and took turns sleeping back there. Sometimes the Feds would show up at the gig and want all of our money. I never thought of doing anything else.”

We had the mattress I was born on under a camper shell in the back of the pickup and took turns sleeping back there. Sometimes the Feds would show up at the gig and want all of our money. I never thought of doing anything else.
Live. Nearly 30 years later, they are still married. Thanks to Goldstein, McClinton resolved his problems with the I.R.S. and has celebrated some of the greatest successes of his career, including the birth of his third child, a daughter named Delaney. In an interview with No Depression magazine journalist Silas House, McClinton credits Wendy Goldstein for helping save his career and straighten out his life. “She just picked me up and dusted me off. She helped me when I wasn’t doing so good, told me I could get my act together and do better,” McClinton says. “She put me back together, helped me forgive myself and get better. I forgave me. I got better.”

McClinton and Goldstein have somewhat different stories regarding when and where they first met. “I met him through a mutual friend when he played in New York at the Lone Star Cafe in 1979 and again at the Bottom Line,” she recalls. “Then, early ’80s were the cocaine decade in this country. I don’t want to say much about that, except to say that Wendy saved Delbert’s life. He played Saturday Night Live, and I went with a friend, since I worked two floors below SNL. I already loved his music, and I liked him. They were going to be playing in Philly and then in Washington. My good friend, Joan Scaramaglio, was also doing radio for NBC in Washington, and I had been wanting to go down and see her. So I caught a ride with McClinton and the band on the bus.”

McClinton adds, “We decided to take a nap on the bus — and we spooned — and here we are.”

Despite any uncertainty about the beginnings of their relationship, their personal and professional partnership seems to be based on a combination of mutual respect, astute business skills, a strong work ethic, and a deep love for each other. They have never done much co-writing before, and Nashville is a really creative place to be. The way I look at it, if you’re going to develop your ability to innovate and create, not just musically, but also in terms of business endeavors. One of the best recent examples of this are words that perfectly define and express the essence of the power of the greatest poets of the greatest rock’n’rollers as well, from Big Joe Turner to Jerry Lee Lewis to the Rolling Stones to the guy whose latest record here lies at hand. … Born in Lubbock, raised in Fort Worth, [McClinton] wrote his first song/poem on a scrap of Kotex paper in a high school classroom, made his first record in 1959, and in the years since has lived a roadhouse odyssey … whose telling yet awais its honkytonk Homer.”

Musicologist Kathleen Hudson asked McClinton about his staying power in a 1997 interview. “You’ve been around so long. Why?” she asked. “Too broke to quit is the main thing that has kept me going,” he replied with a grin. Nearly twenty years later, Hudson says, “Delbert is just Delbert. Whatever air he’s breathing and whatever song he is singing, he is being authentic. He has never tried to be anything else. It happens to cross color lines and genre lines and gives us a reason to shake our hips. That is heart and soul.”

Don Imus adds his thoughts on McClinton’s longevity in music. “Delbert can still sing. Lyle Lovett told me one time, ‘If we could all sing like we want to sing, we’d sing like Delbert.’ His phrasing is as good as Suntra or anybody I’ve ever heard. He is one of the best artists I’ve ever heard. He is a wonderful songwriter. His lyrics are clever, and, yes, he has God’s gift for a voice. And he’s a good person. He treats people right.”

Delbert McClinton and Willie Nelson have a lot in common beyond their well-publicized troubles with the I.R.S. Both have legions of devoted fans who refer to the singers by their first names, and both Nelson and McClinton consider friends and fans as part of an extended “family.” This reciprocal sense of loyalty and affection, no doubt, also has been a key part of McClinton’s enduring success for the past sixty years. One of McClinton’s oldest friends, Glen Clark, says, “I met Delbert when I was seven and he was fourteen. In sixty years, we’ve been through it all. We were poor as church mice, but we were doing it. We were taking a chance on a dream. We gave up what we had for what we wanted. We went on an adventure. We didn’t look back or expect for each other that when we didn’t know what we were doing. We’ve had lots of ups and downs, and he has always been my reference point. If I have a weight I need to share, he is the first person I call. He always will be. He can count on me and I can count on him. Delbert is that kind of friend. I don’t know how you describe it. He’s like my brother. No matter where we are and how far apart we drift, we are never lost. We are always pretty caught up. He is my mentor, my friend, and my brother.”

Don Imus echoes that feeling when describing his relationship with McClinton. “I would do anything for Delbert. Well not anything. I am not going to give him my truck or my house, but he is such a good person, and he would do anything for me. There aren’t too many things I wouldn’t do for him.”

Another key to Delbert McClinton’s long-term success is his ability to innovate and create, not just musically, but also in terms of business endeavors. One of the best recent examples of this are words that perfectly define and express the essence of the power of the greatest poets of the greatest rock’n’rollers as well, from Big Joe Turner to Jerry Lee Lewis to the Rolling Stones to the guy whose latest record here lies at hand. … Born in Lubbock, raised in Fort Worth, [McClinton] wrote his first song/poem on a scrap of Kotex paper in a high school classroom, made his first record in 1959, and in the years since has lived a roadhouse odyssey … whose telling yet awais its honkytonk Homer.”
Sandy Beaches Cruises," better known among veteran cruise aficionados as the "Delbert Cruises." Started by McClinton's friend, Gary Turlington, along with McClinton's wife, Wendy Goldstein, the cruise has grown into one of the most popular annual events of its kind and features a remarkable array of artists from many different genres. Gary Turlington is a retired third-generation architect and builder who lives in Lillington, North Carolina. One of McClinton's best friends, Turlington has partnered with Goldstein on the Sandy Beaches Cruises for more than two decades. Goldstein handles band management, passenger relations, and sales, while Turlington runs the ship management, charter negotiations, stage management, and graphic design. January 2016 marks the 22nd annual Sandy Beaches Cruise, and most of the multigenerational patrons are veterans of previous trips.

"We had about a dozen musicians on that first cruise," Turlington remembers. "Now we have about 35 artists, and about 60 shows, plus the informal jams that just happen in hallways and sitting areas. The cruise is habit forming for the musicians as well as the guests," he adds. "Once they come on one, they all want to come back," Turlington explains. "It's become a family tradition. People who met on the cruise are now bringing their grown children, and it's such a family event that just about everyone counts the cruises by how old Delbert and Wendy's daughter, Delaney, is. She was a baby on the first cruise."

More than simply a week-long vacation for musicians and fans, the cruise has become an important part of unifying and expanding the network of fans and friends that are such a vital part of McClinton's extended musical "family." The cruises are also a way in which McClinton and Goldstein can make other people feel good along the way, that's the bonus."102

Looking Toward the Future

On November 4, 2015, Delbert McClinton turned seventy-five. However, the multi-Grammy award winning singer, songwriter, and bandleader shows no signs of slowing down. Despite six decades of personal and professional obstacles, he has repeatedly re-emerged seemingly stronger and more successful than ever, continuing to tour, write, and record. Of all the difficult years McClinton has survived, 2014 was one of the most challenging. In March, his son Clay (also a performing musician), was in a car accident and suffered a serious head injury. McClinton and Goldstein got the call at home in Nashville in the early morning hours from oldest son, Monty. Clay was in Intensive Care in Austin, so McClinton and Goldstein flew to Texas to stay by Clay's side in the hospital for several weeks. McClinton says, "That's when I met me. That's when I met who I was, and life has changed a great deal since then."103

Once Clay began to show signs of improvement, McClinton headed out to Florida for one performance, after which he was planning to return to the Austin hospital to be with Clay. McClinton recalls, "We got to the venue. I thought I was having heartburn. It got worse. I knew something was not right. They called EMS. They checked me out and told me that I was okay now, but should probably go to the hospital and find out if I had a heart attack. I didn't go with them but had the promoter take me to the hospital and found out that, yeah, I had a little 'nudge,' they called it. They did a heart cath the next day and found that I had 95% blockage in the main artery — a 'Widow Maker,' they call it. I could be me on stage," he said, "but I found that I had so much more energy and more stamina. From 95% blockage to open road. It made a big difference."104

Don Imus agrees. "Delbert was always good, but he sings better now. He looks a lot better than he has in years. He doesn't have bags under his eyes. He has energy. I think he's better than he ever was. He'll go forever. Sinatra worked for a long time — what, into his late 80s? And still had that great voice. Tony Bennett is what, like 150! Still they wheel him out there and he knocks them out every single time. Generations like Delbert. His music, his style, it's ageless. All good art is timeless. The song, 'Dreams to Remember' — my seventy-year-old son came up to me the other day and told me that Delbert was better than Otis Redding, who had the original version of 'Dreams.' He's great when he was twenty-two and playing harmonica with Boz Scaggs, and he's great now."105

Delbert McClinton is once again "back on top." He is playing in major venues from New York to California and is planning his 22nd Annual Sandy Beaches Cruise in January 2016. He is also working on a new album and plans to have it ready for his year-long Diamond Jubilee Celebration. When discussing his songwriting style, McClinton explains what others have struggled to describe. "Call it blues or country rock, or American roots or whatever, but one of the most important things about my songs continues to be that there is always a way out. Nothing I write spirals into the abyss. It's all 'I'll be all right.' The music is mostly so positive, in that 'I'll be okay' — and maybe if I’m hoping that — frame of mind — I always want to have an uplifting draft in the breeze of the song."106

In a 1966 Playboy magazine interview with journalist Ron Rosenbaum, Bob Dylan said, "Popular songs are the only art form that describes the temper of the times. It's more than live—for Alive. It's not in museums or shelves in a library."107 Today, nearly fifty years after that Dylan interview, don’t McClinton believe that statement still rings true? "I think I am a voice of the people," McClinton reflects. "My own stories and the experiences of others are, or could be, true. I write and sing about the problems, the dreams, the hopes of the everyday person. Bad grammar used properly is poetry. It is art, and it is what we sound like today. I write songs the way I am going to sing them. Phonetically. 'Del-bonics,' he adds."108

One might wonder whether McClinton has ever doubted his career and life choices? He says, "I have never been jaded about music. I have never ever wondered if I was doing the right thing. I have never doubted what I was doing, though I have not always been able to back that up. I am still a work in progress. I still have that hunger in there — that thing that has always been there. It keeps me calm. I am not doing this for anybody else. I am playing and writing and singing for me. If I make me happy, I am doing what I need to be doing. And if I make other people feel good along the way, that’s the bonus."109

McClinton's new album, scheduled for release in 2016, includes a song that reflects on his past while remaining optimistic about the future.

