



The Journal of

Volume 8 Number 1

# WESTERN MUSIC HISTORY

The Ball at Rock Museum Celebrates **100 Years of**  
Bob Wills, the King of Western Swing  
Jazz History and the Prairie View Concert  
Festival Goes on West Texas Music

# Letter from the Director



The beginning of the Fall 2002 semester marks the third year since the Center for Texas Music History (formerly the Institute for the History of Texas Music) was officially established in the History Department at Southwest Texas State University. During those three years, the CTMH has compiled an impressive list of accomplishments.

With the help and support of many good people and businesses throughout the Southwest, we have built a unique and important program focusing on the preservation and study of the region's complex and diverse musical heritage. With an emphasis on how Texas music reflects the rich history and tremendous cultural diversity of the Southwest, the CTMH is involved in a variety of educational and preservational activities aimed at helping students, scholars, and the general public better understand this important part of American history and culture.

Our graduate and undergraduate courses on the history of Southwestern music remain very popular. The *Handbook of Texas Music*, which we are publishing jointly with the Texas State Historical Association, the Texas Music Office, and the University of Texas at Austin, will be available in 2003. The online bibliography of books, articles, and other publications on Southwestern music, which our students developed in cooperation with the Texas Music Office, remains a very useful tool for researchers.

Our "Texas Music History Unplugged" concert series has brought to campus such great musicians as Ray Benson, Joe Ely, Tish Hinojosa, Marvin Dykhaus, Terri Hendrix, Lloyd Maines, Joel Guzmán, Ponty Bone, Ruthie Foster, Cyd Cassone, and Willis Alan Ramsey. Through their music, these artists have helped students and others better understand the importance of music to the history and culture of the Southwest. Our community outreach programs, through which we provide educational presentations at public schools, community centers, and other venues, continue to grow.

Our *Travelin' Texas* compilation CDs, which feature such artists as Delbert McClinton, Asleep at the Wheel, Marcia Ball, Eliza Gilkyson, George Strait, Billy Joe Shaver, Sara Hickman, and Ray

Wylie Hubbard, have been very successful. Our third CD, which will feature Jerry Jeff Walker, Rosie Flores, The Flatlanders, and others, will be available soon. Proceeds from the CDs have been vital in helping fund our ongoing educational projects. We are very grateful to the musicians and everyone else who contributed.

We are very pleased to be working closely with the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum, the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, and others to help present the "Country Music from the Lone Star State" exhibit, which will run through January 2003. This issue of the *Journal of Texas Music History* features an in-depth article about the exhibit. I strongly encourage all our readers to visit the Bullock Museum to experience this wonderful presentation on Texas music history.

I am very grateful to the following people for their hard work and generous support: Kathryn Ledbetter, Gregg Andrews, Vikki Bynum, Jenni Finlay, Dawn Shepler, Ann Marie Ellis, Gene Bourgeois, the entire SWT History Department, the CTMH Board of Advisors, the Joan and Herb Kelleher Charitable Foundation, Becky Huff, Gerald Hill, T.Cay Rowe, Diana Harrell, César Limón, Rick and Laurie Baish, Lucky and Becky Tomblin, Kim and Robert Richey, Jo and Paul Snider, Margie First, Darrell and Barbara Piersol, Tracie Ferguson, Phil and Cecilia Collins, Ralph and Patti Dowling, Jerry and Cathy Supple, Dennis and Margaret Dunn, John Kunz, Kent Finlay, Don Anders, Billy Seidell, Pat Jasper, David Dennard at Dragon Street Records, Texas Folklife Resources in Austin, the Texas Heritage Music Foundation in Kerrville, the Texas Music Museum in Austin, the Museum of American Music History-Texas in Houston, the New Braunfels Museum of Art and Music, and everyone else who has contributed to the success of the Center for Texas Music History. We believe the work we're doing is very important, and we need the ongoing support of others to continue our success.

I invite you to contact us for more information or to become involved in this unique and exciting program.

Sincerely,

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**The Journal of Texas Music History** is published Fall and Spring by the Center for Texas Music History at Southwest Texas State University. The contents of this journal do not necessarily represent the views of the University.

**Subscription** Annual subscription rates for the United States and North America are \$10. For outside of North America, please add \$5. Address subscription correspondence to, SWT Department of History, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666.

**Article Submissions** Please submit manuscripts by e-mail in Microsoft Word, Chicago Style, to KLedbetter@swt.edu. Kathryn Ledbetter, Editor, Department of English, Southwest Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666.

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ISSN 1535-7104



<http://ecommons.txstate.edu/jtmh/vol2/iss2/1>

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The Center for Texas Music History is a nonprofit educational program designed to help students and the general public better understand how music reflects the richly diverse ethnic and cultural heritage of the American Southwest. Within its first two years, the Center has developed a number of very successful projects focusing on the preservation and study of Southwestern music history.

In order to continue this success, we need your help. Your contribution will help fund continued publication

of *The Journal of Texas Music History*, along with all the other important educational and preservational projects we have underway.

We are very grateful to the donors listed on this page. They have made a personal commitment to preserving the musical heritage of the Southwest. Their efforts will help us continue to increase awareness of how Texas music represents the unique historical development of the region.

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Order yours now for only \$10 each!

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# **The Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum Celebrates Texas Country Music**

Gary Hartman



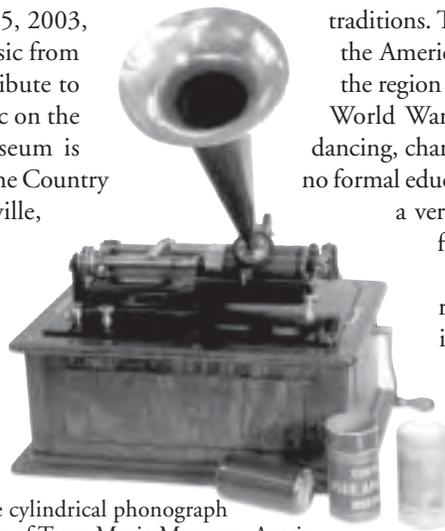
*Since it opened in April 2001, the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum has hosted a variety of exhibits and educational events designed to promote the understanding of the Lone Star State's unique and complex history. The impressive four-story museum, located at the corner of Congress Avenue and Martin Luther King, Jr., Boulevard in Austin, includes 34,000 square feet of exhibit space, along with a 200-seat "Spirit of Texas" performance theater and a 400-seat IMAX theater. Although individual exhibit areas emphasize particular themes in Texas history, the collective focus of the museum is on telling "the Story of Texas" by celebrating the richly diverse traditions of the state and the many people who have made it their home over the past several centuries.*

*The author would like to thank Pat Jasper, guest curator of the "Country Music from the Lone Star State" exhibit, for assistance with this article.*

From September 28, 2002, until January 5, 2003, the Bullock Museum features “Country Music from the Lone Star State,” an exhibit that pays tribute to the important impact of Texas country music on the state and on the world. The Bullock Museum is presenting this exhibit in collaboration with the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, the Texas State History Museum Foundation, the Center for Texas Music History at Southwest Texas State University, the Texas Music Office, KLRU/Austin City Limits, the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin, and others.

Organized into twelve interconnected display areas, the exhibit provides an overview of the evolution of country music in Texas from the early nineteenth century to the present. In addition to the exhibit, the Museum has arranged a series of special afternoon and evening programs, in which prominent scholars, musicians, and members of the music community will perform and discuss the history of Texas country music.

Although it is sometimes under-appreciated as a medium of cultural and historical expression, music has played a vital role in helping all ethnic communities articulate their beliefs, values, and



Vintage cylindrical phonograph courtesy of Texas Music Museum, Austin.

traditions. This has been especially the case throughout the American Southwest, since most ethnic groups in the region had relatively low rates of literacy until after World War II. Music, which could include singing, dancing, chanting, and a variety of other forms, required no formal education or training. Consequently, it served as a very “democratic” form of cultural expression for most individuals and communities.

Beginning with Native Americans in the region, music has always played a central role in the lives of Texans. For most people, music was, and still is, an important part of nearly every aspect of daily life, including work, play, birth, death, courtship, marriage, child rearing, religious worship, patriotic celebration, and countless other activities. Music also has served as an important means of communicating

information and ideas from one generation to the next and from one ethnic group to another. In fact, part of what makes Texas music so unique and vibrant is the “cross-pollination” of different ethnic musical styles, including blues, gospel, conjunto, cajun, polka, country, jazz, and others, as they have mixed and mingled together over the years. Because of unique ethnic, as well as geographic, economic, cultural, political, and economic factors, Texas music, including country music, has developed a distinct sound, different in many ways from the music of other regions.

Whether it is used to help express ideas, information, culture, history, or, simply as a means for having fun, music has long permeated all aspects of Texans’ lives. It is clear that the true “Story of Texas” cannot be fully told without discussing the music that has played such a vital role in the historical and cultural development of the state and region. The “Country Music from the Lone Star State” exhibit highlights these historical roots of Texas country music. With an emphasis on the important contributions made by men and women of all ethnic and social backgrounds, the Bullock exhibit celebrates the uniqueness of Texas music and the impact it has had on shaping American culture.

*Note: This Article may be used as a guide. Its sequence follows the exhibit layout.*

### ***T For Texas, T For Tennessee: The Southern Roots of Lone Star Country***

The exhibit begins with a section entitled “T For Texas, T For Tennessee,” which examines early nineteenth-century Anglo migration into the Spanish province of Tejas from the American South, especially Tennessee. During this period, early English-speaking immigrants, such as Davy Crockett, brought into the region music that was rooted in the folk traditions of the British Isles but already had undergone significant changes in the unique environment of the American South. The music continued to evolve in important ways on the Texas frontier. Numerous styles



Sheet music courtesy of Texas Music Museum, Austin.

# "Country Music from the Lone Star State"

## Schedule of Special Events

that became integral to Texas music, from fiddle breakdowns to gospel, can be traced to the early musical traditions of the American South, but they also clearly reflect changes resulting from the unique influences present in Texas and the Southwest.

The South continued to have a strong influence on the musical evolution of Texas throughout the twentieth century. Perhaps one of the best examples of this is Jimmie Rodgers, a native of Meridian, Mississippi. Often called the "Father of Country Music," Rodgers composed numerous hit songs, including "Blue Yodel Number #1," also known as "T for Texas, T for Tennessee." During his early career, Rodgers toured throughout Texas. He spent the last four years of his life in Kerrville before dying of tuberculosis in 1933 at the age of 35.

Rodgers's music influenced a wide range of Texas artists, including Ernest Tubb. In fact, Tubb started his career as a Jimmie Rodgers imitator, but went on to develop his own distinct sound as a pioneer of the Texas "honky-tonk" style that gained national popularity during and immediately after World War II. Visitors to the exhibit can view photos of these Texas music pioneers, along with other rare items, including a fiddle that belonged to Davy Crockett.

### *If You Want To Play In Texas, You Gotta Have a Fiddle In The Band*

The fiddle has always played an important role in Texas country music, and its legacy is well-represented in the "Country Music from the Lone Star State" exhibit. Barn dances and other gatherings almost always featured a fiddle as the prominent instrument, and, fiddle contests provided an important opportunity for local musicians to demonstrate their skills. Texas fiddler Eck Robertson is believed to have made the very first commercial country recording in 1922 with two old fiddle tunes named "Sally Goodin" and "Arkansas Traveler." The unique Texas style of fiddling has continued to evolve, as western swing, pioneered by Bob Wills, Milton Brown, and others, emerged during the 1930s and incorporated the improvisational techniques of African-American jazz and blues. Today, the fiddle is as important as ever to Texas country music. A variety of Texas fiddling styles can be heard on recordings, in live performances, and at fiddle contests throughout the Southwest. The exhibit includes a collection of fiddles from Bob Wills, Johnny Gimble, and other famous Texas fiddlers, as well as posters and other memorabilia that pay tribute to the importance of the fiddle in Texas country music.

### *Whose Country/ Who Is Country? Country Music and the Texas Ethnic Mix*

In keeping with its overall focus on the cultural diversity of the state's history, the Bullock Museum has included in this exhibit a tribute to the diverse influences that have helped shape Texas music. Although country music often is thought of as the music of rural, white southerners, it is actually an amalgamation of many different ethnic musical genres. Many of the traditional ballads and fiddle tunes are based on the folk culture of the

### "Sounds of Texas" performance series

(free with museum admission)

Held in the performance area of the "Country Music from the Lone Star State" exhibit, First Floor of the Bullock Museum.

- "Waltz across Texas"

*Saturday, September 28 & Sunday, Oct. 13, 1-4 pm*

Two-step, swing, and yes-waltz, your way through Texas times. Learn a few steps and dance along to live music as we explore the history of some of our favorite moves.

- "Border Radio"

*Saturdays, November 2, December 7 & January 5, 1 - 4 pm*

Texas history meets vaudeville in this live interactive performance of the sounds and songs of early radio from the border. Meet the authors of *Border Radio*, Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, as they "host" a radio broadcast featuring legendary figures from the past and even some local legends-to-be.

### "The Spirit of Country Music" performance series:

Held in the "Spirit of Texas Theater," Second Floor of the Bullock Museum.

*Series Tickets (for all 3 programs): \$25 Museum Members, \$30 Non-members. Individual Tickets: \$10 Museum Members, \$12 Non-members. To reserve tickets, call (512) 936-4649.*

- "A Fiddle in the Band,"

*Wednesday, October 2, 2002, 7 - 9 pm*

Hear some of Texas's greatest fiddle players from across generations performing live, including Johnny Gimble, Dick Gimble, Randy Elmore, and Jason Roberts. Hosted by Lynn Denton, Director of the Bullock Museum. Moderated by John Wheat from the UT Center for American History.

- "Texas Women in Country,"

*Wednesday, October 30, 2002, 7 - 9 pm*

Moderated by Pat Jasper, guest curator of the "Country Music from the Lone Star State" exhibit, and Gary Hartman, Director of the Center for Texas Music History, this special event showcases some of Texas's best female country musicians on a variety of instruments, with performances by Kelly Willis, Rosie Flores, Valerie Ryles-O'Brian, Lisa Pancratz, and Cindy Cashdollar.

- "Honky Tonk Hall of Fame,"

*Wednesday, November 6, 2002, 7 - 9 pm*

Country Music Hall of Famer Floyd Tillman will perform. This living legend will share his experiences as one of the originators of the "honky-tonk" sound in a lively discussion hosted by Casey Monahan, Director of the Texas Music Office, and moderated by Joe Nick Patoski of *Texas Monthly* with Austin favorite Roger Wallace and special guests Johnny Gimble and Dick Gimble.

### "An Evening with Bill Malone: The Culture of Texas Country Music"

*Friday November 22, 2002, 6:00-8:00 pm*

Held in the "Spirit of Texas Theater," Second Floor of the Bullock Museum. Bill Malone, internationally recognized scholar of country music history and author of the new book *Don't Get Above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class*, will discuss the diverse ethnic and cultural influences that have helped shape Texas country music over the years. Guest moderator will be Gary Hartman, Director of the Center for Texas Music History at Southwest Texas State University. Austin area educators and their students are invited to attend this free educational seminar. The general public may also attend by special reservation. For more information, please contact Angela Davis or Heather Lewis at (512) 936-4625 or e-mail: [angela.davis@TheStoryofTexas.com](mailto:angela.davis@TheStoryofTexas.com)



Sheet music courtesy of Texas Music Museum, Austin.

British Isles, but country music also has borrowed heavily from African, Mexican, German, Czech, French, and other ethnic musical traditions. This is especially so in Texas, since it had a more ethnically diverse population than other southern states.

Jimmie Rodgers, who was perhaps the most influential figure in shaping early twentieth-century country music, spent his boyhood working alongside black railroad workers and learning to play and sing blues, gospel, and other African-American styles of music. Rodgers's songs reflected these strong influences and helped set the stage for generations of younger country artists to incorporate African-American traditions into their music.

Because of its tremendous ethnic diversity, Texas country music absorbed an even greater variety of other ethnic influences than did the rest of the South. This included Mexican guitar and mariachi horn stylings, German and Czech waltzes, polkas, and "schottisches" (a German interpretation of the Scottish "highland fling"), and Cajun French fiddle and accordion music. Perhaps because of its multi-ethnic origins, Texas country music appeals to a wide variety of people from all generations, races, and ethnic groups throughout the world. This part of the exhibit includes a wealth of photos, recordings, sheet music, posters, instruments, and other items representing the diverse ethnic roots of Texas country music.

### ***Call of the Cowboy***

Country music owes much of its sound and its imagery to the Texas cowboy, and he is well-represented in the "Country Music from the Lone Star State" exhibit. Although the great cattle drives of the late 1800s only lasted about twenty years, the cowboy has become an international icon representing the pioneering spirit of Texas and the American West. Despite

popular images of the "typical" cowboy as being Caucasian, about half were of Mexican, African, Asian, or Native-American descent, and all borrowed from Mexican, German, African, and American Indian traditions in terms of clothing, equipment, food, ranching techniques, vocabulary, and music.

Cowboys were a diverse bunch, but, by the early twentieth century, their music had evolved into a distinct sound that was recognized by early folklorists, such as Texan John Lomax, who visited working ranches to collect and record the music of the cowhands. Lomax's 1910 publication of *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* helped fuel the public's fascination with frontier life and reinforced the romantic image of the rugged cowboy as a lonely hero of the American West.

With the advent of "talking pictures" in the early twentieth century, Hollywood quickly capitalized on the near-mythic



Tex Ritter, courtesy of David Dennard and Dragon Street Records.

cowboy image. Movies that featured such "singing cowboys" (and cowgirls) as Texans Gene Autry, Tex Ritter, and Dale Evans, were hugely popular and helped spawn legions of imitators and admirers. Although many of the "Hollywood cowboys" had never had much direct experience in the cattle business, many country recording stars, including Carl Sprague, Jules Verne Allen, Don Edwards, and George Strait, had spent considerable time on Texas ranches living the life they sang about. Today, the image of the Texas cowboy continues to resonate through popular country music and through American culture as a whole. This potent image is reflected in the impressive array of items included

in this part of the exhibit, such as clothing and assorted paraphernalia from Tex Ritter, Dale Evans, Gene Autry, and others.

