

The Journal of

2008

# TEXAS MUSIC HISTORY

Volume 4



"Phyco Opera" On the Road  
(Viva Teringual)  
The Accidental Texan

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# Letter from the Director



The 2008 issue of the *Journal of Texas Music History* marks our eighth year of publication. During those eight years, the *Journal* has been nationally recognized for its groundbreaking role in presenting quality scholarship covering all aspects of Texas and southwestern music history.

Since we first began publishing the *Journal*, the Center for Texas

Music History also has been acknowledged for its involvement in a number of other activities related to the preservation and study of our state's rich musical heritage. These include graduate and undergraduate courses on Texas music history; the *Texas Music History Online* web site, which will serve as a classroom teaching tool, a research database, and an information resource designed to promote Texas music heritage tourism; collaboration with the Texas State Historical Association, the Texas Music Office, and others on the highly successful *Handbook of Texas Music*; and the *Texas Music Oral History Program*, through which our students have interviewed dozens of prominent figures throughout the Texas music community.

Along with these and many other activities, the Center also is working on several new projects. In Spring 2008, we launched a new book series, entitled *The John and Robin Dickson Series in Texas Music*, in collaboration with Texas A&M University Press. We're very proud to say that the first book in the Dickson Series, *The History of Texas Music*, along with our *Handbook of Texas Music*, were selected by the prestigious Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. to be featured in a national exhibit on Texas history and culture. We also have started a new weekly program on National Public Radio called *This Week in Texas Music History*. In addition, we have begun filming a new television series, *Texas Music Café*, which is scheduled to begin broadcasting on PBS in January 2009.

The Center's success would not be possible without the support and encouragement of many people. I especially would like to thank the following: Gregg Andrews & Vikki Bynum, Dee Lannon, Vincent Messina, the Center's Advisory Board, Frank de la Teja, the Texas State University History Department, Denise Trauth, Perry & Marianne Moore, Gene Bourgeois, Ann Marie Ellis, Diana Harrell, César Limón, Vicki Clarke, John & Robin Dickson, Kim & Robert Richey, Patti Harrison, Teresa Ward, Richard Cheatham, Liz McDonald, Lanita Hanson, Gary Hickinbotham, Laurie Jasinski, Francine Hartman, Jim & Cathey Moore, Rick & Laurie Baish, Lucky & Becky Tomblin, Denise Boudreaux, Jo & Paul Snider, Margie First, Darrell & Barbara Piersol, Phil & Cecilia Collins, Ralph & Patti Dowling, Dennis & Margaret Dunn, Ron & Judy Brown, Grant Mazak, Cathy Supple, Sharon Sandomirsky & Chris Ellison, Byron & Rebecca Augustin, John Kunz, Kent Finlay, Tracie Ferguson, Mildred Roddy, Elmer & Susan Rosenberger, Bill Musser, Lee & Judy Keller, Ronda Reagan, Nina Wright, Glenn & Donna Joy, Billy Seidel, and all of our other friends and supporters.

To learn more about the Center and its unique and exciting programs, please contact us or visit our web site.

Thanks, and best wishes.

**Dr. Gary Hartman, Director**

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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 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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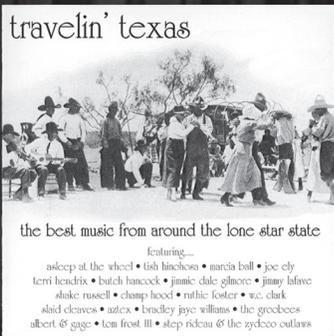
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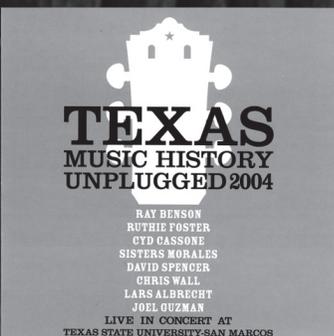
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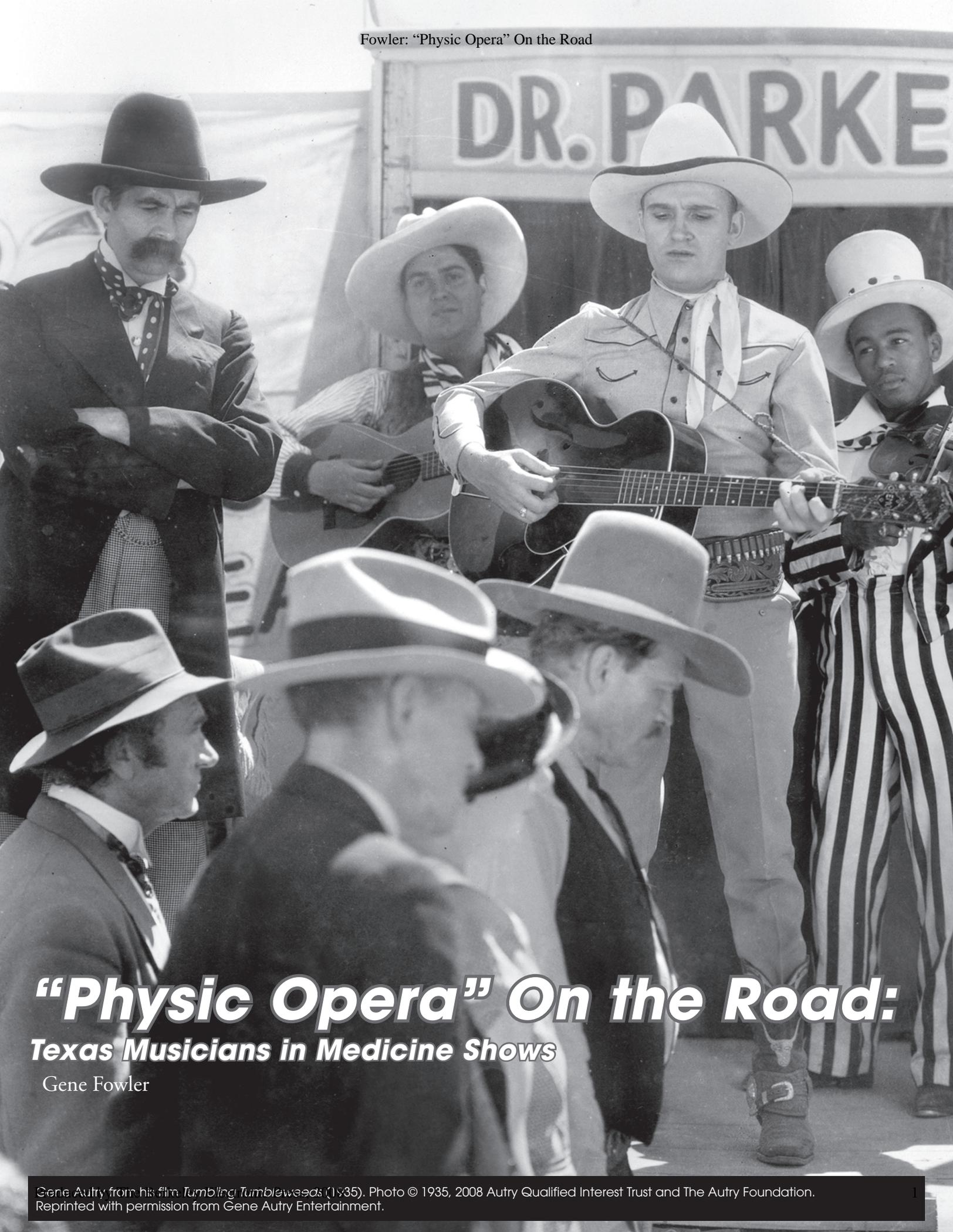
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Fowler: "Physic Opera" On the Road



# **"Physic Opera" On the Road:**

## **Texas Musicians in Medicine Shows**

Gene Fowler



*"The stuff he was selling was black and evil-tasting," recalled Texas blues and R&B legend Aaron Thibeaux 'T-Bone' Walker, "but it brought the people out!" The "stuff" Walker spoke of was Dr. Breeding's Big B Tonic (or B and B Tonic). "Doc" Breeding pitched his nostrum in a traveling show that played Walker's neighborhood in the Oak Cliff section of Dallas in 1925. "(The doctor) hired me and another boy, Josephus Cook, to ballyhoo for him," Walker remembered, "and taught Seph and me to work up some patter about it and climb on the back of a panel truck to drum people in. I'd play and feed jokes to Seph, and he'd start in to dance...Then we'd stack up the bottles, and Doc would come on."*<sup>1</sup>

Though the patent remedies hawked by Dr. Breeding and other theatrical medicine men and women may or may not have possessed any restorative powers, the entertainment they offered definitely lifted folks' spirits. And, like T-Bone Walker, several of the state's finest musicians, including the future "King of Western Swing," Bob Wills, gained some of their earliest professional experience playing with "physic operas," as medicine shows were sometimes called. Years before he hired on with radio personality and Texas politician W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel and the Light Crust Doughboys, Wills ran off briefly with a medicine show led by a champion fiddler and banjoist named Frank Barnes. According to Barnes's son Oliver, a 22-year-old Bob Wills bested Frank in an impromptu 1926 fiddling contest held in Wills's hometown of Turkey, Texas, before briefly joining the show for \$25 a week.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, a shy 15-year-old named Orvon Autry auditioned for the Fields Brothers Medicine Show when it played his hometown of Tioga, Texas, in June 1923. "They carried a dancer, a singer, and a comic," recalled Orvon years later, after he gained fame as "Gene" Autry, Hollywood's most popular movie cowboy of the 1930s and 1940s. The performers were all male, Autry added, "for no one in our parts would tolerate