Hear's get broken every day
You can't let that get in your way
Soon enough those tears will fade
Everything will be rose
Sometimes life gets so absurd.
The trick is learning how to handle the curve.
Get a grip, don't lose your nerve.
Everything will be rose

There gonna be hard times, good times,
All along the way.
It really ain't none of my business,
But I'm gonna tell you 'bout it anyway.
Don't have the answer; nobody's fool.
Listen up. I got news for you.
You gotta find a way to lose your blues,
And everything will be rose.110

26
Delbert McClinton: One of the Fortunate Few

The Jealous Kind

New West Records 2013

Delbert & Glen

Clean Records 1972

Delbert & Glen

Clean Records 1973

Blind, Cropped, and Crazy

New West Records 2013

Delbert McClinton

Victim of Life's Circumstances

ABC Records 1975

Genuine Cowhide

ABC Records 1976

Love Roller

ABC Records 1977

Second Wind

Capricorn Records 1978

Keep of the Flame

Capricorn Records 1979

The Foolish Kind

Capitol Records 1980

Plain From the Heart

Capitol Records 1981

Love Rustler

Capitol Records 1981

Plain From the Heart

Capitol Records 1981

Wake Up Baby

Footage Alert

Intermedia 1984

Live From Austin

Alligator Records 1989

I'm Willing You

Curb Records 1988

Never Been Rocked Enough

Curb Records 1992

One of the Fortunate Few

Rising Tide 1997

Victim of Life's Circumstances

Genuine Cowhide

Raven Records 1997

The Ultimate Collection

Hip-O Records 1999

Nothing Personal

New West Records 2001

Room To Breathe

Blink Rose/New West 2002

Live

New West Records 2003

Cost of Acquiring Life

New West Records 2005

Discography

Wittliff Collections at Texas State University, SWWC Accession No. 2015-143 Folder 1.

[Notes]


2. For more on this, see Gary Hartman, The History of Texas Music (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009).


8. Herman, History of Texas Music, 84.


13. Windell Collections at Texas State University, SWWC Accession No. 2001-443 Folder 1.


15. Ibid., The Harley Sadler Tent Shows were secular traveling shows that included elements of medicine shows, theatre, music, and vaudeville. Long after they declined in popularity in larger cities, they continued to travel throughout rural Texas, until Sadler folded the tents and began a second career as a Texas legislator. For more on this, see Clifford Ashley and Suzanne Dapare Hay, Travelling Through Texas: Harley Sadler and His Tent Show (Bowing Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1982).

16. McClinton, interview by the author, Austin, Texas, April 24, 2015.

17. McClinton interview, July 8, 2015.

18. McClinton interview, April 24, 2015.


22. McClinton interview, April 24, 2015.

23. McClinton interview by the author, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, July 9, 2015.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.


32. McClinton interview, April 24, 2015.


35. McClinton interview, July 9, 2015.
In the early months of 1964, on their inaugural tour of North America, the Beatles seemed to be everywhere: appearing on The Ed Sullivan Show, making the front cover of Newsweek, and playing for fanatical crowds at sold out concerts in Washington, D.C. and New York City. On Billboard magazine’s April 4, 1964, Hot 100 list, the “Fab Four” held the top five positions. One notch down at Number 6 was “Suspicion,” by a virtually unknown singer from Amarillo, Texas, named Terry Stafford. The following week “Suspicion” – a song that sounded suspiciously like Elvis Presley using an alias – moved up to Number 3, wedged in between the Beatles’ “Twist and Shout” and “She Loves You.” The saga of how a Texas boy met the British Invasion head-on, achieving almost overnight success and a Top-10 hit, is one of triumph and disappointment, a reminder of the vagaries that are a fact of life when pursuing a career in music. It is also the story of Stafford’s continuing development as a gifted songwriter, a fact too often overlooked when assessing his career.
Terry LaVerne Stafford was born on November 22, 1941, in Hollis, Harmon County, Oklahoma, in the southwestern corner of the state. He was seven years old when the family moved west to Amarillo, where he grew up on the wind-swept plains of the Texas Panhandle.7 For the 6-foot-3-inch Stafford excelled in sports, starting in both basketball and baseball at Palo Duro High School, before graduating in 1960.5

Music was an important part of Stafford’s life, too. In a 1980 interview with Robert Dalley for the Amarillo Globe News, Stafford recalled, “My dad played a little guitar, so I was always trying to play and sing since I was as young as I can remember. Periodically, I was trying to make my singing debut when I was only ten years old singing at the local Moose hall. I sang a couple of Hank Williams tunes, ‘Your Cheatin’ Heart’ and ‘You Win Again.’ … Later on I joined a country band whose leader was Elmo ‘Richard’ Nelson. … I also got some exposure to Texas swing music [with] Roy Terry & the Panneer Playboys.”8

Amarillo has a rich country music heritage. A Panhandle fiddle tradition personified by Alexander “Eck” Robertson, who first brought the distinctive Texas fiddle style to the national scene in 1922, dates to at least the town’s founding in 1887.9 In the 1930s, Son Langsford, Sonny’s cousin, managed the Lively Ones, a surf group under contract with Stafford’s cousin, Ted Bevan, who first brought the distinctive Texas fiddle style to the national scene in 1922, dates to at least the town’s founding in 1887.7 In the 1930s, Son Langsford, Sonny’s cousin, managed the Lively Ones, a surf group under contract with Ted Bevan, who was now his manager, sent the tape on to John Fisher, president of newly launched Crusader Records.14 Stafford resumes his account, “John Fisher liked it and he did some remixing and promised to have it out by January, 1964. … Suspicion” (Crusader C-110) was the ‘Pick of The Week’ on Pot Luck with Elvis on March 20, 1964, to name a few.”10 Stafford became the vocalist with another pioneering Rhythm Orchids, led by West Texas State College students Buddy Knox (from Happy) and Jimmy Bowen (of Dumas), became part of the West Texas rockabilly vanguard.11 The rock and roll beat caught Terry Stafford’s ear, too. “I really liked Buddy Holly and Elvis, they were major influences on my singing style.”12 Stafford became the vocalist with another pioneering combo, the rhythm Teens, organized by Rick Tucker and Larry Tucker.13 After graduating from Palo Duro High and with plans to seek his musical fortune, Stafford headed to northern California to stay with a aunt, later relocating to the Los Angeles area to live with a cousin, Ted Bevan. For the next two years, Stafford moved back and forth from California to Texas before deciding to remain in Los Angeles, where he began competing in talent shows at such venues as the El Monte Legion Stadium.13 His cousin managed the Lively Ones, a surf group under contract to Del-Fi Records. Oftentimes the band invited Stafford on stage to sing at their dances, and this led to an opportunity to make a demo tape in 1962. As Stafford explained, “The Lively Ones were recording at the Sound House Studios in El Monte with Bob Summers. I decided that I would like to record at the Sound House, so I picked a tune off of an Elvis Presley album, called ‘Suspicion.’ Bob Summers played all the instruments except bass. … We took the tape around to all the major labels in town … but they all turned it down.”15

Along the way, Gene Weed, a disc jockey at KFWB (1980 AM) and a fellow Texas expat, heard the tape and contacted Herb Alpert at A&M Records. Although Stafford did cut two songs for A&M – “You Left Me Here to Cry” (backed with “Heartaches on the Way”) – Alpert passed on “Suspicion.” A year later Stafford’s cousin, Ted Bevan, who was now his manager, sent the tape on to John Fisher, president of newly launched Crusader Records. Stafford resumes his account, “John Fisher liked it and he did some remixing and mastering and promised to have it out by January, 1964. … ‘Suspicion’ seemed built to showcase every little vocal trick in ‘Suspicion’ was written by Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman. Pomus, né Jerome Solomon Felder, had been on the New York City music scene for twenty years, first as a singer and then as songwriter. After teaming with Shuman in 1958 and under contract to Hill & Range, the publisher that controlled the music recorded by Elvis, the two delivered a string of hits for the Drifters, Dion and the Belmonts, Andy Williams, the Mystics, and, especially Presley: “A Mess of Blues,” “Surrender,” “Little Sister,” (“Mama’s the Name”) His Latest Flame,” and “Viva Las Vegas” to name a few.”14 Pomus also took a fledging Phil Spector under his wing. Spector, who soon became a world-famous record producer and creator of the so-called “Wall of Sound,” hung out at the Bell Building, headquarters to music agencies and publishers including Hill & Range.15 Spector produced some demos of Pomus’s compositions for Elvis Presley, perhaps even the “Suspicion” demos.”16