### *Reaching Out Through Records and Radio*

The powerful role mass media played in transforming music is also highlighted in the exhibit. By the early twentieth century, records and radio, along with movies, became important forces in the growing movement toward mass marketing popular music. Country music, which had long been considered a “regional” music unique to the South and Southwest, soon was being played on radio stations, in movie houses, and on living room phonographs throughout North America. Southern gospel music had always been a close cousin of country music. Gospel also reached new levels of national popularity through records and radio broadcasts. In fact, it became so popular, that country music radio stations and bands began incorporating gospel as a standard part of their repertoire.

By the 1920s, musicians, agents, and record labels were aggressively marketing all forms of popular music, including country music. Radio stations also quickly recognized the power of mass communication in selling products. Most aspired to dominate local radio markets, and, they matched corporate sponsors with musical groups who could help advertise and sell goods to listeners. For example, Bob Wills, Milton Brown, and others formed the highly successful “Light Crust Doughboys” in the early 1930s in order to help sell Burrus Mills Light Crust Flour over the radio.

Some radio stations staged live broadcasts at large dance halls as a way to capture the excitement of a live performance and broadcast it to a wider regional audience. In 1923, WBAP Radio in Fort Worth became perhaps the first radio station in the nation to sponsor a live country music “barn dance.” This format proved so popular,

that other stations soon launched similar programs, such as WSM’s “Grand Ole Opry” in Nashville. The “Big ‘D’ Jamboree” in Dallas was one of the best-loved radio shows of the 1940s through the 1960s and regularly featured top names in the country music field. Some stations set up just across the border in Mexico in order to avoid U.S. regulations on broadcasting. These so-called “border radio” stations broadcast very strong signals that often could be heard as far north as Canada.

The Texas recording industry also played an important role in popularizing country music. Texas recording pioneers, such as Pappy Daily, Dewey Grooms, and Jim Beck, helped launch the careers of some of country music’s biggest stars, including George Jones, Lefty Frizzell, Ray Price, and Marty Robbins. Through records, radio, and movies, Texas helped bring country music to the nation and the world. Country music would no longer be considered a regional music, but, instead, an integral part of American popular culture. Here, visitors can see vintage radios, broadcasting equipment, records, songbooks, posters, and other items related to country music and mass media.



Vintage radio courtesy of Texas Music Museum, Austin.



Pappy Daily (left). Courtesy of David Dennard and Dragon Street Records.

### *Expressly Texas: The Western Swing and Honky Tonk Traditions*

Although Texas music has borrowed from a variety of other regional genres, the unique social, cultural, economic, and political environment of the state has given birth to musical hybrids that are “expressly Texas.” Western swing and honky tonk, two sub-genres of country music that developed within the remarkable musical climate of Texas and the Southwest, are explored fully in the exhibit.

Western swing may be the most eclectic amalgamation of musical styles in country music. Pioneered in the 1930s by such Texas musicians as Bob Wills and Milton

Brown, western swing drew on the old fiddling traditions first brought to the Southwest by nineteenth-century Anglo settlers from the Deep South. However, Wills, Brown, and other western swing musicians also had absorbed numerous other diverse musical influences during their early lives, including blues, gospel, ragtime, jazz, conjunto, mariachi, and polka, and, they easily integrated all these styles into the new sound they were developing. In fact, many of these western swing players were so fond of diverse musical styles that they frequented nightclubs in traditionally black neighborhoods, such as Dallas's "Deep Ellum," to learn blues and jazz techniques that they could incorporate into their own playing.

Western swing, like all art forms, also was a product of the social and economic climate of its time. As the Great Depression of the 1930s worsened, western swing bands had to appeal to the broadest audience possible in order to remain employed on radio and in the nightclub circuit. Consequently, they had to build on their already eclectic musical tastes to create a very broad and diverse repertoire of songs that everyone would enjoy. The result was a style of music that ranged widely from slow ballads to upbeat big band swing, and from fiddle breakdowns to blues, shuffles, and polkas. Western swing remains very popular today. Such swing bands as Asleep at the Wheel and Alvin Crow keep dance floors packed throughout the country, and, the Bob Wills Festival, held each spring in his boyhood home of Turkey, Texas, continues to draw thousands of fans every year.

Honky tonk is another hybrid form of Texas country music that owes much of its character to the social and economic changes that took place before, during, and after World War II. Named after the beer joints and nightclubs in which it was born, honky tonk reflected America's rapid move toward a more urban and industrialized society.

With the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, alcohol was once again openly available, and neighborhood taverns flourished. By the time the United States officially entered World War II in 1941, American industry was undergoing dramatic growth. Texas led the way in many aspects of industrial growth, and, it was in the Lone Star State that the honky-tonk style first came to represent the music of a new generation of urban workers. From the oil fields of West Texas to the petroleum refineries along the Texas Gulf Coast, and, in hundreds of towns in between, industry was booming, and, thousands of Texans were moving from the countryside into the cities to find jobs.

Along with this rapid shift from an agrarian lifestyle to an urban-industrial one, social customs also were quickly changing. The unfamiliar new environment of industrial employment, the pressures of urban living, changes in the social structure of the family, and increasing exposure to new ideas and moral values proved very unsettling for many Americans. The newly-emerging genre of music known as honky tonk reflects these anxieties. Honky-tonk songs often centered on themes of alcohol abuse, marital infidelity, divorce, unemployment, social alienation, and a longing for an earlier, and supposedly more simple, rural lifestyle. Texas musicians, such as Al Dexter, Ernest Tubbs, Floyd

Tillman, Lefty Frizzell, Helen Hall, George Jones, and Hank Thompson, set the tone for honky tonk and soon made it a national phenomenon.

Technology also played an important role in the growing popularity of honky tonk. Electronic amplification and public address systems (PAs) allowed honky-tonk bands to develop a more hard-driving sound that could be performed before much larger audiences. The introduction of jukeboxes also made it possible for virtually any neighborhood bar to provide its customers with the newest country hits. Thanks to improvements in radio broadcasting and record production, along with the proliferation of jukeboxes, it soon became possible to travel anywhere in the United States and hear the most popular honky-tonk stars singing their latest hit songs.

The honky-tonk tradition is still alive and well in Texas, thanks to Johnny Bush, George Strait, the Derailers, and countless other talented artists. Items ranging from Bob Wills and the Light Crust Doughboys' stage outfits to Lefty Frizzell's boots and Ray Benson's custom-made guitar help provide visitors with a vivid display of the swing and honky-tonk traditions.

### *Go West (Texas): Where the Country Becomes Rock*

The entire state has contributed to the unique development of Texas music in important ways. However, West Texas serves here as an example of how certain factors can combine to contribute to a distinct regional musical environment. In the case of West Texas, some of the most influential American musicians of the 1950s and 1960s, specifically Buddy Holly, Roy Orbison, and Charlene Arthur, drew from the strong



Hank Thompson, courtesy of David Dennard and Dragon Street Records.

crosscurrents of country and rock and roll to create their distinct musical styles. These artists' early musical careers were rooted in country, but they were quickly drawn toward the newly developing rock and roll genre. Because of the ways in which these musicians bridged these two musical forms, they would have a profound influence on shaping rock and roll history and in forging links between country music and rock and roll.



Roy Orbison & Charlene Arthur.  
Courtesy of David Dennard and Dragon Street Records.

Over the years, West Texas has produced a remarkable number of other influential musicians, as well, including Bob Wills, Waylon Jennings, Guy Clark, Tanya Tucker, Larry Gatlin, Mac Davis, Kimmie Rhodes, Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, and Butch Hancock, all of whom represent the unique cultural environment of that part of the state. This part of the exhibit includes rare letters to Buddy Holly from his fans, along with Roy Orbison's glasses and high school yearbook.

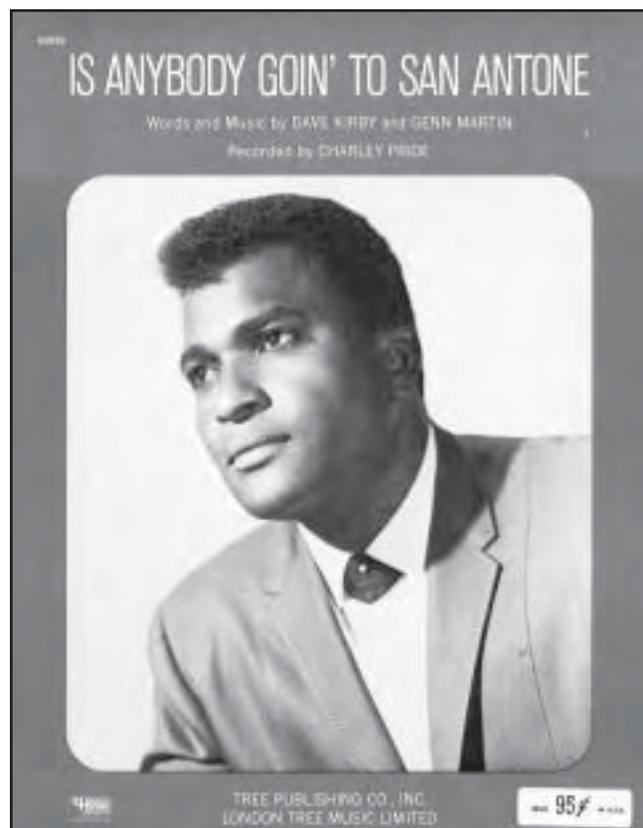
### ***Outlaws and Austin City Limits: New Media and Progressive Country***

At first glance, rock and roll and country music may seem to be somewhat incompatible. However, since rock and roll emerged on the national music scene in the 1950s, it has had a symbiotic relationship with country music. The two musical forms often have borrowed from each other and blended together in unique and sometimes surprising ways. The progressive

country music movement of the 1970s is a good example of how traditional country and the sometimes "rebellious" elements of rock and roll were fused together to create a new sub-genre that helped redefine American popular music. Since Austin was the epicenter for the progressive country movement, it seems only fitting to honor this unique musical hybrid in the Bullock Museum just blocks from the State Capitol.

Progressive country, sometimes referred to as "redneck rock," was largely a result of the strong traditions of country music in Texas merging with the music of the 1960s "hippie" movement. It began in the early 1970s, as Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and other well-established country singers grew frustrated with what they considered to be the Nashville recording industry's overly restrictive policies regarding artistic freedom and marketing priorities. These artists were looking for a new environment in which they would be free to create and perform as they wished. Austin, with its large college student population and its active nightlife, seemed to provide the ideal setting for this innovative breed of musicians.

Nelson returned to his native Texas, where he helped lead a growing cadre of musicians who blended together country, rock, and blues in such venues as Austin's Armadillo World Headquarters and Soap Creek Saloon. Along with Waylon Jennings, Jerry Jeff Walker, Kinky Friedman, Freda (aka Marcia Ball) and the Firedogs, Michael Murphey, Tracie Nelson, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Commander Cody and the Lost Planet Airmen, and others, Nelson helped create a vibrant blend of country



Sheet music courtesy of Texas Music Museum, Austin.

and rock that appealed to audiences of all backgrounds and forced the Nashville recording industry to embrace a broader range of musical styles.

As had been the case with previous innovations in music, technology played a crucial role in popularizing progressive country. Radio, television, and movies helped spread the music and the images associated with progressive country throughout the United States and around the globe. The PBS-based live music series *Austin City Limits*, which started in 1975, took the lead in documenting and promoting Texas music and musicians. Over the years, *Austin City Limits* has built an international reputation for quality musical programming and for helping launch the careers of some of the most influential Texas musicians of recent years. Visitors to this display area will be treated to video clips from the legendary live music program, as well as a variety of items belonging to the stars of this era.

### ***When You're Hot, You're Hot: Crossover and the Contemporary Country Top Ten***

As early as the 1920s, country music was expanding beyond its traditional southern borders and becoming a nationally, and internationally, popular form of music. Since that time, country artists have continued to reach across musical boundaries to attract fans from a broad range of backgrounds and musical tastes. Although purists may decry the commercial marketing of country music, it is important to remember that, even many of the early pioneers of "traditional" country music actively sought opportunities to capitalize on their music and build financially successful careers.

Texas has produced many talented country artists who have had tremendous success in "crossing over" to broader markets. Jim Reeves, Ray Price, Barbara Mandrell, Charley Pride, Kenny Rogers, George Strait, Leann Rimes, Clint Black, Pat Green, and others have blended traditional country with pop, rock and roll, and other styles as a way to appeal to a larger audience and to revitalize country music as it continues to evolve. This part of the exhibit includes outfits from Jim Reeves, the Dixie Chicks, and George Strait, as well as photos and posters of other Texans whose music has had enormous appeal outside of the traditional country market.

### ***Deep Within My Heart Lies a Melody: The Texas Songwriting Tradition***

Songwriting always has been a vital part of the Texas music scene, and this segment of the exhibit examines the role of songwriters in the evolution of country music. From the earliest settlers in Texas, who reinterpreted traditional ballads to fit their new surroundings, to today's seasoned professional songwriters, Texans have been among the most influential and prolific songwriters in country music. For many Texans of all backgrounds, music has provided a "voice" for expressing the joys and sorrows of everyday life.

The state's unique environment has given its music a distinct character, and this is clearly represented in Texas songwriting

traditions. Texas cowboys reshaped older songs according to their own experiences. Blues and gospel music underwent important changes in their migration from the South into the Southwest. "Transplanted" musicians, such as Jimmie Rodgers, were significantly affected by having spent time in Texas, and their music reflects those influences.

Texas songwriters also have had a profound impact on shaping mainstream country music. Cindy Walker, who wrote many of Bob Wills's most popular songs, helped bring western swing to a national audience. Ernest Tubb, Floyd Tillman, Lefty Frizzell, George Jones, and Buck Owens popularized honky tonk, with their graphic depictions of life in a more urban, industrialized setting. By contrast, Roger Miller has had a very successful career writing humorous country and pop songs.

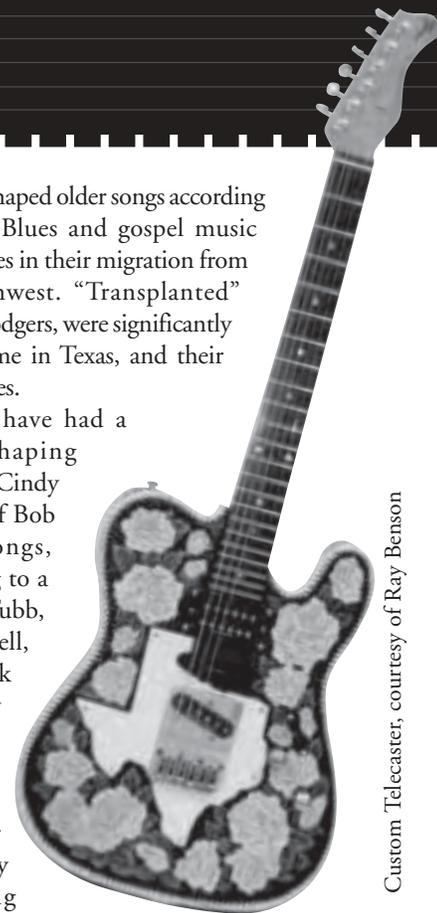
Willie Nelson, Jerry Jeff Walker, Michael Martin Murphey, Waylon Jennings, Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark, Billy Joe Shaver, and others have been some of the most productive and influential songwriters of the past thirty years.

A younger generation of Texas songwriters already has proven that it can uphold the high standards set by those who came before. Lyle Lovett, Robert Earl Keen, Tish Hinojosa, Steve Earl, Nancy Griffith, Bruce Robison, Clay Blaker, Kelly Willis, and many others are continuing the strong tradition of Texas songwriting. This display includes handwritten lyrics from Jerry Jeff Walker, a songwriting notebook from Townes Van Zandt, and Willie Nelson's first songbook, in which the eleven-year-old child prodigy already was composing songs about love and heartache.

### ***Waltz Across Texas: From Ranch Dance to Line Dance***

Dancing is an important part of music in all societies, and Texas is certainly no exception. This section of the exhibit pays tribute to that passion Texans always have shared for dancing. Well before Europeans arrived in the region, Native Americans celebrated their culture through both music and dance. As Spanish, English, German, French, African, and other ethnic groups arrived in the area, they brought with them a strong tradition of singing and dancing.

In Texas, dancing has always provided an opportunity for courting, socializing, demonstrating physical prowess, and escaping from the rigors of everyday life. Early settlers would travel many miles to attend barn dances or house dances. As towns grew, more and more community centers, dance halls,



Custom Telecaster, courtesy of Ray Benson

and nightclubs became available for dancing. Although modern urban dance halls are usually more “adult-oriented,” many rural venues still reflect their very family-oriented origins. On almost any weekend night, you can find dozens of rural dance halls throughout Texas in which families, couples, and single people gather to talk, drink, play, and dance. The exhibit’s display of posters, neon beer signs, and other paraphernalia provide the authentic feel of a Texas dance hall.

### ***Instrumentally Texas Country: What the Pickers Pick***

The “Country Music from the Lone Star State” exhibit concludes with a look at the important role instruments themselves have had in shaping country music. Although it may not be evident at first glance, the broad range of musical instruments and the ways in which they have been played have helped give Texas country music its unique sound.

Early settlers of all ethnic backgrounds had to make use of instruments that were easily accessible, highly portable, and loud enough to be heard in a crowded tavern or dance hall. Fiddles, guitars, and mandolins all fit the bill and became the instruments of choice. The ways in which these instruments were arranged together required the musicians to be innovative in terms of who would play rhythm, melody, harmony, and other parts. Instrumental duets, such as “twin fiddles” commonly used in western swing, grew out of the creative use of available instruments.

As the twentieth century brought electronic amplification and other technological innovations, musicians were freed from earlier concerns over volume and portability and could focus on improving technical skills and expanding the range of instrumentation. Electric guitars and pedal steel guitars soon became standard instruments in country bands. New performing and recording technology allowed musicians to continue innovating and redefining the role of instruments in Texas country music. Here, museum visitors will see guitars, mandolins, drums, and other instruments played by such notable Texas musicians as Herb Remington, Tiny Moore, and Buck Owens.