King-K Medicine Company of Cleburne, Texas, circa 1906. The man standing second from the far right with a decorated fiddle is Henry C. Gilliland. He would later gain fame in 1922 after he and fellow Texas-based fiddler Alexander "Eck" Robertson made the first commercial country recording in history. Photo courtesy of the Patricia Smith Boatright Collection.

a lady traveling with a show. One of the brothers, who called himself Doctor, was the barker, and he sure was persuasive. He sold corn cure and liver pills and salve to ease the rheumatism out of aching backs." Though he suffered from stage fright that derailed his debut during his first number, young Orvon Autry went on the road with the show, earning \$15 a week.<sup>3</sup>

Autry biographer Holly George-Warren notes that four of his films featured medicine show scenes, including his first, *Tumbling Tumbleweeds*, the 1935 picture generally regarded as the genesis of the singing cowboy stampede on the silver screen. Two years later, Autry reminisced about his medicine show days in the press book for the film *Rootin' Tootin' Rhythm*. "I traveled with them for three months, softening up audiences with mournful ballads before the professor began pitching his wares: ointment and pills and his own product, a patent medicine called Fields' *Pain Annihilator*."<sup>4</sup>

Concerns over women performing in such shows had eased a bit by 1944, when a small outfit selling the alcohol-laden

tonic Hadacol played Paris, Texas. Future rockabilly spitfire Charline Arthur, born in Henrietta, Texas, pled so fervently for permission to go on the road with the Ray Smith Medicine Show that her father reluctantly signed papers allowing the 15 year-old to travel with the troupe. Arthur's younger sister recalled decades later that Charline "looked like a star" on the tiny medicine show stage.<sup>5</sup>

The medicine shows that began trekking across the Lone Star state after the Civil War ended in 1865 generally offered music that could range from a lone instrumentalist to a full brass band and minstrel performers. Often, the repertoire consisted of songs made recently popular back east, but regional fare did find its way into the medicine show playlists.<sup>6</sup>

When cowboy musicologist Jack Thorp made a song-collecting trip through Texas in 1889, he performed some of the tunes he discovered (some of which would later become western classics) with a medicine show in Waco. As Thorp recalled in his book, *Partner of the Wind*, he was carrying his

banjo into a downtown Waco chili joint when a man grabbed his arm and explained that "Professor Scott, Wizard Oil King, needed a man like me. His banjo-picker was drunk, and his show was due to open on the public square in a few minutes." The long-haired, long-winded professor "wore a scarlet coat and a huge sombrero," wrote Thorp. "Occasionally he would fondle a pet Gila monster that he carried around...and explain that among other mysterious powers he had a strange influence over dumb animals." Thorp played between medicine pitches and other bits, receiving \$5 for a two-hour show. And he collected lyrics to the song "Buckskin Joe" from the fast-talking professor, who "recited this barroom surprise story ballad with oratorical flourishes that would have astonished Shakespeare."<sup>7</sup>

As with many forms of early Texas entertainment, fiddle music was especially popular with medicine show audiences. Eck Robertson, who grew up near Amarillo, and his occasional musical partner Henry Gilliland, the two fiddlers who, together, waxed the first commercial country recordings in New York City in 1922, took to the medicine show circuit to refine their

Cleburne in 1915.) Furthermore, the high levels of alcohol and other psychoactive substances in patent medicines underscored the view of some that attending a medicine show might lure the innocent over to the "wild side" of life. Like many nostrums, the King K cure-all contained opium, which not only killed folks' pain, but made many of them repeat customers, as well.<sup>10</sup> One medicine showman's young daughter suffered the fate of many nineteenth-century children, when she died in Waxahachie, Texas, from an overdose of morphine after treating herself with too much cough syrup.<sup>11</sup>

The Kendrick Komedy Kompany, a western swing family medicine show band, toured such Texas towns as Floydada, Plainview, Ralls, Jayton, Roby, and Rotan during the late 1920s and early 1930s. As drummer Cliff Kendrick told western swing chronicler Duncan McLean, the Kompany sold "wonder cures...mostly vegetable oil, plus a little bit of whiskey; that's where the wonder came from."<sup>12</sup> Bob Kendrick remembered the medicine as "largely epsom salts in water."<sup>13</sup>

The Kendricks, like many Texas medicine shows of the

Eck Robertson...and...Henry Gilliland...took to the medicine show circuit to refine their artistry on the instrument that some called the "Devil's Box."

artistry on the instrument that some called the "Devil's Box." Robertson, who later had a long career as the colorful "Cowboy Fiddler," left his Panhandle home at age 16 to tour the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma), developing his natural talent as a showman with pitches and trick fiddling. Henry Gilliland played before World War I with the King-K Medicine Company show based in Cleburne, Texas. At least one incarnation of the King-K outfit featured a lone banjo with a half-dozen fiddlers.<sup>8</sup>

A reporter attending a King-K concert in the nearby resort town of Glen Rose, Texas, observed that anyone "who had not lost the last microbe of enjoyment" would find pleasure in the performance. One attendee apparently had lost that last microbe, testifying in a letter to the local paper that he could not "see how mothers can sit under such uproar of folly and shame with their children by their side." Complaining about the audience's drinking at the show, the correspondent continued, "We should set better examples for our children and let all our efforts be to raise the moral standard and not lower it...we could see a great deal of devilry in the whole thing."<sup>9</sup>

The fundamentalist folk myth that credited the fiddle with satanic power helped to cast the medicine shows in an unsavory light in the eyes of many Texans. (The shows were outlawed in

1920s and 1930s, obtained their nostrums from the Gassaway Company of Fort Worth. However, some musicians were even called on to help manufacture the remedies themselves. Western swing fiddler Cliff Bruner joined "Doc" Scott's medicine troupe when it passed through Aspermont, Texas, where Bruner was picking cotton in the 1930s. The entire company, Bruner told music historian Joe Carr, would pitch in to mix the product *Liquidine* during the afternoon, so they could sell it at that evening's performance.<sup>14</sup>

Texas fiddler Prince Albert Hunt, whose late-1920s recordings are regarded by historians as important forerunners of western swing, exemplified the hard-partying style of some medicine show performers. Described by music historian Marshall Wyatt as "adept at comic and stunt fiddling," Hunt often performed in blackface with Chief Wahoo's Medicine Show. A fast-living rounder who claimed to be "drunker than a hoot owl" during some of his recording sessions, Hunt was killed by a jealous husband while leaving a Dallas dancehall in 1931.<sup>15</sup>

Medicine show songman Hunter Gassaway, who was likely a member of the Fort Worth family that provided tonics, liniments, and soaps wholesale to traveling troupes, also lived it up until he was killed crossing a street in 1945. As "lovable

a character as ever the police ran in for drinking," Hunter had "followed the medicine circuit since the turn of the century." As one observer noted, Gassaway was:

known throughout this area for his rich singing of the old South's songs, Negro spirituals, and folk ballads...On the little torch-lit stages in country towns he caught up his standing listeners with the songs of Stephen Foster and the rollicking verses of levee toilers before the 'doctor' passed among them with the medicine bottles aloft. Police figure he had been arrested more than 300 times in the last 23 years for drinking—just drinking. He never gave them 'trouble.' He came to the city jail singing, and he sang in his cell to his cellmates.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps because of its strategic location at the crossroads of the South, the Southwest, and the Great Plains, a number of these traveling shows frequented the Fort Worth area. In a 1993 oral history interview, Oliver Barnes, whose pitchman-musician father had once hired a young Bob Wills to perform with his troupe, recalled that Fort Worth was something of a

headquarters for Texas medicine show folk in the 1920s and 1930s. Some companies appear to have been based there and to have toured from the city year-round, while others only "wintered" in Cowtown.<sup>17</sup>

West of Fort Worth, one medicine man utilized music therapy in a different kind of theatrical atmosphere. Sometimes called the Indian Adept or the Long-Haired Doctor, R.G. Milling practiced his own version of magnetic healing, a drugless treatment that combined massage, faith healing, hypnotism, and showmanship. Describing Milling's pre-World War I sanitarium in a Spanish Mission Revival style hotel in Putnam (near Abilene), one historian noted that, "An orchestra was kept to furnish background music for all occasions and to help soothe the nerves of the many patients who came to drink the water and take the baths and treatments. Various groups negotiated with them to play for dances, usually held on Saturday nights or on special occasions. The ballroom floor was of maple. It was beautiful and also very slick when a little corn meal was added." In 1990, Milling's granddaughter recalled that fiddle bands from Ranger were often employed at the sanitarium. Postcard photographs of the part-Cherokee healer and patients include musicians holding banjos, fiddles, baritone horns, and harp guitars.<sup>18</sup>



Dr. R.G. Milling with musicians and patients at his sanitarium in Putnam, Texas, circa 1910. Courtesy of Ova Withee. The author requests that any readers with further information about this photo contact him at: [genfo@email.com](mailto:genfo@email.com).

With the advent of radio by the 1920s, medicine shows took to the airwaves with programming sponsored by such outfits as the Crazy Water Company of Mineral Wells, whose natural health beverage, Crazy Water, got its name from the purported cure of a mentally-afflicted pioneer woman. However, the company marketed the water and the water's mineral residue, Crazy Water Crystals (which consumers mixed into their home water to make Crazy Water), primarily as a tune-up for sluggish systems. In addition to hillbilly and cowboy artists, the Crazy Water Company's programs featured big band and pop music, as well.<sup>19</sup>

*The Crazy Gang Show*, often broadcast live from the Crazy Water Hotel in Mineral Wells, was syndicated regionally in the 1930s via the Texas Quality Network and nationally over the Mutual Network.<sup>20</sup> *The Saturday Night Stampede*, a representative Crazy Water Crystals-sponsored program on Fort Worth's WBAP, aired live from Ranger Junior College in 1936. One evening's lineup featured everything from the Ranger American Legion

century and early twentieth-century skills. He could buck-dance, sing, play the old-fashioned Hawaiian steel guitar, do hundreds of vintage jokes and comedy routines, ad-lib commercials, recite poetry, and improvise dialogue.<sup>22</sup>

Brothers Hal and Carr Collins, purveyors of Crazy Water Crystals, also advertised their product over border-radio station XEAW in Reynosa, Mexico, which the brothers owned for a time in the 1930s and early 1940s. The Crazy Water Company bought XEAW from the controversial "Goat Gland Man," Dr. John R. Brinkley, who claimed to be able to "rejuvenate" men through goat gland implants. Chased out of Kansas in the early 1930s, Dr. Brinkley built XER (later XERA) in Villa Acuña, Mexico, which, for a time, was the most powerful radio station in the world. The popular Carter family moved to Del Rio, Texas, with a lucrative contract to perform on XERA in the

The medicine shows broadcast from these high-powered stations along the Texas-Mexico border also introduced many non-Hispanic audiences to Mexican folk and popular music.