“Suspicion” is a snapshot of a relationship unraveling from within. “Ev’ry time you kiss me / I’m still not certain that you love me / Ev’ry time you hold me / I’m still not certain that you care.” The singer is unable to overcome his doubt, his suspicion. “Though you keep on saying / I really, really, really love me / Do you speak the same words / To someone else when I’m not there?” Is the singer’s distrust getting the better of him or is there truly cause for the persistent dread? The listener is left to decide. “Suspicion torments my heart / Suspicion keeps us apart / Suspicion why torture me?”11 Much has been made of Stafford’s “sounds-like Elvis” way of singing, and he is often categorized as a Presley imitator, just another one of the “Elvoids.”17 Over the years, Stafford gracefully acknowledged the influence and similarities. “I have always been a big fan of Elvis’ ever since I heard his first record. I spent a lot of time listening to his records so I might have picked up some of his phrasing.”18 However, as his subsequent career proves, Stafford was far more than a mere Presley clone. If Terry Stafford’s vocals are what first catch the listener’s attention, it is the sound that Bob Summers achieves in the production that gives “Suspicion” much of its singular appeal. When Stafford recorded the demo, Summers chose to center the melody around a reoccurring organ riff or refrain, what one observer called a “quirky flourish … the rinky-dink keyboard that plays throughout.”19 According to John Fisher, placing a paper bag over the organs’ Leslie speaker further enhanced the distinctive accompaniment.20 In addition, on the final mix for the commercial release, a vocal chorus with prominent female voices echoes sympathetically, intermittently with Stafford’s sleek delivery. Combine all of this with the paranoid mood of the Pomus breakup suite, and the result is a pop masterpiece. The song has twice had Top-40 success on the Billboard’s country chart: in 1972 for Bobby G. Rice (Royal American 48) and in 1988 for Ronnie McDowell (Carib 15090).7 In 2006, Bob Summers, again playing most of the instruments, produced Ed Greenwald’s “Suspicion” (BSM Sounds), which was intended as part of an iTunes download tribute to Stafford.21

Terry Stafford’s recording of “Suspicion” entered Billboard Hot 100 list on February 22, 1964, and began a steady ascent.22 By March 28, it reached Number 9, poised to break the Beatles stranglehold on the Top 5.28 The song remained in the Top 10 for seven consecutive weeks.29 Stafford received an invitation to appear on Dick Clark’s American Bandstand on March 28, 1964, to sing (lip-sync) his hit record. During the requisite interview afterwards, Stafford was modest, self-efacing, and looking a bit uncomfortable still getting used to the national exposure. Like many, Dick Clark was intrigued by the “suspicion” of the record. “How do you know you got that peculiar sound in the background? Is there any particular instrumentation that caused it to sound the way it does?”23 “It’s an organ,” Stafford explained. “Sounds like muted trumpets to me, but it’s an organ.”24 Two weeks after lip-syncing on American Bandstand, Stafford made his first public appearance on the East Coast at the Paramount Theater in New York City as part of the “Good Guys” show sponsored by radio station WMCA (570 AM). Others on the bill were Sam Cooke, the Four Seasons, Ruby and the Romantics, and Lesley Gore.20 The various package shows afforded Stafford the chance to rub shoulders with some of his favorites. “Muhammad Ali [then Cassius Clay] had a record out at the time, and he would come backstage and talk about his boxing career. And of course, Muhammad Ali was a big fan of Elvis.”21
with his entourage, it was all very exciting. I was working with the legends of the music business, people like Jerry Lee Lewis, James Brown and Roger Miller… I enjoyed seeing them all because there were some great entertainers on those shows.”

Back in Los Angeles, John Fisher assembled eleven recently recorded Stafford tracks along with the hit record for an album, not surprisingly titled Suspicion! (Crusader CLP-1001). Bob Summers handled the arranger’s duties, and disc jockey Gene Weed was on board to write the liner notes. “Suspicion” is defined as ‘an inking or hint’ and that is what Terry’s recording has been for you, only a hint of what is to be found on this album.” Crusader Records placed an ad in Billboard announcing the release of Suspicion!” First artist to break the Beatles barrier! Terry Stafford’s first album and it’s a winner. An exciting album containing the smash single ‘Suspicion’

and many other top-flight performances in the sensational ‘Suspicion Style’.” One of the songs Terry sings “in sensational ‘Suspicion Style’” is “Kiss Me Quick,” also from Elvis’s Pet Love album. It, too, was written by Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman. With Stafford’s Crusader 45 (45 p.m., a record designed to play at 45 revolutions per minute, also known as a “single”) already in Billboard’s Top 10, RCA belatedly attempted to muscle in on the action by combining Presley’s “Suspicion” with “Kiss Me Quick” (RCA Victor 447-0639), but it was too late. The record, released in England, was a fiasco. And Stafford, at the request of his manager, wrote a second Crusader single, “Hoping” b/w “A Little Bit Better” (Crusader C-110), which flopped. The popularity of “Suspicion” persisted, though, and Stafford was on the road during the summer and fall of 1964, touring the United States and Canada. In November, Stafford, along with Dot recording artist Jimmie Rodgers and one of Phil Spector’s girl groups, the Crystals, flew to Australia for appearances in Sydney and Melbourne. In August, Billboard reported “the sudden departure” of John Fisher. “At the time they [Crusader] were having management difficulties,” Stafford told Robert Dallay, “and I was having contractual disputes so everything fell apart.” According to Don Perry, who met Stafford through Bob Summers and later worked with the singer, Crusader advanced Stafford “a few thousand dollars,” but when the company went belly-up, “Terry never received another dime in royalties.” A cache of Fisher-produced Crusader tracks have never been released, either.

After the disappointment at Crusader, Stafford regrouped. He maintained his association with both Bob Summers and John Fisher. Indeed, these two men continued to fill important roles on and off throughout Stafford’s career. Mel Shauer, Stafford’s new manager, first worked out a deal with Mercury Records. However, Stafford succinctly summarized the initial impact of the company founded in 1964 by twenty-year-old Mike Curb, the youthful impresario who would go on to form his own group, the Mike Curb Congregation, become president of MGM Records and later Curb Records, and serve as lieutenant governor of California. The ubiquitous Bob Summers was Curb’s associate at Sidewalk, and when the two began producing movie soundtracks for American International Pictures, Summers enlisted Stafford’s participation.

Stafford then took his client to Sidewalk Productions, the company founded in 1964 by twenty-year-old Mike Curb, the youthful impresario who would go on to form his own group, the Mike Curb Congregation, become president of MGM Records and later Curb Records, and serve as lieutenant governor of California. The ubiquitous Bob Summers was Curb’s associate at Sidewalk, and when the two began producing movie soundtracks for American International Pictures, Summers enlisted Stafford’s participation.

Stafford also arranged and presided over the release of two Sidewalk singles for Stafford. “When Sin Stops — Love Begins” b/w “Soldier Boy” (Sidewalk 920) and “The Joker’s on Me” b/w “A Step or Two Behind You” (Sidewalk 914). “A Step or Two Behind You” is a Stafford original. The affiliation with Mike Curb allowed Stafford the opportunity to further hone his songwriting skills (“Judy,” the B-side of “Suspicion,” was a Stafford co-write). He furnished former cricketer Jerry Naylor with “Would You Believe” (Tower 246), and he even tried his hand at producing. With Bob Summers arranging, Stafford supervised Stan Lee Black’s revival of a couple of oldies, “Be Bop a Lula” and “Raining in My Heart” (Alamo International 223).

Le Spic Vergine dal Seminofredo or Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Bombers (Tower T 5035) became the first soundtrack album on which Stafford was involved. Filmed in Italy and starring Vincent Price as the mad scientist, Dr. Goldfoot, the 1966 drive-in snoozer is the sequel to Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine. Stafford’s “My Try World Little Girl” with that distinctive organ sound, this time spotlighted in a doodling psychedelic instrumental break, could well be an outtake from the soundtrack album of Born Losers (Tower T 5082). This is the movie that introduced Tom Laughlin as “Billy Jack” battling a motorcycle gang in a small California town. “Forgive Me” plays in the background of the pool hall scene when the sheriff confronts the gang.