With its broad scope and engaging format, the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum’s “Country Music from the Lone Star State” exhibit provides a wonderfully entertaining and thought-

provoking presentation on the history of country music in Texas and the Southwest. With a variety of displays and special programs scheduled throughout the duration of the exhibit, visitors of all ages and backgrounds will enjoy exploring the unique musical heritage that is such an important part of Texas. ■

The Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum is located at 1800 North Congress Avenue, Austin, TX 78701. The museum is open Monday-Saturday 9:00AM to 6:00PM and Sunday 1:00 to 6:00PM. For more information, please call 512-936-4601 or visit the museum’s website at: [www.TheStoryofTexas.com](http://www.TheStoryofTexas.com)



# Bob Wills:

## The King of Western Swing

Rush Evans<sup>1</sup>



*In the 1930s, America was immersed in the great economic Depression, but it was also experiencing a technological and cultural explosion. The motorized transportation and the new electronic media would forever change the world. And yet, from the Midwest to the Pacific Ocean, we were still a developing, open, agricultural wild land. The music that had been carried through the folk tradition continued being passed down through the families that had worked the land, the families who had faced dust storms and other hindrances to their hard work west of the Mississippi.*

But music was reaching those folks with the help of new technology, too. Radio changed things. It created national celebrities, musicians who took folk tunes and dressed them up, giv-

America's soulful blues and rhythmic jazz. "People from that area and that day and time, you think would be prejudiced, (but) he didn't seem to have a bit of prejudice," Bob's daughter, Rosetta,

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*Jim Rob Wills was only ten years old in 1915 when he fiddled at his first dance there in Hall County, being called to fill in for his drunken daddy.*

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ing them class and widespread acceptance. The strong identities with the common man and his work stayed in the music, but a new sound was creeping into it, with more structured arrangements and melodies to dance to.

The sound had been coming on for some time, with the earlier recordings of the "Singing Brakeman," Jimmie Rodgers, paving the way for cowboy singers like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. These were the musical heroes for the rest (or west) of the country, while other musical varieties developed a little further east, as Nashville, Tennessee, became the spiritual home of all country music.<sup>2</sup>

And then there was Texas. Everything always seemed a little different in Texas, and maybe it still does. Besides California and Hawaii, it was the only state that had once been a nation, and a spirit of individualism had flourished in its people for years. That iconoclastic attitude could even be found up around the Texas Panhandle and the Cap Rock Canyons, hundreds of Texas miles from the Alamo and the state capital. Truly, it was in the middle of nowhere, the unlikely little Texas town of Turkey, that folk, country, cowboy, jazz, and blues began to mix together in the mind of a young man who would lead the way in a sound we now call Western Swing.

Jim Rob Wills was only ten years old in 1915 when he fiddled at his first dance there in Hall County, being called to fill in for his drunken daddy, also the son of a fiddler.<sup>3</sup> It was the first of thousands of nights on stage over the next six decades. Jim Rob would not realize until much later that playing the fiddle would be his true calling and the most basic element in his eventual Wall of Western Sound.

Young Jim Rob Wills held a series of jobs before adding that of Professional Musician to his resume, including selling insurance and preaching "the Word." But, for a while, he settled into a job at Turkey's barber shop, a job he took seriously enough that he completed barber college. Music had always been in his family and was still a big part of Jim Rob's life when he went into the Dallas-Fort Worth area in 1929 looking for work as a barber. Despite the Depression, he was lucky enough to find work in music as a "black face" fiddler with a medicine show. It was an interestingly ironic career move (by today's standards) for the young man who had already made music with black friends back home, whose jazz and blues influence would be heard his entire career.<sup>4</sup>

Blackface performances were common at the time, though playing and working with black children in the cotton fields was not. This was exactly how Jim Rob had been exposed to black

observed. "He had a lot of respect for the musicians and music of his black friends."<sup>5</sup> He was such a fan of blues singer Bessie Smith that he rode fifty miles on a horse to see her perform live. "I don't know whether they made them up as they moved down the cotton rows or not," Wills later said of his black contemporaries, "but they sang blues you never heard before."<sup>6</sup>

In Fort Worth, Wills and Herman Arnsperger, the guitarist from the medicine show, hooked up with brothers Milton and Durwood Brown to form the Wills Fiddle Band, and later the Aladdin Laddies, after becoming regular radio performers on WBAP in 1930. Long before Michael Jackson ever held a can of Pepsi, it was not uncommon for musicians to be sponsored by, and even named for, advertisers. When the Aladdin Lamp Company dropped its sponsorship, the Burrus Mill and Elevator Company began its cross-promotional relationship with the boys. Thus



Photo courtesy of Rhino Records & Donna Kolby Jackson



Photo courtesy of Rhino Records &amp; Steve Hathaway

were born the Light Crust Doughboys, the singing and playing billboard for Burrus's Light Crust Flour. They literally punched a time clock and worked for the company. Wills was the delivery truck driver by day, fiddler by night. Burrus's manager was the group's employer and the radio show emcee. W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel had plans for the country dance band that were in his product's best interest and not necessarily the band's; they were to perform only on radio and not at dances.<sup>7</sup> But it was, after all, dance music that Wills and his friends were making. It needed real people shuffling across the floor in front of it.

When the Browns left to form Milton Brown's Musical Brownies in 1932, it was not long before Wills's earliest battles with the bottle got him fired by Pappy. Bob and his brother Johnnie Lee

and Wills over the band's name kept Fort Worth's Doughboys out of Bob's Tulsa home base. The feud lasted far longer than either man did. "O'Daniel always had a vendetta against Bob from then on," remembered Montgomery in June of 1998. "We were on the air [by recording] on KVOO all during those years, but Pappy never would book us into Tulsa, on account that Bob was big there. Last year, Borders Bookstore booked us up there. That's the first time the Doughboys ever played in Tulsa."<sup>9</sup>

During those early Waco and Tulsa years, the Playboys began to grow, bringing in such players as the teenaged Leon McAuliffe on steel guitar, Smokey Dacus on drums, Jesse Ashlock on guitar, and "Brother" Al Stricklin and his boogie woogie-styled piano playing. Just like the Doughboys, they even had a product to push—Playboy Flour. Bob's vision of a jazzy fiddle band was taking shape throughout the 1930s, but, to be fair, he was not the only one west of the Appalachians bringing together big city jazz and frontier fiddle. Good friend Milton Brown continued with his similar sound, enjoying great success with the Musical Brownies until his tragic death following a 1936 auto accident.<sup>10</sup>

There were others, all under the western umbrella, being influenced by Dixieland jazz and the minstrel shows. Nearly a decade earlier, Al Bernard had plugged western folk into Chicago blues, taking his minstrel-based show into the Eastern Tin Pan Alley culture. Emmett Miller and His Georgia Crackers, Roy Newman and His Boys, Spade Cooley, Adolph Hofner, and others took Gene Autry's cowboy sound a giant, soulful two-step to the left.

Along the way, Wills had become the leader of the pack. It was his constant effort to put on a bigger, better show that brought about the Big Sound. He was a showman. And putting on a better show meant bringing in lots of other instruments

*(The Light Crust Boys) would endure, in fact, as the keepers of a western music flame, receiving their first Grammy nomination in 1997.*

took off for Waco, Texas, where the Texas Playboys were playing frequently on radio station WACO. From there, they moved on to Tulsa, Oklahoma, finding their first *true* radio home on KVOO.<sup>8</sup> Brown and Wills would separately become the most important figures in this new cowboy jazz, but the Doughboys were Pappy's launching pad, too; O'Daniel's radio exposure started a political career that would take him to the Texas Governor's mansion in 1938, and in 1941, he beat out a young Lyndon Johnson in a U.S. Senate race. His Light Crust Doughboys would continue on without him or Brown or Wills. They would endure, in fact, as the keepers of a western music flame, receiving their first Grammy nomination in 1997.

That's right; more than sixty years after Wills left the band, dozens of musicians have kept the Doughboys alive. They still perform today, with Marvin "Smokey" Montgomery on banjo from 1935 up until his death in 2001. A feud between O'Daniel

and more fiddles than just his own. A good show for dancing, that was the goal, not the creation of some musical revolution.

The transition from Jim Rob to Bob was just the beginning of Wills's effort to achieve class and distinction for his western ensemble. Bob may have been country, but the image he wanted portrayed in both appearance and song, was far removed from the hillbilly style that had been coming out of Nashville, and he did not want the Playboys to be another hillbilly band. He hated the hillbilly image associated with country music. But then, this was a different kind of country music anyway. If Bob had not played a fiddle, no one would have connected country to the Playboys' music at all. It was really jazz; jazz that portrayed a dignified South, with flowing fiddles and classy, sometimes brassy, arrangements. Their rags, breakdowns, Dixieland tunes, and swingin' blues were an uplifting beacon of light in otherwise hard, depressed times.

The Playboys usually appeared in cowboy dress attire. No sequins or overalls, this was a sophisticated outfit. Bob's look was that of a well-dressed bandleader, but one from Texas. His cowboy hat, cigar, and fiddle were all part of his trademark appearance.

"Bob was a stylish, western rogue," said Ray Benson, leader of *Asleep At The Wheel*, Western Swing Bob Wills disciples for the past three decades. "He danced onstage, he was outrageous. He strutted like a peacock, unheard of back in those days."<sup>11</sup> In all other respects, he led a Big Band just like Tommy Dorsey, in a presentation that was downright orchestral—except Bob conducted with a fiddle bow.

The earliest incarnations of the group (over the years, hundreds of musicians would be Playboys) included trumpets and saxophones, and at various times, female vocalists with an Andrews Sisters style. The band's makeup and size changed frequently; it could grow into a veritable western symphony or shrink to a tight little fiddle band. The most important qualifications for Texas Playboys were that they be good musicians and good people. They had to get along with the others and with the audience. It was that simple. No matter how many players were onstage, it was a decidedly different sound from any other in country music, with that steel guitar (electrified by the late 1930s), extra fiddles, electric mandolin, even drums.

With a foundation like this, the emergence of rock and roll was only a matter of time.

The completion of the Bob Wills sound meant having a vocalist who was more crooner than cowpoke, but with a definite western touch. Tommy Duncan's relaxed, smooth voice was as appealing as Bing Crosby's, just more suited for a fiddle band. There was no pretense or exaggeration in Duncan's baritone, and when it was mixed with Bob's cheerleading interjections, it was a magical combination.

Duncan's voice fit the band like a glove, and his touch of class would not take them too far away from country music. Bob and his fiddle made sure of that. Bob was not just the leader and arranger, he was also a vocalist himself, but not in any conventional way. His running commentary during songs was as much a part of a Playboy arrangement as anything else in the mix. Bob's cheerful, nasal voice could be heard in nearly every song, as he threw hollers like "Play it, boys!," "Ahh, now!," "That's what I said!," and any imaginable thought that might (or might not) pertain to the words of the song at hand.

Bob's own personality was a musical instrument. It was the hook, the thing that put a smile on any listener's face. He would sometimes sing whole songs himself, but he was hardly a stage hog. The hollering gave all Playboys a moment in the spotlight



during a dance or radio show. Band members' names were as important as Bob's, even as the lineup changed. It was hard for any audience not to feel connected with Texas Playboys, with Bob's constant reminders of just exactly who was playing the swingin' solo in progress: "Here's the man who'll tell you about it, Tommy!," "that man they call Kelso, piano!," "the biggest little instrument in the world, mandolin! Tiny Moore!," "All right, Herbie! Herb Remington and that little ol' steel guitar!"

It was Bob's magnetic stage presence with his constant Cheshire grin and rhythmic regal bearing that brought the most basic element out of the music. It may have had roots in blues, jazz, and workingman's folk music, but it was always happy. A sense of joy could even be found in such sad Wills classics as, "Yearning," "Bubbles In My Beer," and "Lily Dale." It had to be happy. After all, it *was* for dancing.

The onstage charisma was apparently just a reflection of a genuinely nice man to start with. Light Crust Doughboy Smokey Montgomery plainly stated, "If I asked him for a dollar, he'd give

spread far and wide. So far, in fact, that a book had been written about them as early as 1938. *Hubbin' It* by Tulsa reporter Ruth Sheldon was available by mail order only, and included a dreamy glossy photo of that grinning Texan. The book was not the only fan-driven venture to come decades before Beatlemania. A fan named Ruth Thomason created a set of about a dozen guidelines and duties to keep true Bob Wills fans in line. According to Thomason, any *real* Bob Wills fan "never knocks, but always boosts Mr. Wills," "is one whose room is completely lined with Bob Wills pictures," "attends every dance possible and always listens to the broadcasts," and one who most certainly "never ridicules a Kyser or a Wayne King fan, simply pities her for not knowing enough to be a Bob Wills fan."<sup>15</sup>

Yodeler and traditional country recording artist, Don Walser, remembered the power of a Playboys radio show, as it reached into the Texas Panhandle town of Lamesa. He would walk home from school, in the days when windows stayed open, and the entire neighborhood would pick up those Tulsa broadcasts.

*In 1942, World War II brought the party to a temporary end, as a number of the guys went into the service, including Bob.*

me a ten."<sup>12</sup> Another Smoky, drummer Smoky Dacus once commented on his boss's largess. "After our noon broadcast, some guy in overalls would walk up to Bob and whisper in his ear. Bob would reach in his pocket and give the guy a hundred dollar bill. The story was always the same—the guy had a sick mother who was always in California and he always needed money for a bus ticket. After the guy was out of earshot, Bob would say, 'You know, that guy's probably lyin', but I can't take the chance.'"<sup>13</sup>

A drummer who came a little later than Smokey, Johnny Cuvillo, once told the story of how Bob had quietly relieved him of his Playboy duties: "After we would play a show or do some recording, the Bob Wills tour bus would let everyone off at the bus stop so they could go home, but they would always drive me right to my house and all of my neighbors would see me arrive home in the Bob Wills bus! After I was with the band for almost two years, the bus stopped coming by to pick me up. No one ever fired me—they just stopped picking me up."<sup>14</sup>

From 1934 to 1942, the KVOO radio program was part of the Playboys' lives, and radio's far-reaching exposure in those days was the most important publicity any musician could have. The band would travel for nighttime dances, performing in towns hundreds of miles away, but they had to be back for a live noon broadcast every weekday, and a gospel radio show on the weekend (presumably a balance for the less-than-wholesome atmosphere of dance halls).

The radio commitment was not the only one; they also played each Thursday and Saturday night at Cain's Ballroom in Tulsa. Despite such restrictions, they managed to play throughout Texas and other Midwestern states, and their grassroots popularity was

"You'd walk through there and you could hear a Bob Wills song from start to finish walking by those windows."<sup>16</sup>

In 1942, World War II brought the party to a temporary end, as a number of the guys went into the service, including Bob. Brother Johnnie Lee kept the radio show going during those years, and wound up keeping that daily noon broadcast on the air until 1958. Johnnie Lee had his own swing band by that time based right there in Tulsa, though members of his band and Playboys often overlapped, as players would float back and forth between them. Whenever Bob was in town, he would join his brother on the air. "A lot of people think that they were listening to my dad on KVOO when they probably were listening to Johnnie Lee," declared Rosetta. "Sixteen years he was on there after my dad had moved to California. They played the same kind of music."<sup>17</sup>

Bob had actually set up Johnnie Lee's band for him, just as he would do for brothers Billy Jack and Luke. All the Wills brothers were musically talented, and all were Playboys at various times, but Bob was the clear business leader behind every offspring group. There was always a pool of musicians to mix and match as the size and sound of the Texas Playboys evolved over the years. Bob was the central figure, the creative genius behind a Western Swing empire. "Johnnie Lee was always kind of in the shadows," said Rosetta. "He was a sweetheart, nicest man in the world. Uncle Billy Jack was a good musician, Luke, all of them. But Bob was the star."<sup>18</sup> The brothers' bands were not the only ones in that musical network. Don Walser saw a number of the Playboys many times, but not as Playboys. "Whenever the guys from Bob Wills' band wanted to dry out, they'd go to

Big Spring and work for Hoyle Nix.” Nix was an important swing leader in his own right and a good friend to Bob. “They all had to watch Hoyle just like they’d watch Bob.”<sup>19</sup>

The dancing, smiling image of Bob Wills would also be brought to folks all over the country in the medium that it cherished the most. Bob, Tommy, and all the boys were brought vividly to life as they appeared in several dozen 1940s western movies, including *Go West Young Lady*, *The Lone Prairie*, *A Tornado In The Saddle*, and *Take Me Back To Oklahoma*, in which Bob and the boys shared the screen with cowboy singing star, Tex Ritter.

forever be a beat in country music. (He and the Texas Playboys, by the way, were not invited back.)<sup>21</sup>

Johnny Gimble first sat in with the band as a 23-year-old fiddler. Johnny’s greatest musical influence was jazz great Benny Goodman, who didn’t even have a fiddle in his orchestra. According to Gimble, Wills “couldn’t play jazz, he just loved it. And he hired guys who could play it.”<sup>22</sup> A jazzy fiddle was just the right sound for the Playboys. Eldon Shamblin, the electric guitarist who also served as the band’s manager, understood this when he hired Gimble in Bob’s absence in 1949. “I was on my

### *Bob unknowingly created quite a stir at his Grand Ole Opry performance.*

Radio, however, was still king, and it continued to deliver the Western Swing message to the people. In the late 1940s, Bob and the band made a series of recordings produced especially for radio. The band’s recording career had already been going strong since the mid-1930s, but these song versions were completely separate from the commercially released material. The transcriptions of these live-in-the studio sessions, handled by Tiffany Music, were then sent to radio stations as an early version of what we now call syndicated programming. The performances were formatted in such a way that radio stations could customize them with local announcers and commercials.

It had seemed like a logical business idea at the time. The band’s original legend and following had been built from the far-reaching signals of KVOO and WBAP. Despite such advertised announcements that it was a “sure-fire audience builder for your station, a powerful selling vehicle for your sponsors,”<sup>20</sup> the Tiffany music recordings failed as a business venture, but not before running for several years on dozens of stations throughout the country. It may not have generated cash, but it had kept the Playboys spirit alive. It is ironic that the Tiffany Transcriptions were not intended for commercial release, but now, decades later, they are more readily available than most of the rest the Wills recorded catalog. After sitting untouched for decades in a basement, they were released in the 1980s by Rhino Records, giving a fascinating glimpse of the Playboys’ musicianship at the time.