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Tickville Band playing "Eyes of Texas," "Washington and Lee," and "Smile, Darn You, Smile," along with (the future star of *Peter Pan*) Mary Martin of Weatherford, Texas, singing "Put Away a Little Ray of Sunshine" and "Charmaine," to the noted pioneer of cowboy song scholarship and performance, Jules Verne Allen performing "Cowboy's Lament" and "Santa Fe Trail."<sup>21</sup>

Medicine shows sponsored by Texas-based companies also reached audiences well outside of the Lone Star State. *The Crazy Water Barn Dance* advertised the Mineral Wells elixir on radio as far away as Georgia and the Carolinas. Carried on fourteen stations, the show included such artists as the Tennessee Ramblers, the Tobacco Tags, and the Monroe Brothers, featuring the future "Father of Bluegrass," Bill Monroe. Wade and J.E. Mainer performed with Mainer's Crazy Mountaineers, and Homer "Pappy" Sherrill joined the Crazy Blue Ridge Hillbillies with Earl and Bill Bolick (the Blue Sky Boys). In 1935, future Canadian country star Hank Snow made \$10 a week singing cowboy songs for a Crazy Water Crystals show on CHNS in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The one-man variety show "Doctor Lew" Childre was also sponsored by the Crazy company for a time. As the late country music historian Charles Wolfe described Childre:

He was one of the last country stars to come up through the old-time medicine show and vaudeville circuit, and he was a master of the classic nineteenth-

1930s. A child at the time, June Carter later remarked that, because of the station's massive power, you could hear the Carter Family on any barbed wire fence in Texas. June Carter's future husband, country music legend Johnny Cash, first heard her singing on the border radio while growing up on his family's Arkansas farm. Sponsored by his own medical lectures and such patent medicines as the cold remedy *Peruna*, artists on Brinkley's border radio station (and others like it) included such hillbilly acts as the Pickard Family and W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel and his Hillbilly Boys, along with such singing cowboys and cowgirls as Cowboy Slim Rinehart, Patsy Montana, Shelly Lee Alley's Cowboy Band, and Doc Schneider's Yodeling Texas Cowboys.<sup>23</sup>

The medicine shows broadcast from these high-powered stations along the Texas-Mexico border also introduced many non-Hispanic audiences to Mexican folk and popular music. One fan reminisced about listening to Depression-era border radio stations as far away as South Dakota. While he enjoyed the cowboy singers, the listener wrote that, "the highlight of the program, for me, was the beautiful voice of the 'Mexican Nightingale' [Rosa Dominguez], especially when she would sing 'Estrellita'—this farm boy thought that must be how the angels would sound in heaven."<sup>24</sup>

During the 1950s and 1960s, border stations continued offering country music programming, but they also helped



The Cuban Medicine Company of Lampasas, Texas, near the courthouse in Georgetown, Texas, circa 1890. Courtesy of Clara Scarborough, from her book *Land of Good Water*.

popularize rock and roll and rhythm and blues (R&B) through programs sponsored by such health products as *Pounds On and Pounds Off*. One soothing voice offered a nation racked by Cold War-era stress at least some relief from anxiety with the sleep aid *Restall*. Laxatives and sex aids, staples of 1930s radio advertising, remained just as popular with music-program sponsors during the post-World War II years. In the 1960s, the "howlin'" DJ, Wolfman Jack, blasted many an R&B tune out into the heartland, coupled with a sultry pitch for a potency elixir known as Florex, which was later repackaged as *Mr. Satisfy*. "This stuff

hit like dynamite," Wolfman Jack recalled in 1986. "The day after it went on the air we got like four thousand orders." Despite the fact that the products were merely sugar pills with a little aspirin, the station received reorders for years even after the medicines were taken off the air. Clearly, this was a case of mind over matter, influenced by Wolfman's manic mojo and the raw roots music he spun from the border radio stations.<sup>25</sup>

Most medicine shows had traded in the road for the radio by the 1940s and 1950s, but the old traveling "physic operas" would have an impact on music and musicians for generations

to come. Biographical profiles of 1960s and 1970s country singer Marty Robbins, for instance, indicate that he caught the showbiz bug from his grandfather, Texas Bob Heckle, who told young Robbins about his colorful career as a medicine show performer. Even though another Heckle descendant and genealogical researcher claims that Texas Bob was a cowboy poet and never performed in medicine shows, the mere idea of participating in the colorful and often controversial medicine show environment seems to have helped inspire Marty Robbins to launch his highly successful recording career.<sup>26</sup>

Country Music Hall of Famer Hank Thompson, from Waco, Texas, paid tribute to the medicine shows on his 2000 CD, *Seven Decades*. His song, "Medicine Man," recalls his 1930s experience of seeing "old Doc Tate...elegantly attired in a high silk hat, split-tail coat, and ruffled shirt," expounding "on his miracle tonic from a large gaudy wagon" as "musicians, dancers, and rube comedians performed on the wagon's fold-down stage."<sup>27</sup>

The North Carolina vintage reissue label Old Hat Records has helped preserve and illuminate the musical traditions of medicine shows with its 2005 double-CD set, *Good For What Ails You, Music of the Medicine Shows, 1926-1937*. A lively compilation that makes a vital contribution to the ongoing

revelation of the true American avant-garde, the CD set includes tunes by Texas artists Prince Albert Hunt and the Dallas String Band with Coley Jones. Henry "Ragtime Texas" Thomas, a ramblin' man from Big Sandy, Texas, who performed along the Texas and Pacific railroad line, is represented by a track that features not only his guitar playing but also his chops on the quills, or pan pipes.<sup>28</sup>

A number of contemporary Texas musicians have been so taken with the colorful history of medicine shows that they have performed their own re-creations. In 2004, fiddler and Wild West humorist Doc Blakely hosted *Doc Blakely's Snake Oil Cowboy Show*, at the famous Hinze's Barbeque in the Colorado River town of Wharton, Texas, for six months of weekly performances. "Gather round, friends," Blakely announced when kicking off the two-hour fandango of music and comedy, "and behold the most wonderful potpourri known to mankind, a mixture of the rarest spices, herbs, and vegetation, potions from the far East, distilled swamp waters from Matagorda, secret remedies from as far West as Egypt...and Glen Flora." He was speaking, of course, about *Doc Blakely's Snake Oil Medicine*, guaranteed to relieve consumers of such ailments as "weak gizzard, fallen arches, limp liver," and most every ailment known to man.

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Ray Smith's traveling medicine show in Hutch, Kansas. Courtesy David Dennard, Dragon Street Records.

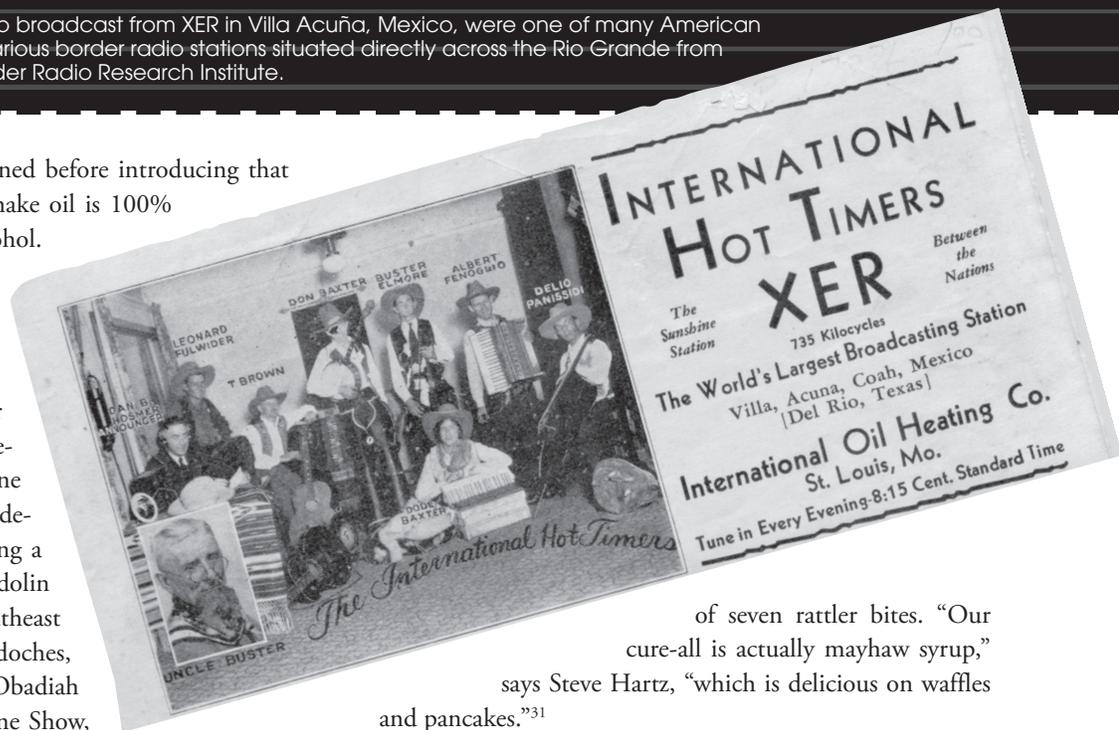


Charline Arthur playing fiddle for a mostly young medicine show audience in 1948.  
Photo courtesy of David Dennard, Dragon Street Records.