For 1969’s Wild Wheels, Stafford also made his big screen acting debut as “Huye,” a dune buggy-riding surfer whose club tangles with a motorcycle pack. Shot on Peninsula Beach, Wild Wheels was produced by Don Epperson, who had produced Stafford’s recent hit for American International Pictures devoted. Stafford, the thespian, does not steal any scenes, but he does get to sing “Wine, Women, and Song” for his pals and their bikini-clad girlfriends at an after-dark clambake. “Night Ride,” written by Stafford, is a tune faintly heard on the jukebox in the biker bar. “Night ride the sun has fallen / Night ride the winds are howling / Night ride the dunes are calling me.” With the Pacific Ocean as backdrop, Terry and Don Epperson, both with guitars in hand, are posed atop dune buggies on the front cover of the soundtrack album (RCA Victor LSO 1156).

In February, prior to the filming of Wild Wheels, Stafford and Bob Summers for Sidewalk Productions pitched two of Terry’s compositions to Warner Brothers Records, and the company agreed to release a single, “Big in Dallas” b/w “Will a Man Ever Learn” (Warner Brothers 7286), that showcases both Stafford’s versatility as a singer and songwriter: “Will a Man Ever Learn” is a brooding plea — “I’ve been crying, girl, over you / Cause you’ve been lying, girl / And I’m still in love with you / Now it looks like a man would never / Night / Your man with organ and horns (sax and trumpet). Stafford, his voice sliding into falsetto at times, gives a raw, gritty performance worthy of soul man Otis Redding.

In contrast, and accompanied by a string section, “Big in Dallas” is a restrained, matter-of-fact account of an aspiring singer’s attempts to make a go of it in the big city. The young man’s mother begs him not to go, but he is determined “to make it big in Dallas.” He anticipates his name “up in lights” and standing ovations from audiences. Months later, after playing honky-tonks and dirty bars, the wannabe star is forced to Love Again” — on the soundtrack of Born Losers (Tower T 5082). This is the movie that introduced Tom Laughlin as “Billy Jack” battling a motorcycle gang in a small California town. “Forgive Me” plays in the background of the pool hall scene when the sheriff confronts the gang.

The Life and Songs of Terry Stafford

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Amarillo By Morning: The Life and Songs of Terry Stafford

As the song "Big in Vegas" was the last song he sang.61 According to Owens, it became one of his most requested lines, but the sense of stoic acceptance is unaltered.

The encounter with Owens provided yet another reality check for Terry Stafford. While Stafford had stopped touring, he continued to concentrate on songwriting and production. A friendship with Don Epperson developed when the two were filming Wild Wild West, and Stafford, inspired by the 1969 Paul Newman and Robert Redford western, furnished Epperson with the dramatic spoken-word "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" (Amaret 116, also Stateside 2C 006-91.586 M).66 Bob Summers introduced Stafford to Don Perry, a trailblazer in the music industry, whom he had met in Los Angeles, to work with Stafford.75

Summers introduced Stafford to Don Perry, a trailblazer in the music industry, with whom he had met in Los Angeles, to work with Stafford.75

For Stafford, "Big in Vegas" was my first successful hit as a writer," cause for those in the music industry to sit up and take note again.62 Stafford and Owens received a 1970 BMI Citation of Achievement as logged by BMI for broadcast performances of the song.63 Even though he had only changed the title and condensed Stafford's lyrics, Owens, when commenting on the genealogy of "Big in Vegas," still seemed reluctant to give Stafford his due. "It was his idea," the head Buckaroos acknowledged, "and something that I enlarged upon. It worked out well for him because I'm sure it paid the rent one month."64 The comment about one month's rent might seem flippant and certainly not literally true, but those who had business dealings with Buck Owens learned that he was a hard-nosed negotiator when it came to allocating royalty percentages, which is apparently what happened in Stafford's case.65

The Life and Songs of Terry Stafford

About the same time, Terry Stafford briefly set up his own label, Bronco, and produced Garland Frady's "Ft. Worth I Love You" b/w "Mr. Bojangles" (Bronco BJ 7112, also Paula P 1242).62 Stafford continued to work with Bob Summers, and he oversaw a second single for Garland Frady, "When Mama Comes to Town" b/w "Bottle of Wine" (Broadway Records 45-9563) for Don Perry Enterprises.60 "When Mama Comes to Town" is a Stafford original. 1971 is the year that Stafford, himself, returned to the studio. "I did a couple of singles for MGM . . . produced by Bob Summers and Don Perry; they were part of an album we did that was never released."65 It proved to be yet another album project for naught. The two MGM 45s — "Mean Woman Blues-Candy Man" b/w "Chilly Chicago" (MGM K 14232) and "California Dancer" b/w "The Walk" (MGM K 14271) — did not chart either, but three of the four songs were Stafford compositions. "The Walk" is a gospel-infused number that follows Jesus and his ministry. "Nobody living today was there when he walked by the sea / But everybody knows that he walked for you and me. " "California Dancer" is the standout, offering further evidence of Stafford's growth as a songwriter. "California Dancer" continues the theme Stafford explored in "Big in Dallas." Follow your dreams, no matter what the obstacles. Persevere and the opportunity you need to succeed will surely follow. In "California Dancer," a young woman boards a Greyhound bus headed for the Golden State. Her goal is to become a professional dancer. "California dancer, she's gonna make it all the way to the top / California dancer, until she does the girl won't stop." Our heroine runs out of money and takes a job at a go-go club waiting for "a big break to come along." She falls in with the wrong crowd, alcohol and drugs readily available. "Tune-in, turn-on California dancer / Smoked a hole in her hopes." Sitting alone in a run-down hotel, she ponders her fate, even as the singer concludes the song on a mantra-like vibe. "She's gonna make it / She's gonna make it."

Although he modestly characterizes himself as "a rockabilly piano player and singer," Earl Poole Ball, Jr.'s musical pedigree includes West Coast session assignments with Buck Owens and the Buckaroos, Gram Parsons and the International Submarine Band, and the Byrds.66 In Nashville, in addition to his work with Stafford, he produced albums for, among others, Freddie Hart and Johnny Cash. In 1977, Ball accepted an invitation from Jack Clement to join, for the next twenty years, he was the "go-to" piano player for the "Man in Black."67 For the Stafford sessions, Ball assembled a troupe of "A-Team" musicians, including Lloyd Green (steel guitar), Charlie McCoy (harmonica, vibes, harmonica), Hargus "Pig" Robbins (piano), and Tommy Allsup (tac-tac guitar). They all gathered at Jack Clement's recording studio, a.k.a. The Cowboy Arms Hotel and Recording Spa, in July 1973.68 Prior to the first session, Ball and Stafford reviewed the list of thirteen songs the singer had selected to record. "Say, Has Anybody Seen My Sweet Gypsy Rose" and a remake of "Suspicion" were on the list, along with a co-write with his buddy Don Epperson, "Road House Country Singer." In a bit of serendipity, Stafford chose "Big in Vegas" not realizing that Ball was, in fact, the piano player on the Buck Owens recording.69 In addition to these songs, Stafford selected "Amarillo by Morning," a song he had co-written with Paul Fraser.

Stafford crossed paths with Fraser, a self-described old rock and roller originally from Bend, Oregon, when Fraser settled in Los Angeles to escape the grind of touring.69 The two began writing together, and one of their earliest efforts was "Amarillo...
It is kind of funny, the song that had so much to do with bringing the Texas sound back was written by a couple of old rockers and inspired by a commercial.

I ain’t rich, but, Lord, I’m free.54 Revolve, he pushes on in the darkness to Amarillo. Tinged with melancholy, “Amarillo by Morning,” like “Big in Dallas” and “California Dancer,” is further testament to Stafford’s never-wavering belief that the song’s genesis is a bit more mundane. “One night Terry called me at home. He had been watching television and a commercial for a delivery service had just run. It got him to thinking. This commercial guaranteed they could get your package to places like Amarillo by the next morning and he wanted to write a song about that concept.55 Fraser screeched down some lines and took them to Stafford the next day. They refined the lyrics, and Stafford decided to cut the tune at his initial session for Atlantic Records. Fraser later remarked, after George Strait’s success, “It is kind of funny, the song that had so much to do with bringing the Texas sound back was written by a couple of old rockers and inspired by a commercial.”