By 1945, Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys had achieved enough grassroots fame that they were invited to play at the prestigious home of country music a little farther east. Bob unknowingly created quite a stir at his Grand Ole Opry performance. A drum set was a natural, integral part of the Playboys’ music, but it was unheard of in the world of country music back then. When the Opry staff told Bob that his drummer could not play, he angrily declared that he would not leave a band member out. It was all the Texas Playboys or none. Bob did agree, however, to let the drums be set up behind the curtains. That is, until time to play, when he hollered, “Move those things out on stage!” In that moment, Bob Wills had left a permanent mark; there would

way to join the band and I stopped in to where they were playing in Waco,” recalled Gimble. “And Bob said, ‘There’s a little fiddle player in the house! The boys hired him. I haven’t heard him. They say he’s good. Well, he sure better be!’ I was scared to death, of course. He asked me if I could play ‘Draggin’ The Bow.’ I had learned that when I was a kid. Bob couldn’t play it; it wasn’t one of his tunes. It was something that knocked him out, though. That’s sort of the way he worked: he cut you loose to play. You played whatever you felt like. He wasn’t bossy at all.”<sup>23</sup>

Gimble vividly remembered the feeling of a Bob Wills show, and how its star connected with his fans. Bob would spend the entire four-hour dance on the bandstand. After a show, he would travel in his car while the rest of the boys hopped in their bus. “He’d kick off the last tune and then make his way out to the car and leave while we were finishing it out. If he had to, he’d stand there and shake everybody’s hand. Sometimes he’d make his way through the crowd [while] they were dancin’, if there wasn’t a back door. You could see that white hat movin’ out through the crowd. He’d speak to everybody that stopped him.”<sup>24</sup>

Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys somehow found time to write, learn, and arrange new songs in the midst of their almost constant traveling and performing throughout the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Bob wrote quite a few songs, but so did Jesse Ashlock, Tommy Duncan, the other Wills boys, and various other Playboys. Bob always incorporated pop tunes by the likes of Cole Porter, along with jazz works by W.C. Handy (a particularly soulful rendition of “St. Louis Blues”), and even traditional folk songs by influences like Woody Guthrie. He would record the blues standard, “Sittin’ On Top Of The World” many times over the years. They could do it all, and Bob was the first to say so. “We’re hep,” he once boasted. “We’re the most versatile band in America. Sure we give ‘em western music like ‘Mama Don’t Allow No Lowdown Fiddlin’ Around Here,’ and ‘Little Liza Jane,’ but we give ‘em rhumbas, too. And when there are jitterbugs in the joint, we get ‘em so happy they can’t stay on the floor. We lay it on like they want it.”<sup>25</sup>

Texas songwriter Cindy Walker was responsible for a number of the songs in the films, as well as other classics like “Cherokee

Maiden” and Roy Orbison’s “Dream Baby.” One tune, which she had written when she was twelve-years-old, would also be interpreted by the Playboys.<sup>26</sup> It was perhaps the perfect Western Swing song, the one that captured its feeling the best. The sad lyrics of “Dusty Skies” paint a stirring picture of hard life on the dry western plains, as the dust storms drive hard working folks from their homes. Only Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys could tell such a

instrumental sold very well, and later, Columbia would ask Bob to record it again with lyrics.<sup>27</sup>

It was 1940 before “New San Antonio Rose” came out, with lyrics as poetic as the melody itself (“Moon in all your splendor, know only my heart/Call back my rose, rose of San Antone/Lips so sweet and tender, like petals fallen apart/Speak once again of my love, my own.”). Bob’s hypnotic hollers of “San Antone!” could be heard in all the versions that he would eventually record, each time with a different Play-boy vocalist.

Its popularity reached far beyond Wills’s core audience in the rural Southwest when, in 1941, the already-legendary crooner, Bing Crosby, released his own version of the song. Crosby’s recording sold one and a half million copies, in a production that was quite faithful to Bob’s own. Crosby’s record served as a validation of Wills’s appeal beyond country music: Crosby performed it the way Bob had, and Bing was surely no hillbilly. The song would literally be heard all over the world by 1969, as the Apollo 12 astronauts sang it, looking back at the earth from a lunar orbit.<sup>28</sup>

“San Antonio Rose” took Bob “from hamburgers to steaks,”<sup>29</sup> as he was fond of saying,<sup>28</sup> but it was not his only song to take on a life of its own. “Faded Love” had also started out as a simple fiddle tune, originally made up by Bob’s father, John Wills. For years, it did not even have words, let alone a name.

The mournful instrumental came to be known as “Faded Love” by the time Bob had his own band, but it was not until 1950 that he and brother Billy Jack wrote the heart-broken words to their father’s beautiful melody, just two years before John’s death. Bob would



Photo courtesy of Rhino Records & Michael Ochs Archives

sad tale with the rich, full sound of a western orchestra. The songs were as ever changing and varied as the band itself.

The Playboys would record hundreds of songs over the years, but two songs would be associated with the band in all its incarnations. They would become standards in the world of popular music.

“Spanish Two-Step” was a simple melody that Bob had made up in the early 1930s. He had written the fun little instrumental piece for the primarily Mexican audiences of Roy, New Mexico, where he had lived and played for a while. He recorded it in 1935, but it was a Dallas recording session in 1938 that brought out a new burst of creativity. “After we had cut several tunes, Uncle Art Satherley, who was the A&R man on this session asked me if I had another tune like ‘Spanish Two-Step,’” Bob recalled some years later. “I said, ‘No, I don’t, but if you give me a few minutes, maybe I can come up with something.’ In a few minutes, I had written and recorded the tune. Uncle Art asked me what I wanted to name the tune. I told him I didn’t know. So he said, ‘Let’s name it ‘San Antonio Rose.’” The

later sign over all royalties from the song to his mother, as an appropriate provision for her financial security. Since then, over three hundred artists have recorded the timeless classic.<sup>30</sup>

“Fifty-seven was the first time I saw him on a bandstand. I was 17, and I was fascinated,” stated Rosetta, Bob’s second daughter. Bob’s marriage to Betty Wills in 1942 would last the rest of his life and produce three children. But this amiable fellow who never knew a stranger had known divorce long before it was, shall we say, popular. Bob Wills had been married five times prior to Betty, two of which were with Milton Brown’s ex wife. (When asked once about his many marriages, Bob simply replied, “I’ve got about sixteen more horses than I’ve had wives”). He would remain friendly with his exes, except for Rosetta’s mother, whom he had divorced when Rosetta was just a toddler.<sup>31</sup> Light Crust Doughboy Smokey Montgomery performed a unique special service for his good friend with regard to the women of Wills’s past. “Every time he’d come to town (Fort Worth), I’d kind of be his transportation to see his ex wives.”<sup>32</sup>

Rosetta had not known her father well when she was a child. Like her sister, Robbie Jo (also the product of an early marriage), she had only been around him a handful of times, and just knew him to be a very sweet and kind fellow, like a distant uncle. By the time she was 17, Rosetta was ready to get closer to this mythical father figure, who was already immensely famous when her mother had first met him in the late 1930s. "I decided I was gonna go see him," she recalled of her first trip with friends to Cain's Ballroom, the Tulsa dance hall that served as the Playboys' home base. "He, of course, did not expect us, he had no idea. I

gear into the bus. The man she got to know during those nights was exactly the same kind-hearted soul that friends and fans have commented on for years. He was as friendly offstage as on.<sup>34</sup>

Certainly, there are those who have commented on his moodiness, jealousy, his tendency to withdraw, but Rosetta saw none of that. "I'm sure there was that side of him, but of course, I never saw it. I really wasn't around him enough to ever have any kind of disagreement. He always acted just thrilled to see me, I never got the cold shoulder."<sup>35</sup> Her fleeting moments were always precious.

There was a side of him that was remote, a private side to the



Photo courtesy of Rhino Records & Steve Hathaway

just went up to the bandstand. He was totally shocked. He didn't quite know how to handle it." Bob had lived a life in barrooms and dance halls and was acutely aware of the seedier aspects of those environments. He would watch all members of his family like a hawk whenever they ventured into such a setting. "He never wanted his wives or his children at Cain's, but I was kind of outside that circle. He couldn't exactly tell me not to come."<sup>33</sup>

It was nights like those that became the basis for their relationship. Most of the time that Rosetta spent with her father over the years would be while one was onstage, the other on the dance floor below. They would also spend hours talking in his car after a performance, while the Playboys were piling themselves and their

seemingly simple man. His struggles with the bottle over the years usually resulted in a no-show for a Playboys gig; this way, fans and friends would only see him at his friendly best. As powerful as his illness apparently was, he usually did not let it show to friends and fans. He was a binge drinker, not a constant drunk; it would not get in the way of the serious musical work to be done. Johnny Gimble only saw Bob drinking twice during his several years as a Playboy, and it did not prevent him from doing his job. Band manager Eldon Shamblin saw to that, according to Gimble. "Eldon said, 'You got a tour to do, Bob, and the bar's closed.' That's how authoritative Eldon was."<sup>36</sup>

Also, as loving as Bob was towards Rosetta, he had hidden

her and Robbie Jo's existence from his other family for many years. When he did let the news out, it was with such whimsy that the mystery had hardly seemed necessary. Rosetta's first introduction to her brother was during a show, while her famous dad was literally in the middle of a song: "That was something out of a movie. He leaned down from the bandstand and said, 'James, this is your sister Rosetta.' We were just there looking at each other. Of course, I knew [about him], but he didn't know [about me]." James was eighteen, Rosetta in her twenties, and both leapt at the chance to get to know each other. "We stayed up all night until the sun came up. We were just fascinated."<sup>37</sup>

riety for unrelated reasons—Jack Ruby.<sup>40</sup>

Selling off that dance hall was just one of the ways in which Bob did his level best to pay off a crippling IRS debt. In those days, there was no opportunity like Willie Nelson would later have for a settlement and payment plan. One simply paid it. Bob sold his homes, his land, and his music. Even the rights to "San Antonio Rose" went to Irving Berlin's publishing company. This fact, according to Rosetta, "really was a crushing blow. He talked about that a lot. When I saw him in the '60s, he couldn't get over that, because he'd lost so much."<sup>41</sup>

The financial pull of the road still had a tight grip on him.

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*When he recorded it in the 1960s, he told me, "I sang 'Rosetta' for you, and I was thinking about you the whole time I was singing that."*

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The family life that Wills knew with Betty and their kids was perhaps as unconventional as his relationship with Rosetta. That presumably more stable family was not really stable either; they would move fourteen times in twenty years, but such is the life of a traveling musician. The love he clearly felt for his family can be found in the song bearing that second daughter's name. "It is a really good song, and he does a great version of it," said Rosetta of the Earl 'Fatha' Hines jazz tune that Bob had first recorded in 1938. "My mother, it was her favorite song, so I was named for the song. The song's older than me. When he recorded it in the 1960s, he told me, 'I sang "Rosetta" for you, and I was thinking about you the whole time I was singing that.' So that made it more special to me because I wasn't even born the first time he recorded it."<sup>38</sup> That later recording, by the way, was released as a single at the time that the Beatles first took over record sales in the States. The record, along with all other tunes considered country and western at that time, sold poorly as the British Invasion took hold.

Years of hard traveling and a good bit of drinking had taken their toll on Bob's health. So after a second heart attack in 1964, he simply "sold" the management of the band for ten thousand dollars.<sup>39</sup> The Playboys were left under the musical leadership of Leon Rausch, a longtime singer with the band (Tommy Duncan had been fired some years earlier, and a number of other singers had passed through since). They made Fort Worth something of a home, but life on the road was really what the band was all about. Bob would sometimes still play with them when the opportunity presented itself, but it was time to simplify his life.

Bob had pursued several business ventures in the early 1960s, such as the Bob Wills Ranch House in Dallas, which was intended to become a sort of home base. During the week, one-time Playboy Johnny Gimble and The Ranch House Boys would play there, and then Bob and whoever was playing with him at the time would handle the weekend dances. Poor management in his absence made for another failed effort, so Wills sold the joint to another Dallas club owner who would soon gain noto-

Bob made decent money on the road, and his demand in other towns kept him out there. He had bills to pay and a family to support. "He was so into music," says Rosetta. "I don't know if he could have done anything else anyway. He never really retired."<sup>42</sup> Besides, playing for the people was what he did the best. He and singer Tag Lambert began touring together in a car. This was the simpler way to do it. By these years, Bob Wills had long been a musician of such stature that simply his own name was enough to create a draw. Hiring musicians was not a problem. He had done it so much for so many years as the Playboy lineup had changed, as some had moved on to other projects. Even well known members such as Leon McAuliffe, for instance, had long been out the band. Leon had his own group, Leon McAuliffe And His Western Swing Band, whose most noteworthy song was named for Bob's best-known dance hall interjection, "Take It Away, Leon!"

Throughout most of the 1960s, Bob just lined up the gigs, and local players would be rounded up before his arrival (often under the billing, "Bob Wills And His Boys"). The basics of country music and Western Swing were somewhat universal (just as they are for rock and roll; Chuck Berry has toured this way for decades). All they needed to know was how to play; all he needed was his smile and his fiddle. He would sometimes hook up along the road with friends like Hoyle Nix and singer Tag Lambert, singing and playing with his band.

At the same time, the Playboys name had continued on, with Bob's blessing, in fact. Leon Rausch, who had already made a name for himself as a vocalist with the Playboys and with Johnnie Lee Wills's band, became the front man of Leon Rausch And The Texas Playboys Band as a way of keeping the Playboys spirit alive and on the road whether Bob was part of the show or not. But frequently in 1965 and 1966, he did participate in Rausch gigs with the unusual billing of "Leon Rausch and The Texas Playboys with Bob Wills."<sup>43</sup> Egos were clearly not an issue, whatever the incarnation. It was the night at the dance hall that mattered.

Country music's enduring star, Mel Tillis, recalled his im-

Courtesy of Rush Evans



promptu recording session with his musical hero, which also led to one of those dance hall gigs in Bob's later years. Tillis was a young recording artist on Kapp Records at the same time that Wills was a living legend recording for the Nashville-based label. Tillis was at the recording studio to talk with the label's Paul Cohen about his next album, when he learned who was standing in the next room. "I said, 'Who you cutting?' and he said, 'Bob Wills.' I said, 'Who?' Oh, my God!" He said, 'Would you like to meet him?' and I said, 'Yes I would!' I went out in the studio and there was Bob. He had his cigar and his hat on and I met him and he was very nice. Paul Cohen said, 'Mel, would you like to cut a song with Bob?' And I said, 'Would I?! Which one?' Bob said, 'Any of 'em.' I picked out one song. I can't remember which one I did first but it came off really good. And then I had written a song called 'Looking Over My Shoulder,' and we cut that. Harlan Howard had a song in there called 'I Wish I Felt This Way At Home.' They put that one out as a

it up, he had his cigar in his mouth, he had his fiddle in his hand, and a cowboy hat on, and all those drunks at the bar and at a table, there was just a complete hush," remembered White of that night in 1966. "It was just the biggest thrill of my life to walk Bob Wills up on the Broken Spoke bandstand. I can still visualize him right here."<sup>46</sup>

That night, it was Bob and The Playboys. White would book him several more times in the next few years, some with just Bob and Leon Rausch as his singer, then later Bob and Tag Lambert. As for that first time, White "got him for 400 dollars, band and all," an unbelievable amount for a guy with such musical influence. "If it wasn't for people like him and Hank Williams, George Jones, Jimmie Rodgers," White added, "these people today are kind of ridin' the gravy train when they get one song out."<sup>47</sup>

During those years, Bob had continued a recording career, releasing numerous albums with session musicians and several that reunited him with Tommy Duncan, one album title refer-

*Wills, ever the gentleman, removed his trademark white cowboy hat and said, "I don't usually take my hat off to nobody, but I sure do to you folks."*

single. I think I wound up with about five songs in there."<sup>44</sup>

Shortly after the record's release, Tillis was afforded the heady honor of performing on stage at a Bob Wills show, with Bob Wills himself—or so he thought. "Later on, they put Bob and me down at Dancetown USA in Houston, Texas. At that time he traveled with Tag Lambert and that was all; they'd hire the house band [at the dance halls]. They booked me to come down there and be on the show with them. Bob did three sets, and at midnight, he got off that stage and out in the audience and got in his car and left! And I had never been on stage. I sat there and waited and waited and waited. I almost got drunk waiting on my turn. Finally, about fifteen minutes before they closed down, they introduced me. I got up and I did the song, and I turned around to Tag and I said, 'Drop it half a key.' He said, 'We'll do it in what you recorded it in.' So I did it in that key. And then he left, and they ain't said one damn word to me! And my feelings [were hurt]! Clyde Brewer was there, a fiddle player, and Bob White was on stage with us.

"A few years after that, I asked Clyde about that. He said, 'You know, that made me mad, too.' And I said, 'What happened?' And he said, 'It made me so damn mad, I asked Bob about it the next time I seen him.' He said that Bob said that he could see the boy didn't need any help when he got up there. So I took it as a compliment!"<sup>45</sup>

James White clearly recalled the first time he was able to bring the legendary fiddler and band to his humble Broken Spoke bar and dance hall in Austin. After telling the joint's regulars that the one and only Bob Wills was coming to play, they simply did not believe him, or at least they were certain that he would not show up. "About that time, the door opened. Bob Wills opened

ring to them as "Mr. Words and Mr. Music."

The decades of original music loved by millions also finally received validation from the music city with which he had shared ambivalent feelings. In 1968, friends coerced Wills to attend Nashville's Country Music Association awards ceremony in the hope that he would be voted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. Bob had never seen himself as a "country" artist and believed that the Nashville community of musicians felt the same. He simply wasn't a member of their club. Wills was surprised and deeply moved at the ceremony when he learned of his induction. Accepting the honor onstage that night, Wills, ever the gentleman, removed his trademark white cowboy hat and said, "I don't usually take my hat off to nobody, but I sure do to you folks."<sup>48</sup>

By the early 1970s, Bob Wills's poor health had caught up with him. Several strokes and heart attacks had left him paralyzed, confined to a wheelchair. In 1973, some of the Playboys got together, with the help of country music star and Wills fan Merle Haggard, to try to put together one last album while Bob still had the strength to participate. It was eventually released as *Bob Wills And His Texas Playboys For The Last Time*.<sup>49</sup>

Light Crust Doughboy Smokey Montgomery was at the sessions. "They brought Bob Wills over in a wheelchair. He'd give the guys the right tempo, then we put a mike in front of him so he could do some of his 'ah-hahhs.' He was so weak we couldn't use them. Hoyle Nix was there, who could imitate Bob to a tee. We got Hoyle Nix to do a bunch of 'ah-hahhs.' Those 'ah-hahhs' you hear [on the record] are Hoyle. That night, [Bob] had one of those massive strokes. I don't think he ever got out of bed after that. The next day, of course he couldn't be there, and the guys were recording 'San Antonio Rose,' and they all started

crying, they just couldn't hardly do it. They figured the stroke he'd had would be his last one. And of course it was."<sup>50</sup>

In what he referred to as a "cosmic juxtaposition," Ray Benson and his fellow Asleep At The Wheel-ers also had the privilege of meeting their musical mentor at those sessions. "He had a stroke about four or five hours after we met. He was really sick, really just dying. We got to watch the band [record] 'Big Balls In

Bob Wills tribute.