The International Hot Timers, who broadcast from XER in Villa Acuña, Mexico, were one of many American bands who performed on the various border radio stations situated directly across the Rio Grande from Texas. Photo courtesy of the Border Radio Research Institute.

"And by the way, gents," he intoned before introducing that week's special guest artist, "my snake oil is 100% natural ingredients and 45% alcohol. Nowhere else on the planet can you buy a bottle of Snake Oil that is 145% liquid."<sup>29</sup>

Others, including Dr. E.T. Bushrod sell "life-restoring" water in old-timey bottles with vintage-style labels. Bushrod's Medicine Show has been a fair, fest, and dude-ranch staple for 20 years, featuring a bevy of old-time fiddlers, mandolin pickers, and guitarists from Southeast and Central Texas.<sup>30</sup> A Nacogdoches, Texas, outfit known as Dr. Obadiah Bluefield's Attoyac Valley Medicine Show, has served fine old-time string music from Woodville to Waxahachie. Concocted by Steve and Sheryl Lynn Hartz, proprietors of the General Mercantile and Oldtime String Shop (where a Saturday afternoon jam has been a tradition for 25 years), the Attoyac Valley show features the snake-oil oratory of Professor Zebulon J. "Rattlesnake Jack" Whiloughby, as he relates the story of the late Dr. Obadiah Bluefield's discovery of *Nomomaladaise*, "one of the greatest and most inexplicable discoveries ever found west of the great Sabine River." While on a scientific expedition "deep in the East Texas piney woods," Obadiah contracted swamp fever and was rescued from "death's door" by friendly Caddo Indians, who gifted him with the secret formula. Rattlesnake Jack was similarly saved from the poison



of seven rattler bites. "Our cure-all is actually mayhaw syrup," says Steve Hartz, "which is delicious on waffles and pancakes."<sup>31</sup>

The faux elixir sold by the late Doc Toler, who lived near Martindale, Texas, until his death in 2005, packed a bit more punch. Performing with his family band as the "German-Choctaw Root-Doctor John-Crow Toler, Physician to the Governor, and Specialist in Cowboy Medicine," Doc Toler peddled a souvenir nostrum called *Torpedo Tonic*, which contained a mixture of cayenne pepper and grain alcohol. Despite his disclaimers that purchasers should not consume the stuff, Toler said that his pitches often proved dangerously compelling as audience members seeking instant health would sometimes take a Texas-size swig of the tonic. Fortunately for Toler and his audience, history in this case did not repeat itself, and his medicine did not cure anyone to an early grave.<sup>32</sup> ★

## Notes

1. Helen Oakley Dance, *Stormy Monday: The T-Bone Walker Story* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 17-18. T-Bone Walker explained that he and Josephus toured with Dr. Breeding during the summer break from school. Walker also provided a brief, first-hand account of life on the road with a 1920s medicine show. "Amen, brother! someone would holler down front [in response to Doc's spirited pitch], and first thing you knew, we'd be handing down bottles and Doc would be collecting a fistful of coins. Seph and I rode and slept on the truck. Doc and his wife drove a tin lizzie [Model T Ford] old as sin and set up at night in a tent. He had a fellow in charge of the truck who would build a fire and dish up some food. Of the fifteen dollars I got, I sent ten back to Mama, but if business was bad, we went hungry sometimes"; See also Helen Oakley Dance, "T-Bone Walker," in Roy Barkley, ed., *Handbook of Texas Music*, (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 348-349.
2. Oliver Barnes with O.E. Rooker, *Sold Out Doctor: Give Me Some More!* (Canton, Oklahoma: O. E. Rooker, 1989), 51-53. Confident of his musicianship, Frank Barnes had a standing offer on his medicine show circuit, promising to pay \$50 to anyone who could produce a stringed instrument on which he could not play a tune. In boomtown Borger, Texas, an oil field worker handed Frank a Bavarian harp, on which the med-showman promptly plucked a melody (Barnes, 91). Oliver also wrote that his father "could put on an extremely good exhibition with the banjo. He would throw it up in the air, holding it only by the neck. He would put it between his legs, lay it flat on the floor, put it behind his head and all the while he continued playing and never missed a note." (Barnes, 122)
3. Holly George-Warren, *Public Cowboy No. 1: The Life and Times of Gene Autry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 21-22. George-Warren unearthed the article "Hereford Man's Medicine Show Paid Gene Autry First

Dollars," *Amarillo Daily News*, Dec. 12, 1951. "Doctor Luke Fields told reporter Bessie Patterson, "When I tell people that I paid Gene Autry his first dollar in show business, they look at each other and wink and grin—they really don't believe me."

4. Ibid.
5. Mary Curry of Joshua, Texas, telephone interview with author, 2002.
6. As an entertainment medium somewhat on the fringes of American culture, medicine shows were not documented as extensively as more "respectable" theatrical forms. References to late nineteenth-century med-shows indicate that brass bands and minstrel singers were not uncommon, along with the occasional "cowboy band." In 1933, for instance, when an "old settler" returned to San Antonio and reminisced about the entertainment offered by Dr. J.I. Lighthall (aka the Diamond King) on Military Plaza, circa 1886, he noted that the band played "Johnny Get Your Gun," a popular tune published in New York that year and composed by F. Belasco (aka M.H. Rosenfeld). Lighthall dramatically pulled teeth, free of charge, during the musical performance, as a pounding bass drum drowned out the patients' cries (*San Antonio Express-News*, November 5, 1933); More conservative traveling troupes advertised the liniment *Hamlin's Wizard Oil*. Dressed in pinstripe suits, bowler hats, and spats, the Wizard Oil chorus performed sentimental or comic songs, such as "The Old Red Cradle," "Listen to My Tale of Woe," "The Agricultural Irish Girl," and "Grandfather's Old Brown Pants." See Brooks McNamara, *Step Right Up* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 67. The "Wizard Oil King" encountered by N. Howard (Jack) Thorp in this article appears to have been a maverick Wizard operator, probably not associated with *Hamlin's Wizard Oil*. Unlike the Cuban Medicine Company, which sent small troupes out in wagons from its home in Lampasas, Texas, most medicine shows seen in the Lone Star State prior to the automotive age were imported from the north. Their visits increased, of course, as railroads reached various parts of the state. The Hamlin Company sent its musical advertising units through much of the country from its headquarters in Chicago, and the Diamond King was based out of Peoria until he died in San Antonio, just days after his 30th birthday in 1886. The "king's" reign was cut short by smallpox, probably contracted from an audience member at his performance on Military Plaza. A general idea of the content of many of the touring med-shows seen in Texas in the late nineteenth-century can be gleaned from the contents of a representative medicine show songster, published in 1886 by Professor Lorman, "The Great Disease Detective" of Philadelphia. "The Lorman's Indian Oil Star Specialty SONGSTER" announced on the booklet's title page that it contained "an entirely new and original collection of Songs now being sung nightly by the members of the above named excellent company, together

with all the popular Songs of the day." Along with ads for Lorman's full range of medicines, the songster included a cast list introducing an "ever welcome Vocalist and Organist," a "celebrated Comedian and End Man," the "Funniest End-Man in the business in his Funny Sayings, Banjo Solos, and popular Songs of the Day," and the medicine-wagon driver, "admired for his dexterity in handling the Ribbons on the Golden Chariot." Song lyrics in the booklet include such tunes as "You Can't Do It, You Know" (music by George Schleiffarth, lyrics by Nat C. Goodwin), "The Letter That Never Came," (sung by Billy Cronin in the play *One of the Bravest*), "Paddy Maguire" (by Billy Hart), and original epics about Lorman's Indian Oil and Lorman's Little Liver Pills. The professor himself appears on the booklet's cover, sporting romantic Indian Scout locks and a chapeau suitable for cavorting about the Western frontier. On the back cover, the professor stands in the "golden chariot" with his performers. More homegrown troupes began touring Texas and surrounding states (often with homemade medicine for sale) in the early twentieth-century, often with string bands that played more regionally-influenced music.