Management at Atlantic Records failed to recognize the song’s potential, however. Promotional copies of the album sent to radio stations were stickered with suggested tracks for airplay, and “Amarillo by Morning” was not among those listed.56 To further compound the marketing oversight, Atlantic selected “Amarillo by Morning” as the B-side for “Say, Has Anybody Seen My Sweet Gypsy Rose” (Atlantic 4006), Stafford’s first Atlantic single and his initial entry on Billboard’s Hot Country Singles on August 25, 1973.57 “Say, Has Anybody Seen My Sweet Gypsy Rose” climbed to Number 35, while the group’s Dawn, featuring Tony Orlando, scored a better seller with the very same song on Billboard’s pop chart.58

The album entitled Say, Has Anybody Seen My Sweet Gypsy Rose (Atlantic SD 7282) received a glowing review in Billboard. “Stafford shows his abilities both as a writer and singer. It’s an unusually powerful selection of material, and as a singer there are few better.”59 Sales soon received a further boost. Both Billboard and Cash Box, the other trade weekly of Billboard, announced that Atlantic Records had decided to give a “s-side treatment” to “Amarillo by Morning” owing to “heavy radio response.”60

In addition, Cash Box reported that, unbeknownst to the company, Jim Christofferson, the program director at KDJW (1360 AM), had flipped the platter over and began promoting the “Amarillo” side; moreover, local residents were so taken with the song that there was a “movement” to declare it the official city anthem.61 Country Music Disc Jockey Hall of Fame member Dugg Collins, who became a close friend of Stafford, was also on the staff at KDJW. “Well, I can tell you the ‘A’ side of that record [‘Sweet Gypsy Rose’] never saw the light of day with me and my radio station,” Collins affirmed.62 “Amarillo by Morning” premiered December 1, 1973, on Billboard’s Hot Country Singles, staying on the chart for fourteen weeks and reaching Number 11.63

George Strait’s version, first released in 1982 on his second album, Strait From The Heart (MCA 5320), continues to receive the most widespread public recognition. Stafford and Fraser garnered a 1984 BMI Citation of Achievement award on the basis of broadcast performances of Strait’s recording.64 In 2003, CMT (Country Music Television) solicited the voting members of the Country Music Association to select the “100 greatest songs of country music,” George Strait’s version of “Amarillo by Morning” occupied the Number 12 slot.65 Bill弗riska WARNER AND David Cannon ranked the song at 89 in Heartaches by the Number: Country Music’s 500 Greatest Singles.66 At the Country Music Association awards on November 6, 2013, with Strait sitting in the front row, hosts Brad Paisley and Carrie Underwood sang an “Amarillo by Morning” parody, “Obamacare by Morning,” much to the amusement of the audience with Paisley acknowledging Strait’s presence. “By the way, thank you, George Strait, I always loved [“Amarillo by Morning”].”67 However, two years after Stafford’s 1973 Atlantic debut, and seven years before Strait’s recording, an actual rodeo cowboy was next out of the chute to record “Amarillo by Morning.” Bareback-bronc riding champion Chris LeDoux included the song on his second self-released album, Songs Of His Life As A Rodeo Man (Lucky Man 6523). LeDoux sold his records and 8-track tapes via mail order and off the tailgate of his truck at arenas where he competed, further ensuring the song a musical niche within the rodeo and cowboy subculture.68 In addition, prior to Strait’s hit, several Texas performers had already found the song to their liking: Charlie Russell (1976), Terry Bullard (1980), produced by John Fisher), and Kelly Schoppa (1981).69 After Strait’s success, other Texans followed suit. Leon Rausch (1986), Clifton Jusky (1997), Moe Bandy (1997), the Light Crust Doughboys (2000), Asleep at the Wheel (2003), and John Arthur Martinez (2004) have all recorded renditions.60 Martinez even sings a version in Spanish featuring the accordion of Joel Guzmán. In Mexico, “Amarillo Por La Mañana” garnered sales for Stafford’s original, too.61

“AmariIlo by Morning” resonates in other media, as well. Filmmaker Spike Jonze entitled his 1998 short film “Amarillo by Morning.” Shot during a rodeo in the Houston Astrodome, Jonze focuses his camera on a couple of would-be hopefuls aspiring to join the circuit.62 Screenwriter-producer-director Glen Mccrory’s novel, AmariIlo by Morning, follows former world champion bull rider Richard “Sticks” Starnes, who after twenty years on the sidelines attempts a comeback to earn enough money to pay for a kidney operation to save his nephew’s life.63 Contemporary romance novels also have a sweet spot for the scenario. By Matthews, Bethany Campbell, and Jodi Thomas have each published an AmariIlo by Morning.64 Capitalizing on the positive response to “Amarillo by Morning” and “Say, Has Anybody Seen My Sweet Gypsy Rose,” Atlantic Records released another two tunes from the Sweet Gypsy Rose album. “Captured,” backed with a Stafford original, “It Sure Is Bad to Love Her” (Atlantic 4015), peaked at Number 24 on Billboard’s Hot Country Singles on May 25, 1974.65

Stafford reunited with Johnny Fortner, an associate from his Crusader Records days, and he used Fortner’s band to begin touring again.66 These public appearances received approving notices, too. Billboard columnist Bob Kirsich, who was in the audience at the Palomino Club in L.A., stated that “Terry Stafford [is] back as a country singer and, given a chance to do his own material, quite a commendable one . . . Stafford’s performance here was quite successful and he had little trouble winning over the Palomino crowd. With some material to call his own, he should have no difficulty retaining a solid foothold in the country field.”67 Stafford also secured an April 1974 booking to appear in the U.K. at the 6th International Festival of Country Music at Wembley Arena in London. Although it had been ten years since “Suspicion,” the audience had not forgotten Terry Stafford. Billboard correspondent Bill Wilson reported, “Newcomer Terry Stafford of Atlantic was another near-hit. He should have no difficulty retaining a solid foothold in the country field.”68

The next month Stafford returned to Nashville and Jack Clement’s Cowboy Arms Hotel and Recording Spa with Earl Scruggs. After meeting with Earl Scruggs, Stafford again chose the songs. “Woman Sensuous Woman” had been a Number 1 hit for Don Gibson in 1972. “It’s a Matter of Time” was the flipside of Elvis Presley’s “ Burning Love.” There are three of Stafford’s own, including “Chilly Chicago” (previously recorded for MGM), plus two collaborations with Paul Fraser, “Dang’d Ole Rodeo” and “Blue Goes With Anything,” and one with Don Epperson, “Don’t Knock It Till You’ve Tried It.”69 “Wee Grow Close (Atlantic SD 18105) was to be the title of the album.
We weren't expecting this,” said Earl Poole Ball. Stafford remains in the can, yet to see the light of day.

The first single, "Stop If You Love Me" (Atlantic 4026), received the Billboard reviewer’s blessing. “A very smooth song and a sad but commercial story. It's well produced and has all the necessary ingredients.”

Stafford got back together with Earl Poole Ball to cut two songs, “Darling Think It Over” and “I Can't Find It” (Melodyland ME 60909). “Darling Think It Over” received a favorable review in the May 10, 1975, Cash Box. “Terry’s first release for Melodyland Records is produced by Earl Ball and already gaining airplay... Vocals are deep and rich and will help this one see more action regionally and nationally.”

Record World’s “Country Hot Line” reported the single “is showing strong action in the southwes...” Inexplicably, neither side made it into "Billboard’s Hot Country Singles." In the meantime, Mike Curb had another film project in the works, Death Riders, a documentary that follows the Death Riders Motorcycle and Auto Thrill Show as it barnstormed the countryside in the summer of 1974. Curb was in charge of the music, and he recruited several artists from the Melodyland roster (Donny Burnette, T.G. Sheppard, Pat Boone, Jerry Naylor, Kenny Surratt, and Stafford) for the soundtrack of songs penned by Porter Jordan and Jerry Styner. Stafford sings “Sunny Side Up” and “Sunshine Baby.” Director James Wilson blends the music with the action interjecting touches of sly humor along the way. For example, the barnstormers put on a show at a nudist colony, and during a motorcycle jump over a line of volunteers outstretched in the nude, “Sunny Side Up” can be heard over the action.

Lighthearted, yes, but in the interim, the powers-that-be at Melodyland decided not to issue a Stafford follow-up single — “She's Out of Control” b/w “Reba,” again produced by Earl Poole Ball — which had already been assigned a release number (Melodyland ME 6022F). Even more trouble, Motown ditched the Melodyland moniker, and Stafford’s association with the organization ended, as well. Once again an affiliation with a major company dissolved in frustration and unfilled expectations. From this point on, Terry Stafford worked only with independent labels based primarily in Nashville.

Without a record contract, Stafford turned to the road, still focusing on the country music audience. “In 1975, I got [another] band together, including Ron Griffith of the Lively Ones, and we toured Colorado and did local clubs. We had a decent sound, but something happened and the group folded.” He booked himself as a solo act in clubs on the West Coast before resuming his partnership with Johnny Fortune. “[Johnny] traveled with me some and played guitar for me, and also acted as my musical director.” Then it was on to the New England and Canadian circuits with the Don Mayberry Band.

Stafford did cut two tunes for Casino Records, a division of GRT (General Record Taped), the manufacturer of reel-to-reel, 8-track, and cassette tapes. Again produced by Earl Poole Ball, “It Sure Is Bad to Love Her” and “Don’t Knock It Till You’ve Cried It” (Casino GRT-113) are both Stafford originals. The former is a sparsely accompanied version of the same song included on the sweet Gypsy Rose album, the latter, with the clever play-on-words title, is the co-write with Don Epperson previously intended for the unreleased Atlantic album.

“IT Sure Is Bad to Love Her” is another of Stafford’s reflections on a man who finds himself in a relationship with a woman who has the emotional upper hand. “She’s different from any woman that I have ever known / And she can be so good to me when she wants to be but she don’t / People always looking up to her when she’s looking down on me.” “IT Sure Is Bad to Love Her” barely slipped onto “Billboard’s Hot Country Single” Number 94 in March 1977. “I never saw a copy,” Stafford admitted. It would be twelve years before a Stafford record again graced the Billboard country chart.

In the 1980 interview with Robert Dalley, Terry Stafford enthused about recently inking an agreement, once more initiated by John Fisher, with a new company, Frontline/Firstline Records. “After signing with Firstline, I went to Nashville in January of 1980 and recorded a real good album using Tammy Wynette’s recording studio and top-line Nashville session men. It should be out at any time now.”