Asleep At The Wheel has been the most visible keeper of the Bob Wills musical flame, but as Ray Benson said, Western Swing has remained alive and well in the dance halls thanks to hundreds of artists and bands throughout the country, most notably, Jody Nix (son of Hoyle), The Hot Club Of Cowtown (an Austin, Texas-based swing trio), and regional acts working

*Benson and his band mates have kept Bob's spirit alive in their music, operating under the slogan: "Western Swing ain't dead, it's just Asleep At The Wheel."*

Cowtown,' 'Twin Guitar Boogie,' 'When You Leave Amarillo.'"<sup>51</sup> Since witnessing that historic session, Benson and his band mates have kept Bob's spirit alive in their music, operating under the slogan: "Western Swing ain't dead, it's just Asleep At The Wheel." And Ray's proud of that. "It's an honor to be the mantle-bearer of this music, along with George Strait [who's fond of covering Wills tunes], and many other very dedicated, not-so-famous people."<sup>52</sup>

Bob Wills died on May 13, 1975 at the age of 70. He had been in a coma since that recording session. The headstone of his grave bears the epitaph, "Deep Within My Heart Lies A Melody." The melody remained in the hearts of millions, just as it had for all the former Playboys. They had vowed after that last stroke not to play anywhere as the Texas Playboys as long as Bob was alive. Some of them had continued making music, others had gotten day jobs. Several years after Bob's death, however, a number of them gathered to make music together again.

*Austin City Limits*, the public television live music program, helped to reunite the core members of the band. Although the TV show could not pay much to the musicians who had been out of the business for a while. James White and friends, including Austin fiddler Alvin Crow, threw a fundraiser at the Broken Spoke the day after the "Austin City Limits" taping, raising enough money to cover hotel and other expenses for the boys. From then on, Leon McAuliffe, Al Stricklin, Johnny Gimble and other reunited Playboys began a new career, keeping Bob's original vision going.<sup>53</sup>

When Al Stricklin and Leon McAuliffe passed away in the 1980s, that core group wound down its successful revival years. But other former Playboys, of which there are many, still play together whenever they can at tributes, festivals, and the annual Bob Wills Day in Turkey, Texas. It would have been fine with Bob. He had always said that anybody who had ever played with him and had gotten paid was a Texas Playboy.<sup>54</sup>

And they have all worn that title with honor, as Rosetta confirmed. "When I see these former Texas Playboys get together, they play, of course, without my father, [but] it's fun, it's always up."<sup>55</sup>

The spirit of Western Swing has been kept alive in other ways, too. Asleep At The Wheel's second Bob Wills tribute album, *Ride With Bob*, was released in 1999, winning critical acclaim and more Grammys for the band whose very existence was a

throughout the Southwestern U.S. and beyond.

A great many prominent country music artists, including Merle Haggard and George Strait, still feel the influence of the man who had been their musical hero. In the case of Mel Tillis, "he still is." Tillis and his Statesiders even recorded a tribute album to the music of Bob Wills, only available through his website and concerts. In true spirit of Playboys Swing, he made the record quickly without taking advantage of modern recording and production technology. There was simply no need. There were no overdubs and fancy recording systems in the dance halls during the decades of Bob Wills shows. Besides, Bob had made his records live with the band in the studio, why shouldn't he? "I cut an album called *Big Balls In Cowtown* about fifteen years ago, and I'm still selling it. You know we went in and we turned the machine and we did the whole album without even stopping. And I said, 'Boys, any mistakes on here and I'm gonna dock your pay!'"<sup>56</sup> Haggard's Wills tribute had followed the same philosophy: *A Tribute To The Best Damn Fiddle Player: My Salute To Bob Wills* was recorded by Haggard and his Strangers in two quick days in 1970.

Rosetta Wills has continually represented her father's work, accepting awards on his behalf from both the Texas and Oklahoma Music Halls of Fame (both states claiming him as their own, and both being right), and many other musical organizations.<sup>57</sup>

The greatest exposure of Bob Wills music to a new audience came when Wills was inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame in March of 1999. The Western Swing music that had been revolutionized by Bob and the hundreds of musicians he'd taken along for the ride over four decades was now officially recognized as a significant early influence on rock and roll music. Rosetta and Cindy Wills accepted the award on their father's behalf. Addressing the community of rock music executives, many of rock and roll's greatest artists, and millions of television viewers, Rosetta spoke of her father, beginning with a quote that he had told a reporter in 1956:

"Rock and roll will be around forever. What I mean is that people don't change much. We didn't call it rock and roll when we introduced it as our style in 1938, and we don't call it rock and roll the way we play it now. But it's just basic rhythm and has gone by a lot of different names in my time. It's the same,

whether you follow just a drumbeat like in Africa or surround it with a lot of instruments. The rhythm is what's important.'

"My father's tremendous energy, spontaneity, and innovativeness changed the face of American music. He led the way to rock and roll by combining black blues and white fiddle music, amplifying his sound with electric instrumentation, and adding drums to a string band."<sup>58</sup>

In 2001, Rosetta moved to her father's original hometown of Turkey, Texas, where his music plays continuously at the Bob Wills monument, and comes alive each April at the annual Bob Wills Day celebration. In 2002, 16,000 fans converged on the little town with a population of 494.<sup>59</sup>

Waylon was right. The sound created by Wills and Company left a huge influence on the work of Willie Nelson, and many others. In his autobiography, Nelson remembers the thrill of seeing Wills perform. Fifteen-year-old Nelson and his brother-in-law had booked Wills to play in their hometown: "Watching him move around, I thought: this guy ain't real. He had a presence about him. He had an aura so strong it just stunned people. I doubt very seriously if Bob was aware how much that had to do with his popularity. . . You had to see him in person to understand his magnetic pull."<sup>60</sup>

Willie Nelson also commented about the thrill of getting to know his musical idol. "He was a great showman and a great bandleader. He was one of the guys that I looked up to. I was probably the youngest promoter that ever booked him. I just felt like I could promote. We had a beer joint and we had Bob Wills. Well anybody ought to be able to fill it up with that, and we did. A good night. It was after Tommy Duncan had already left the band and Joe Andrews was singing. It was one of those nights you never forget. Later on I booked him again in California, and worked several shows with him, and I got to know him pretty good. He had already gotten sick before I knew him that well. He was trying to retire, and just kept coming back."<sup>61</sup>

That is a feeling of Bob's with which Nelson can identify all too well, as his own overwhelming urge to take his music to the people keeps him performing a few hundred shows a year as he approaches 70. (When asked about his own retirement, his stock answer is, "All I do is golf and play music, which one do you want me to quit?")

Music historian and syndicated radio show host "Dr. Demento" understood that magnetism. "I got to see him perform once, in the later part of his career," remembered the good doctor, who saw Bob and the boys at the Palomino Club in Los Angeles: "He didn't really do too much. He let other people do most of the singing and playing, he fiddled maybe twice, and went 'Ah-hahhh!' a lot. But mostly what he did during the performance was to shake hands with everybody who came up to the stage, and he acted like he'd known all of them for fifty years."<sup>62</sup>

"He taught me that music was more important than money." Don Walser (dubbed by *Playboy Magazine* as the "Pavarotti of the Plains") saw that Wills's greatest strength was in the freedom he gave his musicians. "Some [musicians] have a set list. They play the same set list from the first note to the last note;

it's all the same everywhere they go. Bob didn't do that. The only thing that he wanted them to do is, when he pointed that fiddle bow at 'em, he wanted 'em to play. He didn't tell 'em what to play. He was a great bandleader."<sup>63</sup>

Bob's democratic leadership has mostly become a thing of the past. "Nowadays, they play riffs and chords, they don't play music anymore," said Walser. "The musicians hold the singer up while he's singin', but they don't [get to] contribute to it. They want to play. It's like eatin' watermelon, everybody wants a slice."<sup>64</sup>

That confidence in his fellow musicians can be heard in the grooves of his records. "A lot of those records he didn't play on," Gimble noted, pointing out that, for many of Bob's recordings, "he didn't even pick up a fiddle. He'd sit there and direct it and give his hollers, you know. His spirit was there. He was a leader."

For Asleep At The Wheel's Ray Benson, "influence" is simply an inadequate word when describing Bob Wills's role in his musical life. "Wills, for Asleep At The Wheel, was our prototype, that's who we wanted to be. He was not the father of Western Swing, but he was the Elvis Presley of Western Swing. He was the most popular, charismatic ambassador that Western Swing could ever have. What he meant to rock and roll is equally important. He put drums and electric guitars into country music. He brought a style and a stage presence that was so in-your-face. It was what the rock and roll attitude was all about. Also, he's given Texas and Oklahoma such a musical identity."<sup>65</sup>

"When my dad was there, he was the star. He was what you came to see," Rosetta Wills said. "There's something about people like that, the way they look at you, they're so intense, there's just something about the presence."<sup>66</sup>

That presence was not part of a calculated mission. It was just the personality of a fellow who loved music, one who experimented with sounds to create something fun; a guy who played the fiddle with feeling and could get the crowd with him. A crowded room full of people having a good time; that was all it was ever about, really. Bob's simple message was found in the words of a song.

[Kind thanks to those I interviewed: Ray Benson, Mel Tillis, Willie Nelson, Dr. Demento, Johnny Gimble, Lex Herrington, Smokey Montgomery, Don Walser, James White, and Rosetta Wills.]



Photo courtesy of Rush Evans

## BOB WILLS DAY, 1981

In 1981, there were not many college kids listening to Western Swing music. Most of my friends were into Adam And The Ants, Blondie, and Christopher Cross, the local chart-topping success story who had been playing frat parties the year before, right there at the University of Texas.

My personal tastes leaned to what was already classic rock: The Beatles, The Who, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen. But I had also been into what was then called Redneck Rock, the Texas country sound that Willie Nelson had personified. Through him, I had even gotten into tunes older than Beatles music: the swinging sound of Bob Wills, whom my dad had seen at a Neodesha, Kansas rodeo in the 1940s. I had also had the good fortune of seeing The Original Texas Playboys at a taping of *Austin City Limits*, the public television series. Their performance that night in 1978 had sealed the deal for me.

When I met Lex Herrington at my college dorm, I was thrilled to learn that he too was a fan of this special brand of Texas music. But he was more than just a fan; he was from the land of Bob Wills. It was a place where everyone of all ages was not only aware of that swinging sound, but they thought it was as natural a part of the culture as the West Texas plains. In Turkey, Texas, Bob Wills music was literally played out in the open air, around the clock at the Wills monument. No one there had ever heard of Adam and The Ants.

Lex was actually from Quitaque (pronounced “KIT-uh-kway”), the town just ten miles from Turkey, both far off the beaten path of any major highway, a combined population of about a thousand people. Turkey had been home to Wills in his younger days, though The Road had been his true home for half a century. But it was by mutual agreement that Turkey would forever be considered Bob’s original home (though he was born in Kosse, Texas). It was, after all, Turkey where he had learned to fiddle, where he had played his earliest gigs, where he had cut hair at Ham’s Barber Shop, where he had been jailed for rowdiness in 1929.<sup>67</sup> All was forgiven from both sides by the time his music had reached its legendary status.

Lex had never missed a Bob Wills Day, and he certainly did not plan to miss the festival’s tenth anniversary. At the first celebration in 1972, sixteen-year-old Kim Ham, Lex’s sister, was selected as the first Bob Wills Day Queen. It was only later that the judges realized that she was the granddaughter of the barber who had employed Bob Wills in his last day job. On that first Bob Wills Day, a wheelchair-bound Wills shared the stage in the only way he could at the time. It would also be his only time to attend the celebration in his honor. A stroke had deprived him the use of his right hand, so he did his best to participate by fingering the notes of his fiddle on “Faded Love” while Playboy Sleepy Johnson handled the bow.<sup>68</sup> The front page of the local paper showed a photo of Wills and some of the Playboys on stage. A nine-year-old Cub Scout named Lex was seen leaning on the stage in that photo. Nine years later, he still had the same enthu-

siasm for the music of Wills and his Playboys, so driving 400 miles for just a weekend college road trip was not a problem.

Four of us left straight from class in Austin, driving ten hours, directly to the monument of Turkey’s favorite son: a marble tower with etchings of the man and his story, and the statue of a fiddle sitting on top, some thirty feet in the air. “San Antonio Rose,” “Faded Love,” and other Wills tunes rang through the air continually from a speaker at the site. Our musical pilgrimage was already in full Western Swing.

That night, we went to the first of two nights of live dance music at the high school gym. Several thousand folks, some who had traveled further than we had, slid across the floor to the still fresh sounds of many former Texas Playboys with their leader at the time, Tag Lambert. Even more former Playboys gathered the next afternoon at the high school’s football field, including Johnnie Lee Wills, to play and reminisce in front of a sea of cowboy hats (just a few of us big city types lacking the requisite headgear).

We wandered around the grounds that afternoon, checking out the Bob Wills Center, which housed the local library, the Justice of the Peace, and the three-room Bob Wills Museum. Photos, movie posters, cigar holders, spurs, boots, and, of course, fiddles were on prominent display. My friends and I were interviewed for Amarillo radio station KGNC’s coverage of this Panhandle Lollapalooza (we had achieved a sort of Grateful Dead-head-styled loyalist status for our youth and willingness to travel such a long distance in the name of western swing music).

Lex had a mission that afternoon. He wanted to buy the new album by Hoyle Nix: Playboy alum, Saturday night’s headliner, and established Swing Master (Hoyle’s son Jody is still swinging today on the road with his band). Upon spotting the bus of Hoyle Nix And The West Texas Cowboys, Lex climbed onto the front tire and pounded on the window by the driver’s seat. When a country gentleman in a sharp straw cowboy hat stuck his head out, Lex enthusiastically declared, “Hoyle, I need to buy your new record!”<sup>69</sup> A ten dollar bill, an autograph, and a few seconds later, Lex was the proud and happy owner of the latest in swingin’ western music. I had been to quite a few rock concerts by that time, and nothing like that had happened at a Van Halen show.

Before Hoyle’s show Saturday night, we shared a calf fries supper with some rugged bikers (even Harley riders love the Playboys). It was an evening I will not soon forget, as I witnessed the crossroads where seemingly clashing cultures meet, and I ate a part of the cow that I never ever dreamed I would (yes, calf fries are from male cows only, and no, they don’t taste that good). Another large time was had by all at Saturday’s dance. By then the spirit of What Had Made Bob Holler<sup>70</sup> was forever deep within our hearts.

On Sunday afternoon, we piled back in the truck to boogie back to Austin, eight beats to the mile.<sup>71</sup> ■

## NOTES

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# ***Uplift and Downbeats:***

## ***What if Jazz History Included the Prairie View Co-eds?***

Sherrie Tucker



Prairie View Co-eds 1945, courtesy of Ernest Mae Crafton Miller.

*When Prairie View A&M University celebrated its Founders Day and Honors Convocation on March 27, 2002, the historically black college also revived a chapter of forgotten Texas music history. The Prairie View Co-eds were an extremely popular all-woman big band of the 1940s, who brought audiences to their feet from the Houston Civic Auditorium to the Apollo Theater and back again throughout World War II. Thanks to the hard work and dedication of a good many people across the Prairie View Campus, notably those in the College of Nursing, whose turn it was to organize the convocation, the Prairie View Co-eds brought audiences to their feet again with their vivid stories, distinguished presence, good humor, and poignant histories. Almost unbelievably, the university was able to assemble twelve former members of this fifteen piece band from sixty years ago, flying members in from as far as New York and California, as well as two daughters of deceased members. This celebration of the Prairie View Co-eds provided an unforgettable glimpse into history for everyone who heard the honorees tell of their experiences as black college women playing big band music during World War II, as well as a very special reunion for former band members, most of whom had not seen each other, or visited Prairie View, since the mid-1940s.*

*Parts of this article were reprinted with permission from IAJE Jazz Research Proceedings Yearbook, Volume 21 (2001), an official publication of the International Association for Jazz Education, P. O. Box 724, Manhattan, Kansas 66502.*

“I’m having a hard time believing that this isn’t a dream,” marveled former trumpet player Izola Fedford Collins, who had been trying for years to actualize her dream of a Co-eds reunion. Her efforts, in fact, made it possible for Prairie View to locate such an impressive showing of members. Tentative at first, then in joyous clusters of reunited friendships, Prairie View Co-eds,

now in their seventies, approached one another in the lobby of a Houston hotel. Sometimes they knew each other at a glance, and sometimes they had to ask “Is that you?” “I’m looking for teenagers,” confided one woman, “but, of course, everyone is as old as I am!” Yet, by evening the women who had traveled so far with the band, in the years after the band, and that day to attend

the reunion were a cohesive group, ready to give onlookers a history lesson in what it was like to be the Prairie View Co-eds.

"I don't think you know what we went through," said Clara Bryant, trumpet star of the band, who described for the crowd that gathered to honor the Co-eds the hardships that the band encountered while traveling in the Jim Crow South. She then told the audience how much it meant to her to be remembered at Prairie View after so many years. One by one, Co-eds approached the microphone and shared memories. Dr. Margaret Grigsby, former trombonist, told of the black soldiers who so appreciated their performances on bases, especially since African-American segregated troops tended to be overlooked by traveling entertainment, or sent the "raunchiest of acts." Collins spoke of the pleasures of traveling with the band, of working hard and sounding great, of playing with fantastic jazz soloists like Bryant, and the late alto saxophonist Bert Etta "Lady Bird" Davis. The women told of their memories of the



Bert Etta in the foreground playing alto sax. Prairie View Co-eds in the back ground are (L-R) Bettye Bradley, Una White, and Izola Fedford. Courtesy of John B. Coleman Library, Prairie View A & M University, Prairie View, Texas.

band, talked about what Prairie View meant to them, and told us about their post-Prairie View achievements. Some went on to long-term jazz careers, others became music educators, still others went on to other careers ranging from banking, to food management, to medicine, to Civil Rights activism. Each story met with resounding applause. In one of his last acts before stepping down as President of Prairie View, Dr. Charles A. Hines apologized that the Co-eds had nearly been forgotten, and pledged that the band would be prominently remembered in the new cultural center on campus. The next day, at the luncheon that ended just before the Co-eds boarded the bus that would return them to the airport, a young female student spontaneously stood up and announced, "I want you to know that we will never forget you! Thank you for coming back."