7. N. Howard (Jack) Thorp with Neil M. Clark, *Partner of the Wind: Story of the Southwestern Cowboy* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1945), 36-38.
8. Peter Feldmann, *Eck Robertson: Master Fiddler* (Santa Barbara: Sonyatone Records, 1976); Dan Leach, *Johnson County, Texas: A Pictorial History, Volume 1* (Virginia Beach: Donning Co., 1998), 136; See also Jill S. Seeber, "Eck Robertson" and Kevin S. Fontenot, "Henry Clay Gilliland," in Barkley, ed., *Handbook of Texas Music*, 268-269, as well as Charles K. Wolfe, *The Devil's Box: Masters of Southern Fiddling* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press & Vanderbilt University Press, 1997).
9. W. C. Nunn, *Somervell, Story of a Texas County* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1975), 81.
10. Leach, 135; Author's phone interview with Patricia Smith Boatright, granddaughter of King K proprietor, George Cuthbert "Doc" Smith of Lancaster, Texas, 2002.
11. Dallas Morning News, February 4, 1888.
12. Duncan McLean, *Lone Star Swing: On the Trail of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), 103. Interviewed at his home in Palo Pinto, Kendrick explained that "we were the band, me and my two brothers. Our old man—Doc he called himself, though he weren't a doctor no more than you or me—he sung and played guitar a little, and pitched the medicine to them. He'd been doing that since he was a kid." Kendrick further explained that the whole band blacked their faces at times. "That was what was expected in those days. We'd all get blacked up and play that jazz and sell those wonder cures!"
13. Joe Carr and Alan Munde, *Prairie Nights to Neon Lights: The Story of Country Music in West Texas* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1995), 31.
14. For more on Bruner's med-show days, see Cary Ginell

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- and Roy Lee Brown, Milton Brown and the Founding of Western Swing (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 179-180. Ibid, 30
15. Marshall Wyatt, *Good For What Ails You*, CD booklet (Raleigh: Old Hat Records, 2005), 48-49: See also Gary Hartman, *The History of Texas Music*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 137.
  16. "Medicine Show Singer Dies of Crash Injuries," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 26, 1945. The Gassaway name appears in several Texas medicine show references. Patricia Smith Boatright recalled that her grandfather, Doc Smith, employed Hunter Gassaway as a clown and medicine seller with his King K show in Cleburne. (Leach, 133.) Oliver Barnes writes of one "Hunter Hathaway" with a serious drinking problem, in a likely reference to Hunter Gassaway. (Barnes, 132) Oliver also states that his father would drive right up to the E. G. Gassaway home in suburban Fort Worth to purchase the tonic, corn remover, dentifrice, ointment, and liniment that he sold on the road. He also maintained that the Barnes family used these same medicines for their personal health. It is not clear, however, whether the family utilized the electric belts, manufactured in Dallas, that they sold with the show (Barnes, 4). A light-hearted report on a bull session among veteran medicine show proprietors in a Chicago hotel lobby (W.A.S. Douglas, "Pitch Doctors," *The American Mercury*, February, 1927, 224) describes the gathering's Dr. Fred Gassaway of the Gassaway Medicine Company, who was "enjoying a weekend holiday from his pitch in East Bernard, Texas," as "the most prosperous man in all this strange fraternity."
  17. Rodger Harris interview with Oliver Rooker Barnes, Canton, Oklahoma, October 19, 1993. Oral History Program, Archives & Manuscripts Division, Oklahoma Historical Society.
  18. John Berry, "The Mission Hotel at Putnam," 1963 *West Texas Historical Yearbook*; Gene Fowler, ed., *Mystic Healers and Medicine Shows* (Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, 1997), 135. Milling also practiced in Cisco, Stephenville, Gunsight, Rising Star, and perhaps Abilene. In 1912, he was found guilty of practicing medicine without a license in Stephens County, fined \$50, and sentenced to twenty minutes in jail.
  19. Gene Fowler, *Crazy Water – the Story of Mineral Wells and Other Texas Health Resorts* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1991), 42, 46, 52. Years after the publication of this book, I received a call from a niece of big band leader Jack Amlung, a Crazy Water programming mainstay. The family had never heard their relative's music, and as it turned out, a vintage radio/recording enthusiast friend in Houston, Gene Tognacci, had purchased dozens of Crazy Water Crystals program transcription discs from a Mineral Wells antique store. Some of the discs contained Amlung's music, and we were able to provide the niece with a recording of her uncle's band.
  20. Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio – Quacks, Yodelers, Pitchmen, Psychics, and Other Amazing Broadcasters of the American Airwaves* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 139, 140.
  21. Ibid., 141. An original performer's program schedule was found in a scrapbook purchased at an eclectic bookshop once located in a rather dismal strip center on the highway from Houston to Galveston. The 1930s scrapbook had been maintained by Dr. Harry Logsdon of Ranger. It contained letters, clippings, and other ephemera about Ranger's American Legion Tickville Band, a community string band that appears to have specialized in comedy, as well.
  22. Gene Fowler, "Crazy Water Crystals" and Charles Wolfe, "Lew Childre," *The Encyclopedia of Country Music* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 92-93, 118. This volume was compiled by the staff of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.
  23. Fowler and Crawford, *Border Radio*, 111-117. When I visited the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville in 1988, Bob Pinson played for me a 1930s transcription disc that had just been found in a Pickard Family smokehouse and donated to the museum. The Pickards tore a hillbilly-hot rave-up on the disc, leading into a Doctor Brinkley lecture on sex and health.
  24. Ibid., 219
  25. Ibid., 246, 267, 270. A collection of transcription discs at the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin contain border radio programming recorded at UT Radio House from actual broadcasts on Mexican border stations of the post-war era. Musically, the discs are primarily country and gospel, sponsored in at least one case by lengthy commercials for a Plainview clinic dedicated to the battle against "trenchmouth," a bacterial infection that causes inflammation of the mucous membrane lining the inside of the mouth.
  26. Ken Sikes, great-grandson of Texas Bob Heckle, email to author, 2002.
  27. Song notes, Hank Thompson, *Seven Decades*, HighTone Records, 2000. Oliver Barnes wrote about his father selling a tonic, *Tate Lax*, that was made in Waco (Barnes, 4), and Doc Toler spoke of tales gathered in the 1990s from seasoned musicians about a Doc Tate of Waco who combed the Central Texas countryside buying moonshine to pep up his medicines.
  28. For more on Old Hat Records, see [www.OldHatRecords.com](http://www.OldHatRecords.com); For more about Henry "Ragtime Texas" Thomas, see Hartman, *History of Texas Music*, 72.
  29. Email from Doc Blakely of Wharton, Texas, to author, 2008. Also, in 2004, the Cowtown Opry presented "An Exposition of Dr. O. Lee Pettiflower's Balsongic Elixir" to celebrate Texas Independence Day in Fort Worth.
  30. Email from Gene Young of Huntsville, Texas, to author 2007.
  31. Email from Steve Hartz of Nacogdoches, Texas, to author, 2002; videotape of Attoyac Valley Medicine Show.
  32. Doc Toler, interview with author, Martindale, Texas, 2003.

# ¡Viva Terlingua!:

## Jerry Jeff Walker, Live Recordings, and the Authenticity of Progressive Country Music

Travis D. Stimeling



The progressive country music scene that flourished in Austin during the 1970s was rooted in a musical community that shared a deep appreciation of live musical performance. Although such major music industry centers as New York, Los Angeles, and Nashville focused largely on the manufacture and distribution of studio recordings, the Austin-based progressive country movement relied extensively on a vast array of live music venues, including such honky-tonks as the Split Rail Inn and the Broken Spoke, smaller folk clubs such as Castle Creek and the Saxon Pub, and large concert halls, including the Armadillo World Headquarters and the Austin Opry House.<sup>1</sup>

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Beginning around 1972, several prominent Texas musicians, who had enjoyed moderate success in Los Angeles and San Francisco during the 1960s, began to flock to Austin in order to escape the more structured regimen of the mainstream recording industry and to rediscover their creative voices as songwriters and performers. As Dallas-born singer-songwriter B.W. Stevenson explained in a 1974 interview in *The Gar*, the expectations of the music industry to create a saleable product on a consistent basis stifled the creativity of musicians and compelled many to relocate to Austin between 1972 and 1974:

If I'm in L.A...I'm always workin', even when I'm off. Before, it was having time to record. The first three albums were done in two weeks—two-week periods—and that's just not enough time. I like to have time off...There's a lot of times I can't seem to get through to somebody, you know, that I want some time off...I have to have time to write... or I'm just not happy. I gotta have time to myself.<sup>2</sup>

Several of Austin's progressive country musicians continued to travel to Nashville, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York throughout the 1970s to make studio recordings. However, they often returned to Austin where the local club scene offered them a greater sense of creative freedom and a stronger support system made up of friends, collaborators, and audiences who better understood their sense of regional culture.<sup>3</sup> As journalist Pete Axthelm observed in a 1976 *Newsweek* piece, "Austin was a refreshing place to be...[I]t was bracing to wander through honky-tonks like the Soap Creek Saloon and Armadillo World Headquarters, where down-to-earth musicians swilled beer in longneck bottles and shared their songs and dreams."<sup>4</sup>

The spontaneity of live performances and the interaction that took place between musicians and their audiences in Austin venues, therefore, were essential to the musical aesthetics of progressive country music. Moreover, for many artists and fans alike, the shared belief that progressive country music remained independent from the mediating forces of the national music industry helped convince them that this "homegrown" musical

Perhaps the most important element of live performance that is missing from studio recordings is the spontaneity enjoyed by the artists. During a typical recording session, musicians perform songs or parts of songs several times until they have the "best" version possible. This often involves hours of arranging, performing, mixing, and mastering in order to correct the types of tone, pitch, or instrumental control irregularities that are common in live performances. Furthermore, studio albums usually require artists to minimize the kind of musical improvisations that are an important element of many live performances. Finally, and perhaps most problematic in regard to the "improvisational spirit" of the progressive country movement, studio recordings transform the spontaneity of a live performance into a fixed musical object, which can be repeated over and over *ad infinitum*.<sup>7</sup>

Live albums, on the other hand, create a simulation of the concert event that allows consumers to feel as if they are part of an unmediated musical experience.<sup>8</sup> These recordings often preserve the artists' stage banter between songs, reveal musical

collaboration, the importance of direct communication between musicians and their audiences, and, above all, the joy of musical experience—while also commodifying the scene and distributing it for profit to a wider audience. Live albums offered the most passionate fans and the least committed audiences alike an opportunity to partake in the communal exchange that characterized Austin's live club scene, while also allowing the musicians themselves to showcase their own creativity, spontaneity, and prowess as performers.

Despite concerns over losing the "essence" of a live performance through the studio recording process, records did provide artists the potential for additional income and greater regional and national exposure. As a result, many Austin musicians did, in fact, attempt to capture the excitement of their live performances on record for such local and national labels as MCA, Capitol, ABC Probe, and Atlantic. In order to accommodate the limitations of the recording medium and to convey the excitement of the city's music scene, several progressive country musicians recorded "live" albums in Austin venues. Still others who hailed from outside of Texas, such as Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen, Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart, and Phil Woods, came to the city to record concert performances for national distribution.