Two of the songs — “Everybody Loves a Love Song” and “Texas Moon Palace,” a Stafford composition — are paired on a 45 (Firstline FLS-710). “Texas Moon Palace” is a feel-good tip of the hat to the Lone Star State. “So shine on while they’re playing our song / We heard it in Houston and Dallas / But we’ll spend the night where the feeling is right / Here at the Texas Moon Palace.” The single went unnoticed, as for the Firstline album, it never appeared.

Stafford stayed on the road exchanging, for the most part, the nocturnal circuit. “I never booked myself on any ‘oldies and goodies’ shows,” he told Robert Dalley, “because I feel my career has been progressing.” However, he did keep “Suspicion” in his set list much to the delight of live audiences. “I love ‘Suspicion,’ it was the most exciting thing in my life. There is nothing to compare to having your first hit record, especially at the age I was.” In a revealing aside, Stafford confessed, “It is more fun to sing now than it was back in the day.”

During this period, Stafford’s recording activities were intermittent. It is unclear why he decided to wax a couple of gospel numbers in 1983 for little known Eastland Records. With Bob Summers occupying the producer’s chair, Stafford cut “Lord, Can You and Me Get Back Together” and “Life’s Railway to Heaven” (Eastland ERS 101). “Life’s Railway to Heaven” is the venerable nineteenth-century standard. “[Lord Can You and Me Get] Back Together” is one of Stafford’s own. “Lord, can you and me get back together / Can I talk to you like I did when I was young / Oh has it been too long since we’ve been together / Oh can I still get some help from someone.” It was around this time that Ear Poole Ball encountered Stafford at Nadine’s Rodos Tailors in North Hollywood, and the two reminisced about their Nashville experiences. According to Ball, “He was [modestly upbeat] ... still the same Terry I knew.”

John Fisher’s belief in Stafford’s abilities never wavered, either. Stafford also valued his relationship with Fisher. “It seems that most of the success I have had as a singer has been because of John Fisher’s involvement with my career.” In 1985, the two again joined forces at Fisher’s Fish-Wing Music Enterprises. A Fish-Wing press communiqué proclaimed, “TERRY STAFFORD Now Ready To Tour Texas,” furthermore, Nashville record producer John Fisher is hot with a new single on recording artist Terry Stafford on Player International Records.” “Deja Vu” is a Stafford original, and the flipside is a re-recording of “Texas Moon Palace” (Player International Pt-113). This record was the first of four Stafford 45s to be issued by the company over the next four years.

“Love’s Been Hell on Me” b/w “Long Haul Fever” (Player International Pt-115), released the same year, was next. “Love’s Been Hell on Me” was written by Jack Strong, and the subject matter — another man-woman romance gone away — is a familiar one to the Stafford song book. “Long Haul Fever” is Stafford’s contribution to the truck driving school of...
country music. “Two weeks on the road I ain’t had much rest / Truckin’ is my life and I try to do my best.”

While promoting “Love’s Been Hell on Me,” Stafford guested on Nashville Now, the live, nightly television variety show hosted by Ralph Emery on the Nashville Network. Minnie Pearl and Loretta Lynn, sitting in for Emery, engaged Stafford in conversation, and his innate shyness and humility was readily apparent. Twenty-one years after the Dick Clark interview(s) on American Bandstand, Stafford, now a seasoned professional, was obviously still self-conscious in the spotlight, that is until he stood in front of the microphone, where he sang a poised “Love’s Been Hell on Me” and a poignant “Amarillo by Morning.”

John Fisher was also recording demos for independent songwriters, record labels, and publishing companies, and he often had Stafford lay down the vocal tracks when the singer was in Nashville. In 2010, ten of these collaborations surfaced on Terry Stafford’s From Out of the Past (Dorsey Recording 1051). “Love’s Been Hell on Me” was one of the songs. Two others, Lyle H. Austin’s “They’re Growing Grass in the Old Cottonfield” and Jack Smart and Lynn Dorrall Smith’s “Strangers with the Same Last Name,” comprised Stafford’s third Player International 45 (Player International P1-125).

Even though his records attracted little attention, Stafford remained in the public eye. He performed on the syndicated television show Solid Gold in an episode that aired in January 1987. Stafford sang “Suspicion” in the Flashback segment. On February 18, 1989, after a dozen-year hiatus, Stafford reappeared on Billboard’s Hot Country Singles with “Lonestar Lonesome” (Player International P1-134). It hovered at the bottom of the rankings for three weeks, topping out at Number 89. The flipside, “Falling” (It’s a Long Long Way from Hollis, Oklahoma), is one of Stafford’s compositions. “Lonestar Lonesome,” co-written by Steven Stone and John Cunningham, is Stafford’s swan song on the Billboard chart.

The narrator of “Lonestar Lonesome” is currently arrived in Los Angeles, and he has already had to accept the fact that “I may be new in town but I’ve been around just long enough to find / There ain’t a thing in L.A. to ease this cowboy’s mind.” Sitting alone in a bar after one drink too many, the woman he left behind in Houston weighs heavily on his mind. “There’s a love song on the jukebox just like it in Texas / But, girl, there’s no one here just like you … And I’m Lonestar lonesome tonight.” Perhaps Stafford chose “Lonestar Lonesome” because Stone and Cunningham’s lyrics reminded him of his own arrival in the City of Angels nearly thirty years earlier.

There’s no missing the autobiographical flavor of “Falling” (It’s a Long Long Way from Hollis, Oklahoma). First, of course, is the reference to Hollis, Oklahoma, the town where Stafford was born. Then there is the storyline: a young man heads to California “to do some playing … searching for gold.” He meets a woman, who takes him “to her world high on a mountain / Somewhere above Hollywood town.” The singer soon realizes he’s out of his element. “It’s a long, long way from Hollis, Oklahoma / To the top of the Hollywood hills / Her love let me drop to the bottom from the top / And the fall is hurting me still.” He finds neither “gold” nor love. “And if I had a ride I’d be leaving this morning / Back home to those Oklahoma hills.”

“Lonestar Lonesome” and “Falling” are indications that Stafford’s thoughts were increasingly turning to home. In fact, he regularly came back to the Lone Star State to see his family and friends. In a 1973 interview with Globe-Times staff writer George Turner, Stafford proudly acknowledged, “Amarillo always looks beautiful to me, whether it’s windy or not.” Dugg Collins maintained that “had the music opportunities been available in Amarillo that awaited him in Los Angeles, I know he would have never left. Getting back home, even for just a short visit, was always on his mind. He loved Amarillo, Texas.”

In the summer of 1995, Stafford returned to Amarillo for what proved to be the final time. He had been battling liver and kidney ailments for four years, but he was excited about a potential record deal with a company in Dallas. Sadly during the next several months, Stafford’s condition continued to worsen. Hospitalized and placed on a respirator in intensive care, he received few visitors. Dugg Collins would not be denied entrance, however, and he describes their poignant hospital parting: “I said … Terry, I know you can’t speak with that thing in your throat, but just wiggle your fingers to let Ol’ Dugg know that you know I came to see you.” Stafford wiggled his fingers. Collins put his friend’s hand down on the bed and left the room. Terry Stafford, age 54, died a few days later on March 17, 1996. He is buried in the city’s Llano Cemetery.

Success in the entertainment business requires heart, smarts, guts, and luck. Of these requisites, Stafford most certainly had the first three. When asked about the twists and turns in his career, he was straightforward in his reply: “I can’t put my finger on any certain thing that might have hurt my career, but the music industry changed directions at the time ‘Suspicion’ was out and I do think the Beatles and British Invasion on the national music scene affected my career some, as it probably did other American performers at the time.”

Then there were the problems at Crusader Records, which turned out to be a harbinger of what lay ahead: companies shutting down, albums going unreleased, and one-shot record deals. Yet, through all the peaks and valleys, Stafford attempted to maintain a positive attitude, albeit imbued with a stodic acceptance of the vicissitudes of the business itself. Witness the songs he wrote that fit this frame of mind: “Big in Dallas,” “California Dancer,” and “Amarillo by Morning.” Stafford did not alter his singing style, either. The smooth delivery and the subtle inflections allowed him to appeal to both pop and country music audiences. “To me, he was always a superlative ballad singer,” Manassas, Virginia, musicologist Larry Blevins sums up. “Terry’s voice blended Southern roots heritage with cowboy-at-heart Texas soul.” Stafford’s personality and temperament were also constants. As Dugg Collins stated, “I will always remember him for his great talent and his easygoing manner, almost to the point of being shy … Never did see Terry get upset about anything … There was never an ounce of ego in the man’s makeup.”

Earl Poole Ball concurs. “He was a shy and sensitive man … I never saw a big laugh or guffaw, maybe a slight smile now and then. … He was understated like someone who always has something in the back of his mind.”

Don Perry agreed. “[Terry] was a very down to earth guy and more talented than he realized. … The music
After his ordeal with Crusader, it was hard to earn his trust. … In some ways, Terry was his own worst enemy. He wrote some great songs, but he never wanted to turn them over to major publishing companies to pitch to other artists.

companies to pitch to other artists. … I believe he could have been one of the most successful country writer/artists in the business if he had trusted a few more people.”