Even if the Prairie View Co-eds are newly indelible in Prairie View memory, they remain forgotten in jazz history, and that is what I would like to explore. This amnesia is not surprising when one considers the many other institutions, musicians, and audiences that have flourished in jazz throughout its history, yet nonetheless remain outside the boundaries of jazz historiography. By saying historiography, rather than history, I am referring to the methods and theories of narrating history, rather than history with a capital "H," as in "what really happened." The Prairie View Co-eds and hundreds of other all-woman bands, for that matter, really happened: we have evidence! Yet documentation does not secure a place in historical memory. I would like to use the example of the lost history of the Prairie View Co-eds to ask why this is. Jazz historiography, I suspect, is

not just about recording styles and players, notes and anecdotes, but about the battles that have been waged in jazz practices over meanings of such things as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and nation. These battles have ramifications far beyond the relatively small percentage of people who actually play, listen to, write about, or read about jazz.

The Prairie View Co-eds existed outside the boundaries of jazz historiography in a couple of profound ways: the musicians were women; jazz historiography has not generally incorporated knowledge about women instrumentalists, or gender as a salient category of analysis, and the band was based, not at some Hefneresque swinger's paradise or down-and-out boozy bohemia, but at a historically black college. Its members took a full load of college course work, belonged to the musicians' union, and were professionally booked for weekend gigs and summer tours. Black college bands, women instrumentalists, and unrecorded bands seldom

make it into the purview of jazz history books. To include the Prairie View Co-eds in jazz history would not only expand the roster of players, but would demand a transformation of what counts as jazz history. Lost histories, such as this one, may act as levers to productively nudge the borders of what counts as jazz history and who counts as a jazz musician. To incorporate the band of popular, yet unrecorded, black college women from Texas may help us to develop new ways of thinking about jazz that undermine persistent, damaging race and gender stereotypes so prevalent in jazz historiography

As I have mentioned, the Prairie View Co-eds, like most all-woman bands of their day, were never recorded. To focus on an unrecorded band is already to go against the grain of most jazz historiography, which, as Jed Rasula and other jazz studies scholars have pointed out, tends to record the history of jazz records as if it was the history of jazz<sup>1</sup> (with the notable exception of trumpet player Buddy Bolden, who has managed to retain his reputation as a jazz giant without recorded evidence). Because the sources for most jazz historiography primarily have been records (usually on white-owned labels) and white-owned music trades, much of what has fallen outside the bounds of most jazz historiography includes jazz practices that were meaningful to the black press and to black audiences but not meaningful to white producers, reviewers, and audiences. The Prairie View Co-eds were lauded in the black press, and well remembered by audiences who heard them on campus, and in black theaters, military camps, and dance halls. I'd like to suggest that the unrecordedness of all-woman bands

such as the Prairie View Co-eds, indeed, their exclusion from technologies of success (that would also include mainstream music magazines, jazz history books and films, and even mainstream ideas about what constitutes a “real” band)—their *unrecordability*, if you will, is also a part of jazz history.

The imperative to develop new ways to think about jazz history is not only pertinent to people interested in all-woman bands, historically black colleges, unrecorded bands, Texas music, or the Prairie View Co-eds, but probably to more jazz musicians and jazz

modernist geniuses who care not for the material world, romanticized down-and-outers, though countless jazz musicians have certainly wanted their music to be commercially successful. And certainly, improvement of material conditions of African Americans has historically not been antithetical to black cultural politics. Yet, an aura of “not selling out” and, by implication, “not selling” to the mainstream, has been key to jazz marketability.<sup>5</sup> I would add that along with ethnicity and modernist notions of the incompatibility of art and commerce, “what counts as jazz” has

*...jazz equaling “black,” whose meaning is also constantly changing and in dispute, and non-commercial.*

audiences than historians may suspect. I believe that the unrecordability of the Prairie View Co-eds is connected to other kinds of absence, the boundaries of which outline and preserve a problematic stereotype of the “jazz musician” that continues to circulate in jazz historiography (and beyond). This mythical figure is embedded in primitivist notions of black masculinity as isolated, misunderstood, child-like; untutored, raw; disconnected from community and politics, prone to disorderly excesses, intuitive insights and outbursts. Such stereotypical renderings of the figure of the “jazz musician” can be easily recalled in numberless Hollywood portrayals, such as Clint Eastwood’s *Bird*, or literary portraits, such as Eudora Welty’s short story, “Powerhouse.” In the latter, jazz musician is described as “in a trance; he’s a person of joy, a fanatic,” with “a look of hideous, powerful rapture on his face....”<sup>2</sup> These tropes are not reserved for fiction, but appear not infrequently in jazz marketing, journalism, and—most alarmingly—text books and history books. For Leon L. Dunkley, jazz writers’ desires for “Taciturn and Angry Men in Absurd Hats” is a kind of exoticism not anomalous to, but embedded in the historical tradition of jazz criticism and commentary.<sup>3</sup>

The term “jazz” has historically referred to many different forms of music, and these forms have varied over time. For this reason, Scott DeVeaux has argued that historical and critical definitions of jazz have depended less on musical dependability and more on ethnicity and relationship to capitalism: jazz equaling “black,” whose meaning is also constantly changing and in dispute, and non-commercial. Jazz has often been understood by those who narrate its history as unsullied by commerce, and romantic in its representation of blackness as electively and rebelliously outside the mainstream (commercial and racial “outsiderness,” then, as “too hip for the room,” rather than barred from the room).<sup>4</sup> Such definitions often operated as part of the formation of white subcultures based on white fantasies of black culture. As one of many products associated with black people that has been marketed to white consumers by white-owned companies as a non-commercial product, jazz has often been advertised (or used in advertisements for other things) through representations of jazz musicians as “eccentric outsiders,”

also had a great deal to do with gender and sexuality.

We need only to return to the conundrum of unrecordedness. For example, I was recently speaking to a group of jazz researchers about why I thought the Prairie View Co-eds should be included in jazz history. I finished my talk, and they all sat there staring at me, skeptically. And, finally, one gentleman raised his hand and said, “If this band was never recorded, how do you know if it was any good?”

I started to explain that women instrumentalists, particularly horn players and drummers, were seldom recorded, nor were all-woman bands, especially black all-woman bands, and that I didn’t think talent was the only factor at work in who got recorded and who didn’t, and that I didn’t think jazz history should only count the people who had the opportunities to get record contracts, when another gentleman in the front row saved the day by raising his hand.

“I was a member of the men’s band, the Prairie View Collegiates,” he said. “When many of our members started getting drafted, our teacher, Will Henry Bennett started the women’s band to keep music going throughout the war. I was one of those musicians who was drafted and had to leave the band. I knew many of those women because I played with them in the marching band and orchestra, and I’m here to tell you ... the Prairie View Co-eds were outstanding! They were an excellent band!”

The gentleman who knew the Prairie View Co-eds were serious musicians was a musician who had studied at Prairie View, someone who had personal experience that told him that historically black colleges were places where jazz had history, and that some women in historically black colleges, namely the Prairie View Co-eds, played great jazz. But the white male historians who had not gone to Prairie View, who had not heard the Co-eds, were hesitant to believe this band was “serious” or “real” without real proof, i.e., a record, *Downbeat* poll, etc..

Another explanation for why the Prairie View Co-eds disappear from jazz historiography has had something to do with women who are jazz musicians being seen as imitation men, as “not real” musicians, in other words, novelties. As novelties, they would therefore be considered automatically

commercial, so if jazz could not be commercial then women musicians could not be jazz. At least not jazz instrumentalists. For while the prevailing stereotype of the jazz musician revolves around stereotypes of downwardly spiraling, but hip, black masculinity, as discussed by Ingrid Monson in her pivotal article, "The Problem With White Hipness," a stereotype for downwardly spiraling jazzwomen also circulates, embodied in stereotypes about black female sexuality, in the figure of the girl singer with a tragic personal life.<sup>6</sup> As with the figure of the invariably male jazz instrumentalist, the female jazz singer is imagined as intuitive rather than schooled or skilled, and as emotionally and sexually excessive. This romanticized tragic figure, along with the music, is the product. And like the jazz instrumentalist, the image is not just about biography or history, but about marketing and desire, as demonstrated by these liner notes from a Billie Holiday recording on Verve, *Solitude* (Verve V6-8074).

"To Miss Holiday the word [solitude] must be particularly meaningful since she has known the loneliness and the pain, though often without the contentment that solitude can bring."

Whether or not this depiction is biographically accurate is not the point; this construction of the prototypical female jazz vocalist as alone and lonely, yet emoting from her heart, suffering, yet sexy is how the product, the image, and the record was marketed during Billie Holiday's lifetime.<sup>7</sup>

My interest in a historiography that could include the Prairie View Co-eds and other female jazz instrumentalists is not grounded in hopes of extending to them the compromised star treatment received by some female jazz singers. Nor am I interested in extending to women musicians the mythologies about male jazz instrumentalists as eccentric outsiders. I *am* interested in exploring how "all-girl" bands shake up the gendered and raced, sexist, heterosexist, and racist, contours of jazz historiography by being too far outside the outsider myth to get in. I'm interested in how their relentless estrangement from the paradigm, even after the publication of several excellent books on women in jazz in the 1980s, reveals the constructedness of jazz historiography in ways that tell a great deal about the desires of readers and writers of such narratives, masks the desires of audiences who danced to and applauded "all-girl" bands, and begs



the question of what is at stake in the continued privileging of some jazz artists and overlooking of others.

I am also interested in the ways in which a reissued jazz history that included the Prairie View Co-eds and other “all-girl” bands could enrich our knowledge of women’s history, for instance, women’s negotiations of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nation, during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States “All-girl” bands were places where Jim Crow laws were often upheld, but sometimes challenged; where some working class women sought skilled professional opportunities, union representation, and alternatives to menial labor; where some middle-class white women rebelled against the pedestal and the so-called “cult of true womanhood”; and where some African-American women fought for—and represented to black audiences—improved social, political, and material conditions for African-American women and all African Americans. The latter is exemplified by the Prairie View Co-eds, who combined the sights and sounds of a swinging professional black band playing popular hits of the day (at a time when black music had become, for the first time, the predominant pop music in the United States) with images of a group of young black college women for black audiences in segregated dance halls, military camps, and theaters across the south and east.

There was nothing tragic, down-and-out, or lonely about representations of jazz musicians or jazzwomen as presented by the Prairie View Co-eds, not in the eyes of their audiences, not in the praise of the black press. Their status at the college itself was described by bassist Argie Mae Edwards (Medearis) in our 1997 interview: “Oh, we ruled the campus. We were traveling all the time, you know. And we had money! And when we’d go out on weekends, our friends would say, ‘Bring me something back.’ And we’d bring them food back and all of that. Oh, we were something else.”<sup>8</sup>

As black college women who were also jazz instrumentalists, the Prairie View Co-eds were, indeed, something else! In writing about how black women novelists “restructured womanhood” through representations of “race women,” Hazel Carby has pointed out that, while many black women novelists imbued their black female characters with a desire for “racial uplift,” they denied them sensual desire in order to counter a history of racist depictions of black women as nothing but sexual.<sup>9</sup> Black women who played in “all-girl” bands of the 1940s inherited the same problematic history of representations of black women as “primitive and exotic creatures” that troubled novelists such as Nella Larson, but, as musicians, they also inherited the “alternative form[s] of representation” popularized by powerful blueswomen such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.

In fact, as I have written elsewhere, African-American all-woman bands, and this seems especially true of the band from Prairie View College, may have been unique in their ability to link expressions of political desire of race women with the sensual desire of blueswomen. As black college women and dance band musicians, the Prairie View Co-eds offer a rare glimpse into black womanhood as both a site of uplift *and*

downbeats. Revisiting the performances of the Prairie View Co-eds as they are remembered by musicians, the black press, and black audiences, may prove a rich site for what Farah Griffin has called “Textual Healing,” or a process of reclaiming or re-imagining black female bodies as “engaged in acts of pleasure and political agency.”<sup>10</sup> I quote from their press book:

You Don’t Have To Go To College  
Here’s A College You Can Adopt As Your Own.  
For These Darlings of Rhythm Will Teach You  
All There Is To Know About Swing!!<sup>11</sup>

The image of jazzwomen as young black college women, cared for by families and communities, and well-chaperoned by their black female professors, works against hegemonic images (desires) for jazz musicians to be dissipated bohemians; for jazzwomen to be tragic, unloved sex objects.

The Prairie View Co-eds were a place where Margaret Grigsby could work as the lead trombonist in a professional band that played the major black venues of the 1940s, and at the same time serve as secretary of the senior class, belong to numerous clubs and sororities, and earn top grades as a pre-med biology major. Where Bert Etta “Lady Bird” Davis could simultaneously be the star alto player, and a public school music major, and secretary of the junior class. The musicians did not just signify upward mobility because they were from families that could afford to send them to college; the band itself, as a professional organization whose members belonged to the musicians’ union and were paid union scale, was a route for college opportunities for poor women with musical skills. Drummer Helen Cole, as the daughter of a widowed domestic worker, recalled: “The band is the *only* way that I had of trying to put myself through school.”<sup>12</sup> She would not have had an opportunity to attend college if it had not been for the band. In addition, she was able to send some money home to her mother. She majored in business a decision that would serve her well many years later when she wished to retire as a drummer and go to work for a bank. The role of black colleges in jazz is not the only neglected history here, but also the role of jazz in black colleges. The existence of extracurricular professional bands where musicians earned union scale made it possible for some African Americans to attain college educations.

To understand what the history of black colleges meant to the Prairie View Co-eds and their audiences, it is important to note that on the eve of U.S. entrance into World War II, Prairie View College was not only the biggest black institute of higher education in Texas, it was the only four-year public college in Texas that African Americans could attend. Founded in 1878, when most white Texans were opposed to higher education for African Americans, Prairie View College shares a proud history with other distinguished black colleges established simultaneously with, and in response to, the rise of the southern system of mandatory segregation known as “Jim Crow.” Before the Civil War, every southern state except Tennessee legally prohibited the education of black Americans, free or enslaved.

After 1865, black education was no longer a crime, but it was still hard to come by as states invented new laws that required black students to attend segregated or “Jim Crow” facilities. As Angela Davis observed, black people who were able to secure educations under these conditions “inevitably associated their knowledge with their people’s collective battle for freedom.”<sup>13</sup> For African-American women who comprised half the student body of black colleges even before World War II, a college education provided urgently needed alternatives to menial labor, such as domestic work and share cropping. While white women with high school educations could obtain clerical positions, black women were largely barred from such work, but could work as teachers in black schools if they had some college.

Despite the invisibility of historically black colleges from most jazz and swing histories, many black colleges in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s boasted popular dance bands. These bands were sources of pride, as well as entertainment, for black audiences both inside and outside the campus walls. Traveling entertainment from black colleges was already a time honored tradition, dating nearly as early as the establishment of the colleges themselves. Perhaps the best remembered today are the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

Though different from choral groups in obvious ways, when dance bands made up of young black college students traveled off-campus, their performances provided living proof that black colleges were alive and kicking, despite a well-known history of political, legal, and economic obstacles. Activities of black college bands were widely reported in both the entertainment and college sections of national black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* and *Pittsburgh Courier*.

Well-known and popular dance bands emanated from black colleges, such as Wiley, Alabama State, Fisk, Morehouse, and Wilberforce. Many musicians from these college-based ensembles went on to become famous in the professional music world.

Bandleader Erskine Hawkins got his start in the Alabama State Collegians, as did trumpet player Wilber “Dud” Bascomb, who would later star in Hawkins’s famous professional dance band. Horace Henderson led a dance band at Wilberforce. Drummer Roy Porter and trumpet player Kenny Dorham both played in the Wiley Collegians while students at Wiley College. One of the last wishes of blues singer Charles Brown was, in fact, that

upon his death, donations be made to the Prairie View Music Department. He had played in the Prairie View Collegians. Like most such bands, the Prairie View Collegians was made up of all men. But when the armed forces depleted the band in the spring of 1943, music teacher Will Henry Bennett recruited for a new “all-girl” band. The Prairie View Co-eds were soon playing weekend jobs at Houston’s Civic Auditorium and Down Town Grill, plus nearby military bases.

By the Spring of 1944, they were represented by Moe Gale’s professional booking agency, going on the road each summer on a tour that included numberless one-nighters for primarily black audiences across the South, both civilian and military, including the renowned Tuskegee Airmen, and appeared at black colleges and black theaters, including annual features at New York’s Apollo Theater.

When the Prairie View Co-eds played for black audiences, as they usually did, their college connection was crucial to their popularity. Like the men’s college groups, the Prairie View Co-eds represented the achievements of black education, and, as black college women during World War II, they reminded audiences of the particular gains made by black women at that historical moment. Even those labor historians who are skeptical about the war-time headway achieved by white U.S. home front women generally agree that the labor crisis of World War II constituted a major watershed for African-American women. The Prairie View Co-eds embodied black women’s claims to respectability and upward mobility, qualities historically denied



Helen Cole, Prairie View Co-eds drummer, courtesy of Ernest Mae Crafton Miller

them by dominant society. But, unlike other images of respectable black womanhood available in the black press at the time, serious, heroic figures such as Mary McLeod Bethune, the image presented by the Co-eds was youthful, upbeat; a refreshing picture of respectable, educated black women enjoying themselves. For black audiences, they stimulated race pride. For the same reasons, they posed something of a challenge to the worldviews of some white audiences.