One of the first Austin-based musicians to achieve substantial critical and commercial success using this model was Jerry Jeff Walker, a singer-songwriter from Oneonta, New York, who gained national popularity in late 1968 with the AM radio single "Mr. Bojangles."<sup>9</sup> Walker had always balked at the process of making records in professional studios, stating in a 1974 *Rolling Stone* interview that studios cause musicians to:

lose all sense of time and space. Because no matter what time you go in there and close the door, it's twelve o'clock midnight. It always was. You don't know if you're making a rally or dying. It drives me fucking nuts. I don't like to play music in a dead space. I'm always saying, "Okay, can I be excused now? Can I go out in the street and be with real people?" You have to play music over and over too much. It loses all spontaneity.<sup>10</sup>



Jerry Jeff Walker, 1973. Courtesy of Craig Hillis.

## The spontaneity of live performances and the interaction that took place between musicians and their audiences in Austin venues, therefore, were essential to the musical aesthetics of progressive country music.

genre was more artistically "pure" and more capable of serving as a legitimate means of communicating authentic local culture. Comparing the Austin scene to that of New York City, Jeff Nightbyrd, writing for the national music magazine *Crawdaddy*, argued in March 1973 that Austin musicians and audiences valued music as a form of expression, not as a commodity. "In New York you spend two-fifty to get into a joint where it doesn't take very long to figure out they're using music to sell alcohol. In Austin you pay a buck to get in and get off."<sup>5</sup>

Despite such praise for the "authenticity" of the Capital City's music scene, some critics also pointed out the difficulty inherent in trying to capture on record the dynamic interplay between performers and fans at a live venue. For instance, Ed Ward remarked in an August 1975 *Rolling Stone* review of the Lost Gonzo Band's eponymous MCA Records album that "Most of the bands [in Austin] play drinkin'-and-dancin' music of the sort that doesn't easily transfer its excitement to vinyl."<sup>6</sup> Of course, the difficulty of recording live performances without compromising either sound quality or the experience of having actually been present was nothing new. Even the most successful efforts at capturing on record the "essence" of being at a live show fall short, mainly because they simply cannot duplicate the full sensory experience of being in the audience.

mistakes that might be removed in a studio recording, and situate the sounds of the audience in the mix alongside the featured artists. In addition to these sonic markers of "liveness," the packaging of live albums often encourages vicarious participation in the concert experience by including images from the performance, such as candid onstage photographs of the musicians and the audience, along with copies of concert advertisements, tickets, or other memorabilia.

Although live albums may allow listeners to perceive a direct connection to a spontaneous concert experience, this perception is not entirely accurate. Live records, like all others, are highly-mediated cultural products shaped by the marketing strategies of record companies, the post-production manipulation of producers and engineers, and the musical choices of the artists themselves. Because they represent the complex and dynamic relationship among musicians, their audiences, and the music industry, live albums reflect the artistic, cultural, and economic priorities of everyone associated with that particular recording project. Nevertheless, live records generally provide the most accurate replication possible of the actual concert experience.

For members of Austin's progressive country music movement of the 1970s, live recordings provided an opportunity to reinforce local notions of musical authenticity—the value of musical

For Walker, the recording studio was a sterile space, and he certainly was not the only musician who felt that way. As Walker noted, the process of recording an album can be an alienating experience. It eliminates the audience, physically separates musicians into individual sound booths, and reduces the spontaneity of the performance in order to make the recording process more efficient and less expensive. In addition to these concerns, recording in a studio can be stressful, because it means that musicians face more pressure to create a polished, professional product. Rather than providing the thrill and immediate gratification of performing before a live audience, studio recording places a tremendous amount of demand on the artist to produce a record whose primary purpose is to ensure commercial viability, not artistic creativity. Walker tried to cope with these challenges the same way in which the Beatles, Brian Wilson, Jimi Hendrix, and others had before. These artists viewed the recording studio not simply as a place to create the most polished and marketable music possible, but also as a space within which they could experiment with new sounds and document their creative process.

In Jerry Jeff Walker's case, he came to Austin in large part to escape the pressures of the "big city" recording studios. He had been in the Capital City during the 1960s while touring throughout Texas, but he would not settle there permanently until the early 1970s. In 1971, Walker rented a cabin in Red River, New Mexico, a resort town in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains that had become home to many young expatriate Texas songwriters. Walker came to Red River intending to write new material for his debut album with MCA Records. Shortly

after arriving, he met bassist Bob Livingston, who had just left Michael (Martin) Murphey's band to join Texas Fever, a Red River-based group featuring Oklahoma-born songwriter Ray Wylie Hubbard. The three musicians quickly became friends, and Walker shared several of his new compositions with them, including "Hill Country Rain," "Charlie Dunn," and "Old Beat-Up Guitar." By 1972, Livingston had rejoined Murphey in Austin. Soon afterward, Walker also moved to Austin and began searching for a band to accompany him on his upcoming MCA sessions. As Livingston recalled, "Jerry Jeff shows up in Austin...so I called him up, and I said, 'Jerry Jeff, you need to come and hang out with us. We're rehearsing with Murphey.' And he goes, 'Really?' So he shows up, and when he sticks his head in the door, it's like an instant band."<sup>11</sup>

Walker recruited Murphey's band, which included pianist Gary P. Nunn, pedal steel guitarist Herb Steiner, fiddler Mary Egan, and guitarist Craig Hillis. Walker then contacted Michael Brovsky, his manager and producer in New York, to arrange a

to a playback [that] we never listened to anything back. We just would go in there, and [Jerry Jeff]'d start making sangria in a big tub around 7 o'clock, and everybody'd have several glasses of sangria, and then we'd start recording at about 8:00 or 8:30. We would go until midnight or 2:00 in the morning and then listen to everything we'd done. It was real ragtag. Really funky.<sup>13</sup>

Mickey Raphael, one of two harmonica players who took part in these sessions, remembered that the musicians all were:

set up pretty close together. I mean, pretty tight. It wasn't like everybody was spread out in different rooms with lots of separation. Everybody was set up where they could see each other, and there was, y'know, recording gear, a tape machine somewhere in the room, and we would just...It would be like

24 For members of Austin's progressive country music movement of the 1970s, live recordings provided an opportunity to reinforce local notions of musical authenticity—the value of musical collaboration, the importance of direct communication between musicians and their audiences, and, above all, the joy of musical experience

session at Odyssey Sound, the only recording studio in Austin capable of producing a record for a major label. Although it proved to be adequate, Odyssey Sound did not match the level of quality found in most commercial studios in Nashville, Los Angeles, or New York. As Walker later recounted in the album's liner notes, "We found a tape machine in the old Rapp Cleaner Building (Steve and Jay's Odyssey Sound), and anyone who wanted to contribute came by and picked or just listened."<sup>12</sup> Livingston recalls that the studio was primitive, but the unorthodox setting fostered a more collaborative atmosphere and minimized the pressure on the performers to produce a slick, polished recording:

We go into this funky studio situation. They didn't even have a board...It was on 6th Street in this old converted dry-cleaning house that was not even converted. All it was was burlap all over the wall, big ceilings, and a sixteen-track tape recorder sitting in the middle of the room. No board. A bunch of microphones. Everybody just plugged into this tape recorder...It was so involved to listen

a picking session. That's exactly what transpired... They could've had an audience in there. It would have been great. It was just like sitting up on stage and playing.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike most professional studios, the "funky" setting of the Rapp Cleaner Building ensured that Walker's recording project would be an organic outgrowth of the Austin music scene and a genuine reflection of the local music community's creative output. Whereas formal recording studios are replete with technology designed to mediate between musicians and their audiences, Odyssey Sound did not even have a mixing board. Therefore, by plugging directly into a tape recorder and performing "live," Walker and his collaborators were able to produce a record that could literally and metaphorically minimize the distance between themselves and their audiences.<sup>15</sup>

This album, which would be titled *Jerry Jeff Walker*, would not remain entirely free of the influence of a major studio, however. Walker finished making the record, which included Guy Clark's "L.A. Freeway," with engineer Tom Cacetta at Soundtek Studios in New York. Nevertheless, Walker later would reminisce about

the spontaneous and organic nature of the recording process to describe the sessions. He mentioned that he was inspired to enter the studio after spending a weekend at a farm near Hudson, New York, casually jamming with folk musicians David Bromberg and Larry Packer. Adding to the impromptu nature of the situation, Michael Murphey's band, with whom Walker had recorded at Odyssey Sound, happened to be in New York City playing at the Bitter End in Greenwich Village. The

Good Lovin' Grace," Walker asks the band for "one of those intros," to which a musician laughingly replies "one of *those* intros?" The slow, blues-inflected introduction that follows sounds like a false start, as the pianist, guitarist, and bassist struggle to find the downbeats. Likewise, the album's concluding song, "The Continuing Saga of the Classic Bummer, or Is This My Free One-Way Bus Ticket to Cleveland?" begins with a false start that is met with exuberant laughter, and the ensemble