As for “Suspicion,” Stafford understood that for many listeners the song would always define his career. However, as he made clear, “I do not regard myself as an oldie. … I still have been one of the most successful country writer/artists, personal correspondence with the singer and other associates, along with steadfast support for the project. Pugach’s Country Music Discography (http://countrymusicography.blogspot.com/terry-stafford) and Terry Stafford’s Suspicion Demo Tape (http:// getSystemService/terry) are essential sources for following Terry Stafford’s recording career. 

For additional tips and suggestions, a tip of the hat to Earl Paul Bulk Jr., Daniel Coffey, Doug Collins, Sam Jones, Melody Kelley, Justin Longmire, Jack Pursico, Mike Purus, Tyler Sneed Smith, Mary Helen Spence, and Andy Wilkenson.


“Amarillo By Morning,” The Life and Songs of Terry Stafford, ed. Greg Adams, 45-56.

Terry Stafford’s “Amarillo By Morning” 45-pm. Courtesy Joe W. Specht.
The opening of the Vulcan Gas Company in 1967 marked a significant turning point in the history of music, art, and underground culture in Austin, Texas. Modeled after the psychedelic ballrooms of San Francisco, the Vulcan Gas Company presented the best of local and national psychedelic rock and roll as well as the kings and queens of the blues. The primary medium for advertising performances at the venue was the poster, though these posters were not simple examples of commercial art with stock publicity photos and redundant designs. The Vulcan Gas Company posters — a radical body of work drawing from psychedelia, surrealism, art nouveau, old west motifs, and portraiture — established a blueprint for the modern concert poster and helped articulate the visual language of Austin’s emerging underground scenes.

The Vulcan Gas Company closed its doors in the spring of 1970, but a new decade witnessed the rapid development of Austin’s music scene and the posters that promoted it. Austin’s music poster artists offered a visual narrative of the music and culture of the city, and a substantial collection of these posters has found a home at the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University. The Wittliff Collections presented Homegrown: Austin Music Posters 1967 to 1982 in its gallery in the Alkek Library in 2015. The exhibition was curated by Katie Salzmann, lead archivist at the Wittliff Collections, and Alan Schaefer, a lecturer in the Department of English.
at Texas State University. The exhibition catalog, edited by Alan Schaefer and featuring essays by Texas music and popular culture scholar Joe Nick Patoski and poster artist and scholar Nels Jacobson, was published by the University of Texas Press in March 2015.

The Homegrown exhibition comprises approximately one-hundred and forty posters, handbills, and flyers selected from the Wittliff Collections’ permanent holdings. The Wittliff, an archive and research center located on the campus of Texas State University, is dedicated to the preservation of the cultural, literary, and photographic legacy of the southwestern United States and Mexico. Documenting Texas music and songwriting and the culture that nurtures these endeavors is central to the Wittliff’s mission, and donations of music posters date back to the Wittliff’s founding in 1986.

In the mid-2000s, a colleague of Austinite Tom Wilmore, Sharon Sandomirsky, contacted Dr. Gary Hartman of the Center for Texas Music History at Texas State University and mentioned that Wilmore had expressed interest in placing his poster collection in an archive. Wilmore, who made his way to Austin in 1974 and quickly immersed himself in the city’s nightlife, had amassed a diverse and thorough collection of posters from the era. Hartman visited Wilmore at his home in Austin, looked through the collection, and soon put Wilmore in touch with archivists at the Wittliff. Wilmore donated his collection to them between 2004 and 2008.

Wilmore’s posters serve as the inspiration for Homegrown, and the majority of the exhibition pieces are from his collection. Other items were either donated by or purchased from a number of notable figures in the Austin music scene, with a couple of key pieces on loan from others. The Wittliff Collections already held a selection of posters from music journalist and biographer Joe Nick Patoski; Nancy Coplin, a promoter and booking agent; and Jodie Fischer, a long-time assistant to Willie Nelson. In order to fill out Homegrown, the Wittliff acquired additional posters from Houston White, a founder of the Vulcan Gas Company, and many of the artists themselves, notably Danny Garrett, Sam Yeates, Kerry Ann, Nels Jacobson, and Jesse Sublett. Artist Michael Priest and Bobby Earl Smith, a record producer and bassist and founder of Freda and the Firedogs, both loaned important pieces for the exhibition. These posters complement collections at the Wittliff such as the papers of poster and comic artist Jack Jackson, a.k.a. Jaxon, and the Oat Willie’s collection.

The posters of the Vulcan Gas Company, produced by art directors Gilbert Shelton and Jim Franklin, along with likeminded experimentalists including Tony Bell, Jim Harter, and John Shelton, offered a profound reconsideration of the visual art of blues, soul, and rock and roll. Shelton, the creator of classics of underground comics such as Wonder-Wart-Hog and The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, was the club’s first art director. He introduced the Vulcan crew to split-fountain
inking, a labor-intensive but remarkably striking blending of colors on the same ink roller to achieve a gradual transition from one color to the next. Shelton and company's technical advances lent themselves to the psychedelic aesthetics of the period, and the results rivaled the work of their San Francisco colleagues. Collaborations between Vulcan artists were common, and one sees a notable example with Franklin and Shelton's flyer for a bill featuring Austin acid rockers Conqueroo and Bubble Puppy. Shelton also collaborated successfully with Tony Bell, a colleague of Shelton's at the Texas Ranger, the University of Texas's now defunct student humor magazine that featured a who's who of early 1960s Austin underground movers and comic artists.

Following Gilbert Shelton's departure for San Francisco in 1968, Jim Franklin took over art direction at the Vulcan Gas Company. That same year Franklin introduced the armadillo as a symbol of the Austin underground. Franklin's first flyer featuring the armadillo was for a drug bust benefit at Woolridge Park in downtown Austin, just across the street from the city jail. Rather than try to visually represent the long list of bands booked for the benefit, Franklin chose an image to represent the audience of psychedelic scenesters: an armadillo smoking a joint.

Soon after the Vulcan Gas Company shut its doors in 1970, Austin's new home for adventurous music was established just south of the Colorado River at 525 ½ Barton Springs Road. The Armadillo World Headquarters was a "cultural arts laboratory" spearheaded by Eddie Wilson, the then manager of Austin psychedelic pioneers Shiva's Headband and current owner of Austin's Threadgill's restaurants. Jim Franklin played a key role in the establishment of the Armadillo and produced...
the poster for the opening-night concert that featured Shiva’s Headband. A decade-long experiment in diverse booking practices, the Armadillo helped firmly establish the city as a musical center. A loose collective of artists known as the Armadillo Art Squad, whose ranks included Jim Franklin, Micael Priest, Ken Featherston, Henry Gonzales, Guy Juke, and Sam Yeates, produced posters for the venue that carried the spirit of psychedelia into a new decade and combined it with a surreal take on Texas imagery and unique interpretations of performers’ musical motifs. The Armadillo brought everyone from Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart to Sun Ra and the Ramones to Austin, and artists relished the opportunity to promote and illustrate the various musical offerings. Friendly competition ensued between artists, and a variety of styles were on display. Jim Franklin’s posters offered surreal treatments of bands’ musical aesthetics and lyrical content. Micael Priest, who led Directions Company, Austin’s first counterculture advertising agency, produced dense compositions with remarkable portraiture, comical images of debauchery, and bold lettering. Ken Featherston’s skillful crosshatching resulted in intricate portraits of such Armadillo favorites as Gram Parsons, B.W. Stevenson, and Austin music scene pioneer Kenneth Threadgill. Guy Juke, whose bag of styles was as diverse as any Austin artist, moved seamlessly from comic book-inspired visual narratives to what Micael Priest describes as “cubist bebop.”

The Armadillo World Headquarters was by far the most prominent patron of Austin poster art in the 1970s. However, as the growth of Austin’s music scene accelerated throughout the decade, new venues emerged and poster artists helped develop their visual aesthetics. The Soap Creek Saloon, a rock and roller’s hideout located just outside the Austin city limits, benefited from the monthly calendars produced by...
Kerry Awn, a Houston native who was influenced by the work of Rick Griffin and Ed “Big Daddy” Roth. Awn’s serial body of work for the Soap Creek Saloon reads like a comic book; it is an ongoing chronicle of the bands who performed and the regulars who frequented the out-of-bounds roadhouse. Another artist who offered comic book-inspired sensibilities to music-related visual art is Jack Jackson, a.k.a. Jaxon, one of the key figures in the development of underground comix. His poster for Sir Doug and the Texas Tornados’ Texas Rock for Country Rollers tour features sequential panels advertising each stop on the tour, which included an engagement at Soap Creek where Sir Doug and company were regular performers.

The mid-1970s saw the emergence of East Sixth Street as a home for music venues. First was the Ritz Theater, which was taken over in 1974 by Jim Franklin. Franklin booked a roll call of country, jazz, blues, and rock and roll luminaries. The most notable of Franklin’s Ritz-era posters are his portraits of bluesmen such as Bukka White and Bo Diddley. Franklin’s Ritz Theater was short lived, but an enterprising musician and blues aficionado from the Texas Gulf Coast kept the blues alive on East Sixth Street. Clifford Antone opened his Antone’s nightclub in 1975. Antone’s established itself as a blues institution, and it was Danny Garrett who became the venue’s go-to poster artist. Antone requested respectful portraits of blues performers for his club’s posters, and Garrett obliged with ornate renderings of blues pioneers such as Muddy Waters and B.B. King. Garrett produced a notable body of work for the Austin Opry House, too, which includes posters for Lou Reed, Warren Zevon, and Willie Nelson.