Lead trombonist Margaret Grigsby, later a doctor at Howard University Hospital, recalled one incident on the summer tour of 1944. "We had to play at Sea Island, Georgia, once. It was the first time they didn't call us Prairie View Co-eds. They had a poster up there, 'the Prairie View Prancers.' And I got mad right away. I said, 'What do they mean the Prairie View Prancers? They can't call us Co-eds?'" "Prancers" summoned images of chorus lines, and though the photo on the poster made it clear that it was

black women were not available to just anyone. They were valued and respected and protected. The fact that they were strictly chaperoned as young black women represented a kind of "race pride" that involved claiming an aura of "respectability" usually reserved for white middle-class women.

When former Co-eds spoke of their chaperones, they did so with affection and respect, but also expressed particular joy in how they exercised power and agency in these relationships. Bassist Argie Mae Edwards (Medearis) laughed as she remembered how the young female professors would beg the musicians to request them as chaperones so they have a change of scenery. Those who didn't "act right," in the judgement of the Co-eds, weren't likely to be asked again.<sup>15</sup> While in New York for the Apollo bookings, the musicians stayed in the Hotel Cecil; Minton's Playhouse was in the same building, and other clubs hosted jam sessions as well. Several musicians were able to

*The presence of chaperons, on the road, at performances, and in the oral narratives of musicians, indicated that these young black women were not available to just anyone.*

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a band being advertised, not a line of dancers, the substitution "Prancers" for "Co-eds" stung. Grigsby had nothing against dancers. Her cousin Blanche Thompson, also known as the Brown Skin Venus, was a member of Irving C. Miller's Brown Skin Models, and would be cheering the Prairie View Co-eds on from the wings during their Apollo Theater debut. What upset her was the fact that the substitution eclipsed the musicians' college affiliation. "At that time, many Southerners refused to call African Americans anything that reflected progress, so calling us Co-eds showed we were college educated."<sup>14</sup>

The versions of "jazz musician" and "black womanhood," delivered by the Prairie View Co-eds appealed to black audiences of the 1940s in a way that was unintelligible and even antithetical to dominant white desires for jazz meaning. Surely, this is related to the historical context in which they were never recorded, were ignored by the mainstream (white-owned) jazz press, and omitted from jazz history. Emphasis on the college status of the musicians was a kind of "textual healing" for black audiences that removed the band from dominant definitions of jazz as "untutored free expression." Another site of "textual healing" occurred in the oral narratives when Co-eds alumnae told stories about their chaperones. When the Prairie View Co-eds traveled, unlike most "all-girl" bands, they did so with chaperones who genuinely cared about their safety. While it may be tempting to view the chaperones as yet another layer of surveillance and repression of black female agency, it is also important to think of black women's self-representation in a dominant culture that defined them as hypersexual, up-for-grabs. The presence of chaperones, on the road, at performances, and in the oral narratives of musicians, indicate that these young

sneak by their chaperones and participate in New York jam sessions. Stories about chaperones, both of the musicians being valued enough to be provided guardians, and of claiming some autonomy, are places where the Prairie View Co-eds give us rare glimpses into struggles over gender, race, sexuality, and black womanhood in unrecorded jazz history. It is another place in their history where uplift and downbeats co-mingle.

The Prairie View Co-eds are one of several African-American "all-girl" bands that were extremely popular with the black press and African-American audiences in the mid-1940s, yet were never recorded, were ignored by the white-owned music trades, and omitted from jazz and swing historiography. As a fifteen-piece band (five saxes, four trumpets, three trombones, piano, bass, and drums) that played hits of the day such as, Count Basie's "One O'Clock Jump," Lucky Millinder's "Sweet Slumber," Jimmie Lunceford's "White Heat," Harry James' "Back Beat Boogie," and Woody Herman's "Woodchopper's Ball," complete with improvised solos by such serious musicians as Bert Etta "Lady Bird" Davis, who later played with Dinah Washington's road show, and Clara Bryant, who went on to participate in the famous Central Avenue jam sessions in Los Angeles; as a band that received rave reviews for their performances at such demanding venues as the Apollo, the Prairie View Co-eds would seem to fit the historical criteria for a big band. Yet, they do not fit typical jazz/swing discourse about musicians and bands. In their unique position as black women who were both musicians and college students, the Prairie View Co-eds raise questions not only about what does it mean to overlook African-American women as big band instrumentalists, but what does it mean to downplay the



Ernest Mae Crafton, back stage at the Apollo 1945, courtesy of Ernest Mae Crafton Miller  
<http://ecommons.txstate.edu/jtmh/vol2/iss2/4>

importance of African-American institutions in jazz history--in this case the unsung role of historically black colleges? Why do we think of black colleges as homes of choral groups, such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who performed arranged versions of spirituals but not of jazz and swing bands, such as those based out of Wiley, Morehouse, Fisk, Wilberforce, and Prairie View? What does the popularity of a band whose title emphasized that the musicians were black college women do to our assumptions about what big bands meant to audiences during the late swing era? And what does the presence of black college women, simultaneously figured as "race women" representing the hopes of African Americans during the war for better living and working conditions, and as big band musicians who played jazz, swing, jump, and blues, traveling one-night stands on the road on weekends and summer vacations, contribute to our knowledge about historically black colleges and African-American women's history during World War II?

As I have stated elsewhere, if jazz history included the perspectives of women instrumentalists, we would know more about jazz and we would know more about women. If jazz history included the Prairie View Co-eds, who and what else would we know more about? We would know more about the role of historically black colleges in jazz history and the role of jazz in black colleges. It would seem more crucial, perhaps, to persistently engage in gender and race analysis of how jazz has been defined, produced, marketed, consumed, and historicized. We would know one 1940s example of an African-American cultural site in which young black women could express both dignity and pleasure. We would know more about jazz cultural formations that included women--what I have called the feminized, devalued, sub-categories of jazz (includes different things at different times and places, but often jazz education, singing, certain instruments like flute and harp that have been associated with femininity, "all-girl" bands). We would be encouraged to pay more attention to unrecorded jazz to produce and study descriptive accounts of unrecorded jazz, as well as analyses of what these unrecorded jazz practices meant to whom and why they were not recorded. We would know more about the circuits of jazz practice that were meaningful to black audiences as sites of "textual healing," though not necessarily acknowledged by white-owned recording companies or magazines that later become the basis for jazz historiography. We would have more awareness of unacknowledged jazz subjectivities that could provide powerful counter-memories to the problematic stereotypes about jazz and jazz musicians that so persistently circulate.

If jazz history included the Prairie View Co-eds, the words "jazz musician" could evoke thoughts of Ernie Mae Crafton Miller, who played baritone saxophone in the 1940s, who now plays piano in a hotel in Austin, Texas, or trumpet player Clora Bryant, who played jazz professionally until the early 1990s, but made only one album under her own name in 1957. We could think of the young Texan black college women upstairs at the Hotel Cecil, slipping out to attend jam sessions as their chaperones slept, as a part of the same world, though differently situated by gender, that includes the famous men of bebop

history who jammed downstairs at Minton's.

The "something elseness" of the Prairie View Co-eds offers considerably more than a separate female jazz history, more, also than jazz history as-we-know it, only co-ed. Rather, they seem to offer a challenge that could reframe--revamp, if you will--the contours of jazz historiography itself. This revamping cannot be achieved by historical overdub, sometimes called inclusion, alone. I propose that this revamping would include a social analysis of unrecordability. A jazz historiography that encompassed all-woman bands and black colleges would be, like the Prairie View Co-eds, "something else." ■

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# "Sandstorm"

## Reflections on the Roots of West Texas Music

Nolan Porterfield

Elvis and Buddy in Lubbock, Texas, courtesy of David Dennard and Dragon Street Records



*Several years ago I was in Cleveland, Ohio, for a two-day tribute to Jimmie Rodgers, entitled "Waiting for a Train: Jimmie Rodgers' America," sponsored by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Country Music Hall of Fame, and Case Western Reserve University. The event involved concerts by some of our best contemporary "roots" musicians and scholarly papers by leading academics and historians of country music. When I began writing a biography of Jimmie Rodgers in the early 1970s, I would never have imagined in my wildest dreams that he would someday be taken seriously and honored by big-city intellectuals way up north. It was sort of like Gourmet magazine devoting a whole issue to chicken fried steak.*

Many of the participants were picked up by a van at the airport, and as we were checking in at the hotel, I was standing next to Guy Clark, who was there to perform at one of the concerts. He said to me, "In the van coming in from the airport, I heard you say you grew up in West Texas. Whereabouts?" He smiled, but there was just that little edge in his voice that said, "I bet where I grew up was a lot meaner, and dustier, and littler than where you grew up."

Long ago I gave up on saying, "Draw, Texas," when people ask where I'm from. So my standard reply is usually "Lubbock," and that's what I told Guy Clark. He gave me a smug smile and said, "Monahans." I said, "Okay, you win." But I thought about it a minute and I realized — hey, I can do better than that, and not even stoop so low as Draw. So I said, "O'Donnell." He said, "You win."

The point of this story, beyond allowing me to drop Guy Clark's name, is that Texans, regardless of what they may say, are partial to the places where they grew up. We may complain and carry on about it, but a strong sense of place is imbedded in all of us, and more often than not, the music of our particular place is a central part of what roots us to it. I haven't lived in West Texas in over thirty years, but I've never felt at home anywhere else, and when I think of West Texas, I think of Bob Wills and Ernest Tubb and Hoyle Nix and Tommy Hancock and the nameless *little* local bands on small 250-watt radio stations all over the plains; I think of Western swing dance tunes and honky-tonk heartbreakers, the conjunto music of the fieldhands who came to pick cotton in the fall, Friday nights when the neighbors gathered to make ice cream and play guitars and fiddles and mandolins. (No banjos, thank you very much.)

Music in West Texas has a rich history and a diverse background, but if we are talking about the music known and played

styles and forms from beyond the region.

Carr and Munde confirm what I have said about this difficulty of categorizing and defining not only West Texas music, but that of the state as a whole: "In Texas . . . the lines between musical styles have been blurred by musicians who combine many influences to create new and often exciting musical forms. . . The music of Buddy Holly and other 1950s rock and roll musicians is [just one] example of the way several musics can be molded into a new form."<sup>1</sup>

In view of this, it's interesting and perhaps informative to approach West Texas music from the point of view of the listener. I propose to offer some sense of the general musical environment in West Texas as I knew it, growing up there some fifty years ago. Pardon my lapses into personal experience rather than scholarly analysis or academic discourse. Sometimes anecdotal evidence is the best we have.

First, about that word "roots" in the term "West Texas Music

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*When we look back on the country music of that era, three names immediately stand out, especially for us Texans: Hank Williams, Lefty Frizzell, and Bob Wills.*

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40 and listened to by the great majority of the population, then its roots are mostly in string bands of one kind or another — essentially, the many kinds of music historically called "hillbilly" which now fit under the broad umbrella of country music, with side excursions into rock-and-roll, rockabilly, and plain old rock (still essentially string bands). Nevertheless, the subject of "West Texas Music Roots" is vast and deep, and even a condensed survey of it is beyond the scope of this article. Fortunately we have an extensive account in a fine book by Joe Carr and Alan Munde called *Prairie Nights to Neon Lights*, published by the Texas Tech University Press.

Despite this rich musical heritage, it's difficult, if not impossible, to identify such a thing as indigenous West Texas music — that is, a particular style or repertoire that originated there and distinguishes itself as unique to that area. By and large, there's no such critter, and the reason is pretty simple when you think about it. Places where distinctive musical styles developed — like western Kentucky thump-picking, Louisiana and East Texas zydeco, Southeastern string bands, Tennessee fiddling — these are places that were settled in the nineteenth century or earlier, when making music at home was the primary form of entertainment for most people. But West Texas was only sparsely settled until around the time of World War I. My grandfather came to Lynn County in 1924 and was considered to be one of the pioneers. By that time the phonograph had become a major source of down-home entertainment, and very soon came radio and talking pictures, all of them being outside influences far stronger than what might have been developing there on its own. Thus West Texas music, like much of our popular culture, is largely an amalgamation, a grand transformation, if you will, of

Roots." Since I'll mention some people who aren't West Texans, you'll see that I define that term "musical heritage" in the broadest sense, not as specialized musicology or regional cultural history, but rather as the general musical atmosphere combined from every source, both native and national, that prevailed in West Texas in the 1950s. Buddy Holly, for instance, is known to have admired Bill Monroe, whose music is about as far from native Texas styles as it could get. To go back to the beginnings for a moment, Eck Robertson, the first West Texan to make commercial records, hardly had what could be called a "native" style — he was thirteen when his family moved to Texas and had made his first fiddle back in Arkansas at the age of eight. On the modern end, a lot of the influence that sold guitars — and ducktail haircuts — on the High Plains in the 1950s and 1960s came from a swivel-hipped kid from Mississippi. The business of tracing influences is often interesting and sometimes valuable, but it can also create false dilemmas and lead down some tangled and profitless paths.

When we look back on the country music of that era, three names immediately stand out, especially for us Texans: Hank Williams, Lefty Frizzell, and Bob Wills. Two out of the three were West Texans, more or less, and Hank Williams might as well have been.

I have a story about Hank Williams.

New Year's Day 1953, was a cold, blustery Thursday on the Plains. A blue norther was howling down out of the Panhandle, and the sky was thick with gusting sand. Coming in the middle of the week, New Year's was just another slow workday in my dad's crossroads grocery store and gas station, about ten miles from nowhere. In the early hours of that sandstorm morning,

# ALWAYS LATE

Porterfield: "Sandstorm": Reflections on the Roots of West Texas Music

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W S M

while I slept my zombie adolescent sleep, dreaming of misty English countrysides, Nanabeth Cox, and flashy cars, Hank Williams died in the back seat of his '52 Cadillac, somewhere in the wilds of eastern Tennessee.

I don't remember how I learned of Hank Williams's death, and I now find that strange and rather puzzling. But I was a strange and puzzled kid, square as a bear, and I missed a lot of what was going on. I was equally unaware of another great passing that very week — that of Fletcher Henderson, the musical genius who was largely responsible for the swing revolution that Benny Goodman got most of the credit for. But I had no reason to know about Henderson; after all, he was black and several cultural removes from the West Texas world of a decidedly unhip, muddle-headed white boy. Hank Williams, on the other hand, was one of us, as close to blood as blood gets, but I probably wouldn't remember much about his death if it were not for what happened when I went back to school the next day.

It took a while to figure out what was happening. Country kids in my day tended to be cold-eyed realists, too simple to be sentimental, and we desperately avoided public displays of emotion. But something was going around, quietly, awkwardly, out of a need too great to contain, in the first whispered communications that morning: "Hey. You know Hank Williams died?" Even more unsettling was the invariable response: a solemn nod of the head, a troubled sigh, even now and then a tear or two (but only from girls, of course). All that morning, kids gathered in small

That Doggie in the Window." It's possible that I read about Hank's death in the back pages of that day's edition of the *Lubbock Morning Avalanche*, headlined "Hill-Billy Song King Found Dead in Automobile by Chauffeur," along with late bulletins from the Korean War, warnings that our schools and colleges were filled with communists, and, on a note of social progress, the news that, for the first time in decades, no one had been lynched in the United States during the previous year. Eisenhower was about to take office, Stalin still ruled in Russia, our schools were segregated, Elvis was a wimpy senior at Humes High. The whole world seemed a dark and windy place.

In 1953 nobody paid much attention to country music, at least not publicly. If you had any pretensions at all to culture and sophistication — if you just wanted to be "normal" and have nice people like you — you ignored country music wherever possible. If you couldn't ignore it, you made fun of it. Historians of country music like to think of the 1940s and 1950s as "The Golden Age," but in those days everybody called it "hill-billy music," and practically no one I knew took it seriously.

What we mostly did was take it for granted. Country music was everywhere around us, as common and everyday as the dust in the air we breathed. The all-country radio station had not yet been invented (that would happen a year or so later, right in our very midst, when Dave Stone put KDAV on the air from a cotton field just south of Lubbock), but every 250-watter for miles around programmed three or four hours of pickin' and singin'

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*Country music was everywhere around us, as common and everyday as the dust in the air we breathed.*

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clumps in out-of-the-way corners and vacant classrooms, talking in hushed tones, sharing the news about Hank Williams's death.

I'd never seen my schoolmates behave this way, and until then it had never occurred to me that anyone else paid much attention to Hank Williams, not the way I had. In later times, in other places, and among other people, there would be similar occasions for mourning — fashionably, in the wake of Janis and Jimi Hendrix, Elvis and John Lennon, and, of course, Buddy Holly. But in 1953, for the young, innocent, straight-arrow fans of just one more redneck troubadour (and one whose career was, after all, in serious decline), it was bizarre and rather baffling behavior. To understand even vaguely the impact and meaning of that day, it's necessary to understand something about the character back then of the music we listened to and the circumstances under which we heard it.

As I've said, it seems strange now to realize that I don't remember just how I learned of Hank Williams's death. More than likely, I heard about it from the cheap little Wards Airline radio that played incessantly in my father's store, a static hodgepodge of swing bandstand, western roundup, time-news-temperature, Les Paul's "Lady of Spain," Patty Page singing "How Much Is

daily, an early morning wakeup show beamed at the farmers, a mid-morning jamboree for the housewives, and an all-afternoon "Western Request" that kept the cards and letters coming in. While I pumped gas and stocked shelves in my dad's store, I spent a lot of time listening to Hi Pockets Duncan from KSEL, and later KDAV. When anyone else was around, I made a point of tuning to "The 950 Club" (KSEL, 950 kilocycles, not hertz!) where smooth-voiced Wayne Allen played Bobby Sherwood, Artie Shaw, and Benny Goodman.

There were no bars in Baptist-dry West Texas in those days, but every cafe and gathering place had a jukebox. There was even one in my dad's country grocery, a decrepit old Wurlitzer that held only ten records. For several months one fall, nine of the ten slots held Hank Williams's "Lovesick Blues," because the distributor got tired of changing worn-out records. (The tenth record was Theresa Brewer's "Music, Music, Music," obligatory for every jukebox in those days: "Put another nickel in, in the nickelodeon.")

Because we weren't allowed to dance at school and there were no other places to do it, on Saturday nights several couples would drive out of town to some point where two deserted dirt roads

crossed, park their cars facing the intersection with headlights on, tune all the car radios to the same station, and dance in the center, waltzing and two-stepping and hugdancing in the dusty light to string-band strains from "The Big D Jamboree" or "Louisiana Hayride." We claimed to hanker for the uptown rhythms of city orchestras, but ballroom dancing, even if we had known how, seemed out of place.