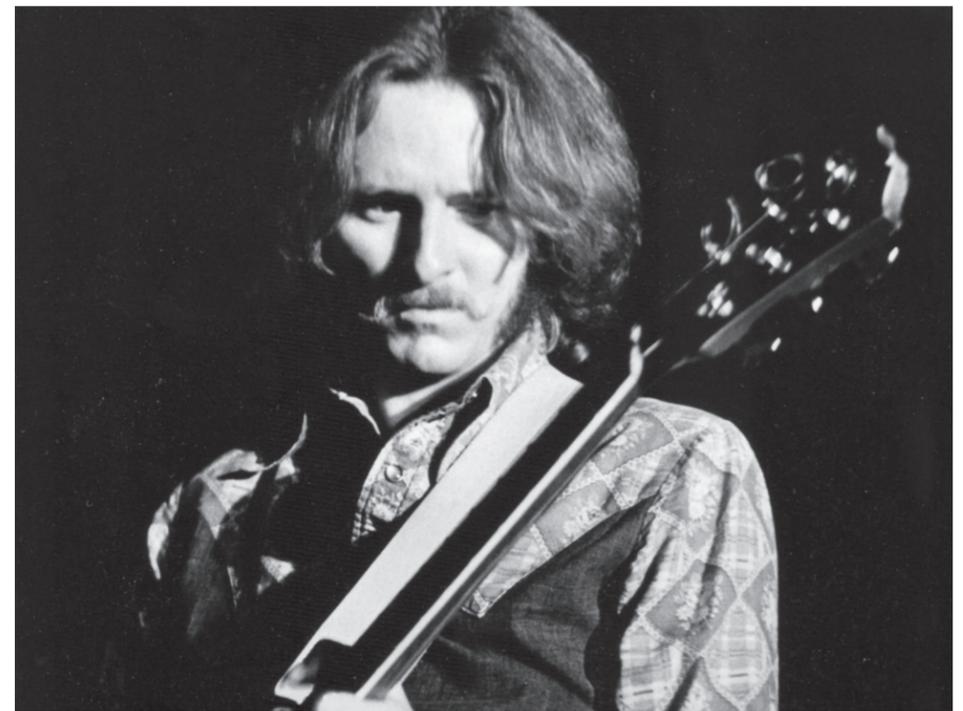
Just as Walker's narrative involving the Jerry Jeff Walker album place it within the context of a jam session, the songs themselves also provide ample evidence of the loose atmosphere of the recording sessions.

fact that the very same musicians who had been involved in the original "spontaneous" recording sessions in Austin also were able to participate in the New York tapings helped alleviate much of Walker's discomfort over being in the studio, and this helped cause "new songs [to] start...flowing."<sup>16</sup> For Walker, the ability to record with familiar musicians in a less-structured setting made the entire process more artistically rewarding. Because Walker intended for these sessions to document the process of creativity and provide the engineer with enough material for an album, he believed he was able to reclaim the studio as a workspace, thereby displacing ultimate responsibility for the final product from himself to the creative minds employed by the studio.

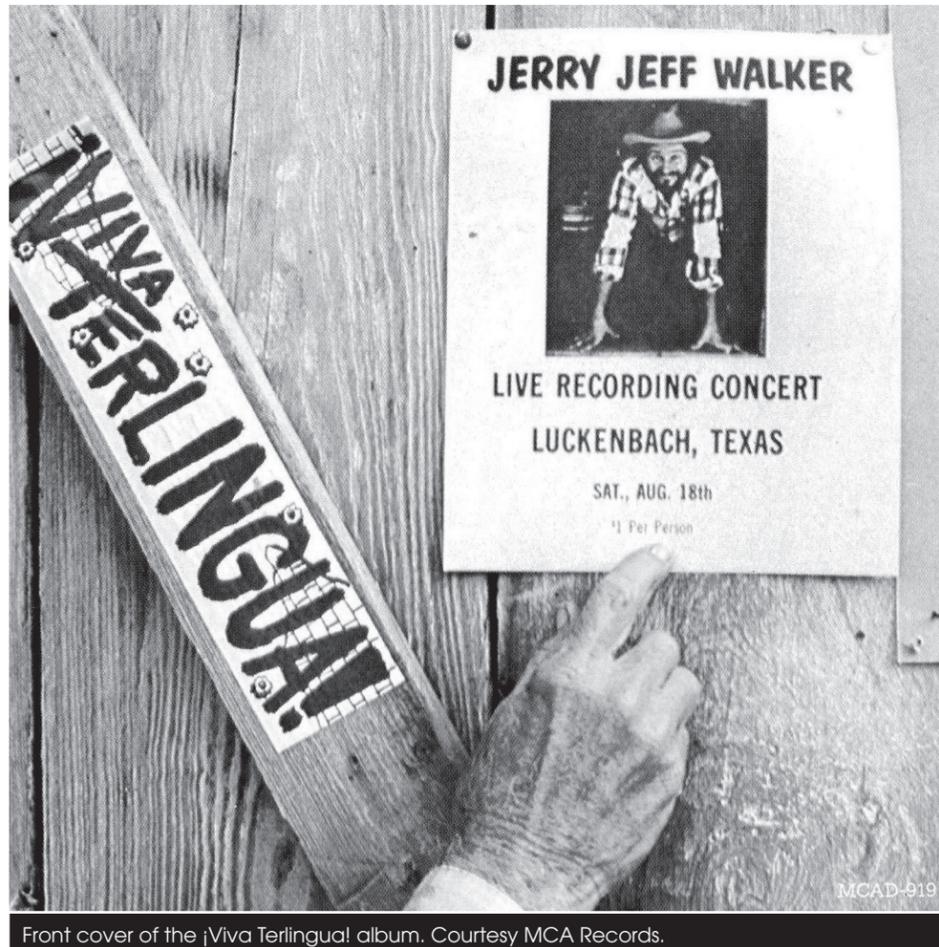
Just as Walker's narrative involving the *Jerry Jeff Walker* album place it within the context of a jam session, the songs themselves also provide ample evidence of the loose atmosphere of the recording sessions. The final mix, supervised by Steve Katz at New York's Electric Lady Studios, includes spontaneous banter, hand-clapping, laughter, and shouts of approval by musicians and others present. All of this helps lend the recording more of a "live" feel. For example, at the beginning of the song "Her

struggles to find a consistent tempo throughout the record.<sup>17</sup>

In a typical studio session, such "mistakes" as those present on the *Jerry Jeff Walker* album would be corrected by having the musicians play as many additional takes as necessary to render a polished final product. However, Walker indicates his distaste for such multiple takes in the song's tag by saying "Thank God you don't have to hear the take after this." The rather sloppy performance, the exuberant and sometimes overmodulated vocals, and even the muddy mix all contribute to Walker's vision



Craig Hillis, 1974. Courtesy of Craig Hillis.



Front cover of the *Viva Terlingual!* album. Courtesy MCA Records.

space and redefines it as a social space. In the case of the Luckenbach sessions, this social space involved not only the musicians, but also two of the town's most unique and colorful residents—John “Hondo” Crouch and his daughter, Cathy Morgan. Crouch and Morgan purchased the town in 1970 with hopes of transforming Luckenbach from a ghost town into a hangout where people could come to relax and drink beer. Adopting the motto “Everybody’s Somebody in Luckenbach,” Crouch and Morgan created in Luckenbach an environment in which people from all backgrounds could meet, exchange ideas, and make new friends.<sup>20</sup>

Walker began traveling to Luckenbach shortly after his arrival in Austin and found in Hondo Crouch a close friend who encouraged his creativity by providing a nurturing atmosphere in which to work.

As Bob Livingston observed, Crouch “was like a surrogate father for [Jerry Jeff], and he was kind of a rambler and yarn spinner and even played pretty good Spanish guitar... Hondo was the ‘grand imagineer’ of Luckenbach. And Jerry Jeff really took to him.”<sup>21</sup> Crouch’s almost constant presence and his empathy for Walker’s own ceaseless search for freedom was, it seems, a comfort to Walker and created a supportive environment in which he could compose and perform music freely. Moreover, as physical manifestations of a bygone era, both Crouch and Luckenbach represented a very tangible connection to the unique history and culture of Texas, which was essential to the progressive country movement’s efforts at bucking national trends.

While Walker’s experimentation with unorthodox recording venues had proven to be relatively successful, Michael Maitland, the president of MCA, was understandably worried about the proposed Luckenbach sessions. The financial risks that the company might incur were substantial, since it would need to supply the type of mobile recording unit that cost considerably more than a conventional studio. Another logistical and

financial concern was that, rather than following the standard studio protocol in which musicians arrive with pre-arranged and rehearsed compositions in order to minimize costly delays, the material for the Luckenbach sessions was to be created, arranged, and performed for the first time right there on location. What this meant was that Walker and Brovsky were asking MCA not only to underwrite the costs of recording Walker’s material, but also to pay for the time it took to compose, arrange, and perform the songs. This was almost unheard of for an artist with as limited a track record as Walker. Further complicating matters was the fact that Luckenbach offered little in the way of amenities, including its undependable supply of electricity, which created significant technical problems for the recording engineers.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the extensive financial and technical risks inherent in the project, Brovsky managed to convince Maitland to finance the Luckenbach sessions. For nearly two weeks, Walker and the Lost Gonzo Band—Michael Murphey’s former group—joined with several of Austin’s leading session players to create *Viva Terlingual!* Much like his 1972 recording sessions at Odyssey Sound, Walker worked to create a casual environment in which individual musicians could rekindle old friendships, write songs, and contribute their musical talents to the larger project. Mickey Raphael, who had been touring with Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings, remembered, “It was a good time for everybody to hang out, because, if we all had different jobs with different people, we’d be out on the road separately. So, this kind of brought other musicians that were friends that didn’t get to play together a lot.”<sup>23</sup>

The casual mood of the sessions is reflected in the *Viva Terlingual!* album cover, which includes a sepia-toned photograph showing the musicians relaxing around the woodstove in the Luckenbach post office. Other photographs taken during the sessions and included on the album cover document the personal relationships developed among participants. They show the smiling faces of Crouch, Walker, and background singer Joanne Vent, along with the conversations, meals, and drinks shared by the musicians. The overall visual effect of the album cover underscores the key themes of Walker’s approach to the songwriting and performing process. More specifically, the visual message transmitted by these photographs is that this was a communal effort on the part of these musicians, whose priority was exercising creative freedom in an informal setting rather than producing a marketable commodity in a sterile studio.<sup>24</sup>

With the exception of Guy Clark’s “Desperados Waiting for a Train” and Michael Murphey’s “Backslider’s Wine,” the songs recorded for *Viva Terlingual!* were fully or at least partially composed at Luckenbach. As such, they serve as musical analogues to the album cover’s images, further documenting the casual atmosphere of the sessions. The opening cut, “Gettin’ By,” draws Maitland into the narrative by poking fun at the

president of MCA Records’ initial resistance to the Luckenbach sessions. In the second verse, Walker comments:

Last week I was thinking, it’s record time again, And  
I could see Mike Maitland pacing his floor.  
Ah Mike, don’t you worry, something’s bound to  
come out.  
Besides, I’ve been down this road once or twice before.