The gradual emergence of punk throughout the 1970s reenergized rock and roll and the visual art that accompanied it. The Ramones at the Armadillo World Headquarters was arguably the first punk concert in Austin, and it was Michael Priest who riffed on the band’s first LP cover for a poster promoting the steamy July 1977 gig. Fellow Armadillo Art Squad stylist Guy Jake lent his ever-evolving style to the new waves of punk and rock and roll with posters for Devo and local punk innovators the Dickies. Rick Turner, whose poster and design work evolved throughout the 1970s, transitioned successfully into the punk era. He produced notable posters for national acts Devo and Patti Smith along with flyers and monthly calendars for Raul’s, Austin’s nascent punk venue, located just across from the University of Texas. Another Raul’s artist, Michael Nott, a.k.a. NOXX, was the most prolific poster artist of Austin’s early punk era. Musicians were getting in on the act, too. Jesse Sublett of the Skunks, one of Austin’s very first punk ensembles, lent his cartoon and collage-inspired skills to a number of flyers. Randy “Biscuit” Turner and Tim Kerr of the Big Boys, Davy Jones of the Next and the Hickoids, and Cam King of the Explosives produced posters and flyers for their own bands’ shows.

Austin’s music posters illuminate the unique artistic and cultural forces from which the city’s identity emerges. Music scholar and poster enthusiast Rush Evans notes, “This kind of poster image is certainly common to many major cities with live music. But in Austin, where the music and its history are so entrenched in the community’s way of life and its economy, there seems to be an incredible interest in the story behind each one.” And while the Homegrown exhibition is now over, the posters remain housed at the Wittliff Collections and are available for students, scholars, art enthusiasts, and music fans to view.

Notes

1. Emerging in the mid-1960s in response to the censorship imposed by the “Comics Code,” underground “comix” were humorous and progressive publications that emphasized counterculture activity, sex, and social malaise. Key figures in the creation and publication of these comix include such notable figures as Robert Crumb, Frank Stack, and Gilbert Shelton. See Michael Pinney, ed., Homegrown: Austin Music Posters 1967 to 1982 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015).


3. Eddie Wilson, interview by Alan Schaefer, October 25, 2013, Austin, TX.

4. Michael Priest, interview by Alan Schaefer, June 7, 2013, San Marcos, TX.

The go-to formulation explaining the existence of the Flatlanders’ music originates from the pithy title to the 1990 release of recordings the band originally made in 1972: more a legend than a band. The problem that has always existed with this is that the stories are tales of how and in whom this legendry applies. For those who followed the Texas singer-songwriter scene closely in the 1970s, the legend of the Flatlanders is a result of songs from the band’s repertoire appearing in the performances and records made by the three primary members (Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Joe Ely, and Butch Hancock) in the years before the release of More a Legend Than a Band. For everything else, the record itself actually inaugurated their mythos—a previously unknown relic to play alongside the collected works of Gram Parsons, among others, at the dawn of “alt-country.”

John T. Davis is well aware of both of these angles of approach to the Flatlanders, and it is to his credit that he discerns them both in New It’s Now Again in order to provide a far more interesting narrative: a band as transitory moment in the lives and careers of a handful of friends brought together in a specific place and time, and emanating outward and outward to the present. Strictly speaking, the place was Lubbock, Texas, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Of course, every band is a product of its place and time. But Davis’s novel approach to band biography is in placing the music of the Flatlanders within a much longer history of the landscape from which they emerged. In the introduction, he acknowledges as much when he writes that “most books about contemporary musicians do not start off with depictions of Plains Indians and tales of Spanish conquistadores journeying over a vast sea of grass.” But if you know anything of the sparseness of West Texas, how could it be any other way with a band that called itself the Flatlanders?

The vast emptiness of a prairie plowed under to cotton and end are as hard to grasp as the West Texas wind. Now the superior performances. Together, they sang in harmony and end are as hard to grasp as the West Texas wind.

Musical sensibility. “There was this house,” Davis writes, and that house was on the edge of the Texas Tech campus. And in that house, Jimmie, Joe, and Butch would play songs long into the night, drawing from each other’s vast repertoire and writing a few new ones along the way.

They played together enough as friends that they accidentally became a band. A man who occasionally played bass with them, Syl Rice—the most professional and concurrently most outside the core group—helped facilitate their recording of some demos in Odessa, Texas. The studio there was better than the one in Lubbock and cheaper than Norman Perry’s across the line in Clovis, New Mexico, where Buddy Holly had recorded before them. Those demos got them a session in Nashville in 1972 with Shelby Singleton, a man who, at the time, owned what was left of Sun Studios, as well as Plantation Records. A single of perhaps their finest song, “Dallas,” was released on that label, though not widely. Supposedly, a few 8-tracks were produced. They played the Kerrville Folk Festival to much acclaim, at least among the few who attended. But rather quickly, they forget about the whole event.

Jimmie Dale Gilmore then headed off to an ashram, and Joe Ely put together a group to rival Doug Sahm’s for its synthesis of all the strains of Texas music and wound up touring with the Clash. Butch Hancock began releasing records on his own label like West Texas Ballads and Dust-Blown Tractor Times that were much admired by fellow songwriters, but little heard at the time.

More than anything, they kept in contact with each other. They played each other’s songs, produced each other’s records, and all played tunes from their brief time as the Flatlanders. When More a Legend Than a Band was issued in 1990, Jimmie, Joe, and Butch were middle-aged men. Davis’s book is unimaginable without the public response to that record, though the nearly forgotten demos that Syl Rice kept all those years, released as The Odessa Tapes in 2012, are probably the superior performances. Together, they sang in harmony like brothers. In the past twenty-five years, which Davis chronicles in great detail, they have “reunited” for albums and performances many times under the Flatlanders moniker, Now It’s Now Again is a fitting title for their story, whose beginning and end are as hard to grasp as the West Texas wind.

—John Cline

Laird also explains the economics behind the show. Under the umbrella of PBS, the program came into its own. However, as public funding for PBS decreased during the 1990s, ACL became increasingly dependent on donor support. Fortunately, donors stepped forward and provided the necessary funding to keep the program afloat. It was from this rocky period that the ACL Music Festival came into being. Looking for a way to bring more live music to the Austin area, as well as a chance to entertain sponsors and increase revenue, ACL’s directors agreed to partner on a music festival based loosely on the television program. The first year was an overwhelming success, and the festival became an area’s premiere annual events. Laird rounds out the book by looking into ACL’s more recent move from Studio 608 on the University of Texas campus to the Moody Theater in downtown Austin.

Adding another layer to the rich musical history of the city, ACL helped define Austin as a unique musical destination. Laird references the One Knite, Barton Springs, the Huns, and Doug Sahm, as well as other names and destinations that fans of Austin music will appreciate. She writes for a popular audience yet produces a scholarly work. Laird interviews producers and managers who were key to the program’s success and examines a number of press releases and set lists.

An impressive amount of research went into what may well become the show’s definitive history. The book is quick and enjoyable read that gives someone interested in ACL Live and Austin music culture a thorough look into a broadcast that has been crucial in Austin’s rise as a major American musical mecca. There are forty black and white photographs interspersed throughout the book that help the reader visualize the subject matter. The book does not, however, offer a history of the ACL Music Festival. Laird examines the festival only to highlight the impact that the television show has had, with a minimal history of the festival itself. Even an expert on Austin music who is familiar with the many musical facets of the city will find new information here. One can hope that an interested reader has a reason interested in the history of Austin City Limits Live and its impact on Austin as a musical destination.
John Cline
is a writing instructor at the University of Texas at Austin. His work has appeared in the Atlantic, Salon, Oxford American, and Los Angeles Review of Books, as well as in various academic publications. He lives in Austin with his LP collection.

Kent Hemphill
is a graduate student in Public History at Texas State University with a concentration in Southwest Studies. His research interests include music and culture in the Southwest, particularly in Texas. Currently working with Professor Dan Utley, Hemphill is compiling oral histories of past Texas State administrators in order to augment the university’s historical record.

Diana Finlay Hendricks
holds an M.A. from Texas State University with an emphasis on Texas music and culture. She perfected a juggling act as a professional journalist, editor, photographer, music developer, publicist, and promoter while co-owner of the historic Cheatham Street Warehouse nightclub for more than two decades. Today she is a regular contributor to Real South Magazine and Lone Star Music and has written about southern food, music, and travel for regional and national publications. www.dianahendricks.com

Alan Schaefer
is a lecturer in the Department of English at Texas State University and a musician. He is the editor of Homegrown: Austin Music Posters 1967 to 1982 (University of Texas Press, 2015).

Joe W. Specht
is former director of the Jay-Rollins Library at McMurray University in Abilene, Texas. He is co-editor of and a contributing author to The Roots of Texas Music (Texas A&M University Press, 2003), and he has authored numerous articles for The Handbook of Texas Music, The Journal of Texas Music History, The Encyclopedia of Country Music, and other publications.