These rustic orgies left no permanent marks. Afterward we went right back to Patti Page and Frankie Laine and Joni James and Eddie Fisher — in 1953 rock & roll was yet unknown, still little more than a gleam in Chuck Berry's eye. We spoke intensely of "classical music," our notions of classical tending in the direction of Mantovani or something by Sigmund Romberg, "Stouthearted Men," perhaps. I yearned for what I thought of as normalcy, "good taste," "respectability." I wanted nothing so much as to root-hog out of my country roots, get as far as I

we think of the fifties as being dominated by Hank and Lefty. Eddy Arnold, still the "Tennessee Plowboy," was outselling both of them in those days. Hank Snow had rocketed to the top with "I'm Moving On" (released about the same time as Lefty's first records), and no one could touch Ernest Tubbs when it came to touring and pulling in the crowds. I spent a lot of jukebox nickels on Kitty Wells, Red Foley, Goldie Hill, Webb Pierce, and Jim Reeves, among others.

And Bob Wills, of course. If I had to name the five greatest country songs, two of them would be "Faded Love" and "San Antonio Rose." They really don't write 'em like that anymore.

I could go on forever talking about Bob Wills's impact on West Texas music, but I'll limit it to one quick story out of my own experience, and it actually doesn't have much to do with Bob Wills.

During my freshman year at Texas Tech, I sometimes worked 50 hours a week and carried a full load of classes. Needless to

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*By eleven o'clock or so, the joint was, as they say, jumping, and we were doing our best to keep time with Bob Wills, both on the dance floor and on the bandstand, where he could barely stand up.*

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could from all the "howdys" and "you-alls," and sandstorms and hard-scrabble hickness that seemed to be everywhere I turned. I never quite made it and lived to be grateful I hadn't. But I went on suffering from the symptoms of hypertoxic cultural dysfunction for some time.

After Nanabeth Cox broke my heart our freshman year of high school, my pal Bobby Kitchen and I spent a lot of time hanging out at Jackson's Drive-in, consoling ourselves with hamburger steaks and hillbilly music from the jukebox. Bobby, who looked like James Dean and had a mildly tough reputation, broke the hearts of more girls than I ever said hello to, but he always seemed to be between romances and as much in need of a cheatin' song as I was. Hank's "Cold, Cold Heart" and Lefty Frizzell's "Look What Thoughts Will Do" seemed to fill the bill: equal parts of she-done-me-wrong, Lord-how-it-hurts, and pull-up-your-socks.

As a fan of Lefty Frizzell, I take a back seat to no one. Even now, after the passing of so many years since Nanabeth dumped me for the O'Donnell Eagles' star half-back, I still get weak and moony and somehow revived when I hear "I Love You a Thousand Ways" or "If You've Got the Money, I've Got the Time." We lived narrow, cut-off lives in those days; it was years before I learned that Lefty Frizzell was working just down the road, in Big Spring, when he made those records. I don't know where I thought he was — off in some mythical place that didn't really exist, like New York or Nashville, I suppose, but I'd have crawled all the way to Big Spring if I'd known he was there.

But Hank Williams and Lefty Frizzell weren't the only ones. Country music was rich and diverse back then, just before the rock & roll deluge. It's only with the benefit of hindsight that

say, that didn't leave much time for a social life. A lot of the other guys on my floor at West Hall were in the same shape; as the school year drew to a close in the spring of 1955, we were all quivering masses of pent-up frustration. Four or five of us scraped together the wherewithal to buy a fifth of cheap whiskey, Heaven Hill, as I recall, sold to us by our wing supervisor, a senior who put himself through Tech selling brewed and distilled spirits to his fellow students but who would not, of course, allow any of us to consume them in the privacy of our own dorm rooms.

Our communal purchase of a flask of Heaven Hill coincided with the appearance of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys at the old Cotton Club on the Slaton Highway. Someone rustled up a car, and we betook ourselves and our flagon of rare nectar off to hear Bob Wills. We went stag, of course; no time to arrange dates, even if we'd known any girls to ask.

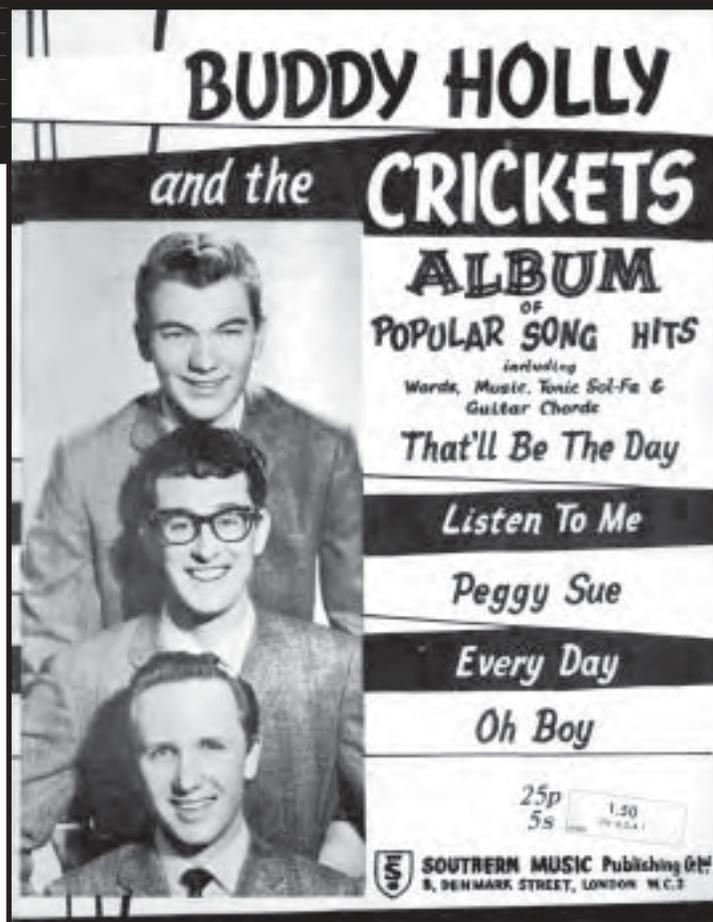
By eleven o'clock or so, the joint was, as they say, jumping, and we were doing our best to keep time with Bob Wills, both on the dance floor and on the bandstand, where he could barely stand up. In fact, he finally fell off and had to be carted away, while the Playboys carried on as though nothing had happened. We weren't in much better shape. I didn't dance much, but my buddies had discovered that there were plenty of willing young ladies, and at some point they all went off to the dance floor and left me to guard our bottle of Heaven Hill. In a minute or two, I realized that if I didn't get up and walk around, I'd pass out, so I carefully clutched the bottle in both hands, stood up, and wobbled off, holding our Heaven Hill as if it were the crown jewels.

I have neglected to mention that the guy working the door that night was none other than Hi Pockets Duncan, the well-known country DJ, whom I had been listening to for years and

who was, in my eyes, a very famous person. I should also explain that in those days one of my greatest aspirations was to be a DJ on the radio, just like Hi Pockets, entirely oblivious to the fact that when I opened my mouth what came out sounded a lot like Gomer Pyle, or worse. At any rate, emboldened by quantities of Heaven Hill and burning with youthful ambition, I found the courage to walk up to Hi Pockets, still clutching the precious flask in both hands, and started babbling: how I was a big fan of his and how I wanted to be a DJ and how could I get a job and would he help me, etcetera, etcetera. To his credit, Hi Pockets listened to it all very patiently, on and on till I finally began to run down. Then he reached out and took the bottle of Heaven Hill and put it in his coat pocket. He said, "Son, do you know how much money I make?" Well, of course I didn't, but I knew it must be a lot, because he was on the radio and famous and all that. He said, "Sixty dollars a week," turned on his heel, and walked off with what was left of our bottle of Heaven Hill.

I don't know if he was telling the truth about the sixty dollars a week, but a short while later, when I got a lousy job with a small daily newspaper out in New Mexico at seventy-five dollars a week, I consoled myself with the thought that at least I was making more than Hi Pockets Duncan. You could starve without trying very hard even on seventy-five dollars a week, back in 1955.

I have remarked on Carr and Munde's fine book, *Prairie Nights to Neon Lights*. It's a comprehensive account, but there are a few omissions. I wish, for instance, that there was some mention of The Caprock Playboys, whose blazing, brilliant, and notorious career lasted about three months in the summer and fall of 1952. During all that time we played maybe two stage shows and about three dances, as I recall, but we were on the radio (unpaid, of course) every Saturday afternoon, from KPET, Lamesa (also known as "A Friendly Voice from a Friendly Town"). Anyway, we thought it was the big time; we came on right after Hoyle Nix and the West Texas Playboys and right before the Fluvanna Fencejumpers, another grievous omission from Carr and Munde's book. Fluvanna is about the only place more obscure than Draw. The Fluvanna Fencejumpers consisted of a very pretty teenage blonde, I don't remember her name, who played great honky-



Courtesy of Texas Music Museum, Austin

tonk piano, accompanied by her little brother on the fiddle and his friend, more or less pretending to play guitar. The piano player often wore tight jeans and bounced around a lot when she played. On those tight-jeans days we stayed after our show and lined up at the studio window to watch the action on the piano stool.

I also wish there was something in *Prairie Nights to Neon Lights* about Ronald Mansfield, about whom I know nothing except he had a local hit in the early sixties with a great song called "Tell Me Pretty Words." I once used it to demonstrate for a Yankee friend of mine the difference between "bluegrass" and the kind of music I

grew up on in West Texas, which I proposed to call "sandstorm" instead of "bluegrass." "Tell Me Pretty Words" was the quintessential "sandstorm" record. If there is such a thing as native West Texas music, "sandstorm" is it.

Perhaps that bears a slight adjustment. When I remarked earlier that there is hardly any such thing as indigenous West Texas music, I was speaking from an historical viewpoint, looking back to the beginnings, which for West Texas came along too late for the kind of home-grown, folk-based music that developed in older cultures. Since the 1950s, however, there seems to have been an emergence of styles and attitudes that are distinctively West Texan, a kind of latter-day "indigenous music" that will serve as a base and beginning point for future generations. This includes, for example, musicians once identified with the short-lived Flatlanders: Butch Hancock, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Joe Ely, and others. Moreover, there's the very unique and original work of Andy Wilkinson, which more than any other music that I can think of, draws on the culture, history, and heritage of West Texas, and which may very well be laying down the foundation for what in the future will be identified as the truly native music of that region. ■

(This article contains revised portions of a paper that was read on September 4, 1999 for the program entitled "Roots: A Symposium on West Texas Music," held at Texas Tech University)

#### NOTES

1. Joe Carr and Alan Munde, *Prairie Nights to Neon Lights, The Story of Country Music in West Texas*, Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1995, 5-6.

## **Tejano Proud: Tex-Mex Music in the Twentieth Century**

By Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002).

This is an excellent multidimensional study of *música tejana* in the twentieth century. Beginning with early attempts by national recording companies to commercialize Texas-Mexican music in the late 1920s, Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., explores the main stylistic features and adaptations of this diverse genre of music, as well as the major social, political, and cultural forces that shaped its ensembles and styles over the next seventy years. Emphasizing *música tejana* as a complex array of dynamic musical forms, he discusses the wide range of musical ensembles—the conjunto, vocal groups, progressive conjuntos, orquestas, grupos, and Chicano country bands—that have played it. He analyzes the evolution of *música tejana* in the context of a borderlands culture that nurtured its growth and creative expression.

San Miguel, Jr., begins by showing that the recording industry by the 1930s had contributed significantly to the growing popularity of conjunto music, particularly among agricultural workers in South and Central Texas. This popularization of conjunto benefitted from immigration, stylistic changes in ensembles and the mix of instruments, Spanish-language radio, and a growing number of jukeboxes, record players, entrepreneurs, and dance promoters. Although record companies and Spanish-language radio stations did record and play corridos, canciones típicas, huapangos, and other styles of music, diversity had become a casualty of the growing commercialization of *música tejana* by 1941.

The popularity of *música tejana* after World War II was due in large part to the formation of two recording companies—Discos Ideal, set up by Armando Marroquín and Paco Betancourt in 1947, and Discos Falcon, which was founded by Arnaldo Ramírez a few years later. These companies contributed to the rise of a number of popular Tejano artists who recorded for its label, including several women—particularly Lydia Mendoza, Chelo Silva, and Carmen y Laura—who shaped the Tejano recording industry in the 1950s. Thanks in large part to these recording companies and artists, the orquesta tejana and conjunto dominated all other forms of *música tejana* through the 1960s.

Although Chicano political activists embraced conjunto as an important cultural expression of the tejano community, conjunto suffered an overall decline in the 1970s and 1980s. San Miguel, Jr., attributes this decline to the rise of a more urban, acculturated Tejano middle class that associated the accordion and conjunto with the more bawdy, rowdy features of working-class culture and life in the barrios. He also points out that with few exceptions—most notably, Steve Jordan and El Rio Jordan and Chavela y Brown Express—conjunto

musicians continued to cling to tradition by playing mostly polkas and rancheras. They failed to incorporate rock and roll, contemporary soul, and other innovative styles that had become popular in the 1960s. As a result, older artists such as Tony de la Rosa, Rubén Vela, and Henry Zimmerle maintained their popularity, but conjunto had little appeal to youth in the 1970s and 1980s.

San Miguel, Jr., calls attention to the important role of Emilio Navaira's music in the resurgence of traditional conjunto in the early 1990s. Because of several adaptations and innovations, including the incorporation of country and rock influences, Navaira enjoyed great popularity and success in the tejano community as he sparked renewed interest in the accordion. The revival of conjunto was nurtured also by an annual conjunto festival in San Antonio, the creation of a traditional and progressive conjunto award category in the annual Tejano Music Awards, a growing number of bilingual tejano FM radio stations, and the expanded role of major record companies in the Tejano music industry.

In the late 1980s, Sony Discos, Capitol-EMI, and other major labels launched a concerted effort to find Tejano crossover groups that might attract audiences in the international Spanish-speaking as well as the domestic English-language market. San Miguel, Jr., points out that this led to selective recordings of cumbias and baladas for audiences in Mexico and Latin America. Among the grupos tejanos that spearheaded efforts to internationalize *música tejana* in the 1990s were La Mafia, Mazz, and Selena, who toured outside the United States, particularly in Mexico. Selena, who had a number of regional and international hits, developed an impressive repertoire of songs that reflected pop, rap, rock, dance, hip-hop, and *mariachi* influences. She also incorporated choreography and charisma into her performances. At the time of her murder in 1995, she was on the verge of becoming a huge international star.

This is a well-written book that makes important contributions to the history of music, popular culture, and ethnic studies. It is a highly nuanced study that takes into account class, ethnic, and gender considerations, and it pays attention to the important role of dance and instrument arrangements. *Tejano Proud* complements Manuel Peña's excellent book, *Música Tejana*, with whom San Miguel, Jr., has a few minor interpretive differences. I highly recommend it for classroom adoption.

**Gregg Andrews**  
Southwest Texas State University

## Don't Get Above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class

By Bill C. Malone, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

Bill Malone is perhaps best known as the author of the still definitive study of American country music, *Country Music U.S.A.* (University of Texas Press, 1968, 1972.) He is arguably the creator of the modern genre of country music scholarship. In this latest volume, Malone presents a highly personal, well-thought-out and revealing discussion of country music and its connection with the southern working class.

Malone begins his study with two basic assumptions: that country music is southern, and that it has an intimate relationship with working people. He discusses, in detail, six realms occupied by country music. These are home, religion, rambling, frolic, humor, and politics.

Southerners and country music fans will find much of interest here. Malone readily admits that his membership in both of these groups colors his observations, but also gives him perceptive insight. Readers will discover themselves thinking, "Oh, yes, I've noticed that and always wondered why."

The discussion of the mother figure in southern culture and music is especially intriguing. Southerners likely never question the special position of "mother" in the South. Malone contrasts the reverential, almost holy position of the Southern mother figure with that of the Southern woman - often characterized in country song as one who cheats and lies and is often murdered. It is an interesting paradox.

Also fascinating is the discussion of the southern male, the "rambler" character and the development of the concept of Southern "honor." One can readily see, in stereotypes of contemporary Southern men, the continuation of cultural themes that originated in Europe centuries ago.

Bluegrass music is often overlooked or undervalued in discussions of country music. Malone gives this music its due here and identifies bluegrass as a vital sub-style which still embraces the classic country music themes.

The field of modern country music scholarship, for which Malone is largely responsible is filled with discussions of the music and its origins. This study of the people who developed, nurtured, and lived it, is long overdue. Malone debunks the popular notion that American country music is Celtic or Elizabethan in origin. Scholars who wrote early descriptions of rural Southern music (perhaps feeling the music was inferior) found it more palatable and deserving of attention if they could connect it to a more elegant past.

Malone makes no such apologies for country music and confronts it head on as it is, rather than how a lesser scholar might wish it to be. Indeed, American country music is deserving of serious study because of its origins and development among the American southern working class, not despite them.

Malone is at his strongest when he discusses artists and music from the early classic country music era. Historical perspective and his obvious love of the subject matter result in interesting and informative discussions of country music and southern culture from before the advent of recording to the 1970s. This reader is less comfortable with Malone's discussion of and conclusions about more recent artists and their music. Malone also may give too much import to performers on the periphery of mainstream country music, such as Iris Dement, Tish Hinojosa, and James Talley. Discussion of country music and southern culture since the 1980s is perhaps best left to future authors.

Despite these reservations, this work is highly recommended to students of southern culture and country music fans with an interest in the origins and culture of the music. It is a valuable addition to the literature of country music.

Joe Carr

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is a History Professor and Director of the Center for Texas Music History at Southwest Texas State University. Recent publications include the introductory chapter “The Roots Run Deep: An Overview of Texas Music History” in *The Roots of Texas Music*, Texas A&M University Press, 2003.

## **Rush Evans**

is a graduate of the University of Texas Communications program and a free-lance music writer focusing primarily on Texas music and its rich history. He is a frequent contributor to *Discoveries*, a national music collectors magazine, where he has published articles about Willie Nelson, Kinky Friedman, The Flatlanders, and many others. He has been a Texas radio and television broadcaster for 20 years.

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