During the instrumental interlude, Walker reassures Maitland that the song will work, even though “it’s not really a monster track,” creating ironic distance between himself and the visibly mediated album upon which this comment is documented. In addition to “Gettin’ By,” many of the songs that made the album began simply as improvised lyrics or melody lines and were cobbled together on the spot. This rather haphazard approach to composing helped create instrumental and vocal arrangements that reflected the spontaneous nature of the informal picking sessions and the communal process of making the record. “Sangria Wine,” for instance, began simply as a recipe for making drinks, along with the refrain “Oh, oh, I love sangria wine.” While Walker worked on the lyrics, the band experimented with the accompaniment, trying to match the theme of the song with the ideal groove. As Livingston recalled:

We would try everything “reggae” at least once. We might take a song like “London Homesick Blues” and try it bluegrass and rock and reggae and every kind of way, just for fun. And so Jerry said, “We ought to do [‘Sangria Wine’] reggae.” But we didn’t know anything about reggae. Michael McGeary, our drummer, said, “Man, it’s just kind of this thing. You have to have some guitar parts. Like Craig [Hillis], you should go ‘do-do-do-do-dut’, and then Bob, you answer it with the bass ‘boom-boom-boom’ something.”<sup>25</sup>

Another example of the informal approach to arranging and recording the album is evident on how the Lost Gonzo Band performed background vocals on several of the songs. Their imprecise vocal performance, which includes tuning, control, and timing problems, adds an element of realism and suggests that the band is drinking alcohol while making the record. By highlighting this improvisational technique of composing, arranging, and performing, *Viva Terlingual!* rejects the more structured, commercially-oriented approach to recording contemporary country music and, instead, celebrates an attitude of mutual artistic respect and communal enjoyment symbolized by the entire progressive country music movement.

The Luckenbach sessions concluded with a “live recording

concert” held in the town’s dancehall on August 18, 1973. Nearly three hundred people paid one dollar each to be part of what turned out to be the only true “live” segment of *¡Viva Terlingua!* According to some of the musicians, the concert was somewhat of an afterthought. Despite last-minute planning and minimal advertisement, the hall was filled with friends of the band and a few others who found out about the concert at the last minute. Bob Livingston remembered that “people just showed up and said, ‘What’s going on here?’ and the town of Luckenbach was jumping.” Mickey Raphael observed that “most of [the audience members] were kids from Austin that were into that ‘cosmic cowboy,’ ‘progressive country’ scene at the time...It was the same crowd that was going to the Armadillo and Castle Creek.”<sup>26</sup>

In many ways, the concert also was a realization of the idealized, collaborative, and free-wheeling recording session

Mother,” Walker and Brovsky help convey the exuberance of live performances. This helped reinforce the notion that fans are an essential ingredient of the progressive country music phenomenon, and it gave listeners the sense that they were part of an authentic and unmediated concert experience, whether or not they actually were there in person.<sup>28</sup>

While the loose vocal arrangements of *¡Viva Terlingua!* and the direct involvement of an audience reinforce the “live” feel of the record, most of the album is not truly live. The liner notes mention that the songs are part of a “live recording concert,” but, in fact, only “Up Against the Wall, Redneck Mother” and Gary P. Nunn’s “London Homesick Blues” are from the live show. Everything else on *¡Viva Terlingua!* was recorded prior to the August 18 concert. Furthermore, three songs—“Desperados Waiting for a Train,” “Sangria Wine,” and “Get It Out”—conclude with a “fadeout,” which underscores the fact that the

wherein writers and singers do things their way... work? Heretofore, singers have been treated as wayward, slightly batty infants whose whims must be ignored. If they start a liberation movement, can it be accommodated? No reason why not, argues Jerry Jeff Walker. He is the only prominent singer who refuses to set foot in a recording studio.<sup>30</sup>

Flippo believed that the success of *¡Viva Terlingua!* played a direct role in shaping Austin’s progressive country movement by guaranteeing that it could function as a sanctuary for independent-minded artists, while also exerting a significant influence on the mainstream music industry. Others also hailed *¡Viva Terlingua!* as an accurate representation of the styles, rhetoric, and image of the Capital City’s live music scene. As Joe Gracey, disc jockey at Austin’s KOKE-FM, said in a November 1973 *Austin American-Statesman* article, “They...sat down and made the best record

The town depicted in the chorus of “Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)” bears little resemblance to the Luckenbach of Walker’s *¡Viva Terlingua!* The song offers few details about the community’s unique characteristics, and the artists named in the song have no direct relationship with Walker’s recording session there. The link to Walker himself in “Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)” is not established until the final chorus, when Willie Nelson joins in and replaces the reference to Mickey Newbury with a line about “Jerry Jeff’s train songs,” an allusion to Walker’s version of Guy Clark’s “Desperados Waiting for a Train.” Jennings, who had recorded his 1976 album *Waylon: Live* at Austin’s Armadillo World Headquarters in 1974, and whose 1976 RCA compilation *Wanted!: The Outlaws* became the first country music album to be certified platinum (reaching sales of one million)<sup>35</sup> remarked that the lack of specific details about Luckenbach was necessary because neither he nor co-writers Moman and Emmons had been there prior to recording

Instead of isolating band members from one another in recording booths, the concert setting facilitated musical collaboration and exchange by allowing the musicians to play together exactly as they would have in one of Austin’s live music venues.

that Walker had described on the jacket of his self-titled 1972 album. Instead of isolating band members from one another in recording booths, the concert setting facilitated musical collaboration and exchange by allowing the musicians to play together exactly as they would have in one of Austin’s live music venues.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, the presence of a live audience was an essential element of Walker’s informal attitude, which he wanted to communicate to potential record buyers. As such, the live concert allowed the artists to remain within their normal social context of performing onstage, while also presenting an opportunity for producer Michael Brovsky to capture the energy of the local live music scene in order to market it to a larger national audience.

Perhaps the best example of the importance of this type of artist-audience interaction at Walker’s Luckenbach concert is Ray Wylie Hubbard’s “Up Against the Wall, Redneck Mother.” During this song, enthusiastic audience members sing along on the chorus. One particularly exuberant fan yells out indicating his approval at the end of the first and third lines of the beginning verse. (“He was born in Oklahoma,” and “He’s not responsible for what he’s doin’.”) Throughout the song, audience members are prominently featured clapping their hands and singing loudly in the background, especially in unison with the signature chorus (“And it’s up against the wall, redneck mother”). By making the audience such an integral part of “Up Against the Wall, Redneck

listener is not actually experiencing an unmediated musical event but rather one in which studio engineers have had a hand in shaping the final product. These fadeouts imply that the improvisations will continue in perpetuity, but out of earshot of the listener. The effect of the fadeouts is quite ironic. On one hand, fadeouts highlight the fact that much of *¡Viva Terlingua!* is not actually live, since they are a result of technological manipulation and mediation of the recordings. At the same time, however, the fadeouts reinforce the perception that the progressive country music scene is based on a live performance environment in which a wide variety of musicians can join together in unceasing collaboration and experimentation.

Critics praised *¡Viva Terlingua!* as a milestone in the progressive country music movement and commented on how well it captured the organic, spontaneous nature of this new musical genre. Prominent music journalist Chet Flippo, who had remarked earlier in 1973 that “the present crop of Texas musicians are followers, rather than innovators,”<sup>29</sup> observed just one year later in 1974 that *¡Viva Terlingua!* was important because it demonstrated that Austin’s relaxed and liberal environment could yield an album of great artistic and commercial merit. According to Flippo:

The rest of the recording industry has a wary eye trained on Austin...will this noble experiment,

Flippo believed that the success of *¡Viva Terlingua!* played a direct role in shaping Austin’s progressive country movement by guaranteeing that it could function as a sanctuary for independent-minded artists, while also exerting a significant influence on the mainstream music industry.

that anybody in Texas will ever make. Every cut is tremendous... Some of the cuts are taken from the Saturday night concert, and all of ‘em are live, whether there’s an audience or not.”<sup>31</sup>

The historical importance of Jerry Jeff Walker’s Luckenbach sessions became fully apparent in 1977, with Waylon Jennings’s recording of the Chips Moman and Bobby Emmons tune “Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love).”<sup>32</sup> The lyrics bemoan the stress and malaise of an urban existence and express longing for a more peaceful, rural setting and a simpler way of life.<sup>33</sup> The singer asks his partner to trade her expensive jewelry for “boots and faded jeans” and to trade her “high society” and “four-car garage” for a place where they can “get back to the basics of love.” In the chorus, that place is revealed to be Luckenbach:

Let’s go to Luckenbach, Texas, with Willie and Waylon and the boys.

This successful life we’re livin’s got us feuding like the Hatfields and McCoys.

Between Hank Williams’ pain songs, Newbury’s train songs, and “Blue Eyes Cryin’ in the Rain,”

Out in Luckenbach, Texas, ain’t nobody feelin’ no pain.<sup>34</sup>

the song. In fact, Jennings said in his 1996 autobiography that much of the song’s success, which included reaching Number 1 on the *Billboard* country chart and Number 25 on the *Billboard* pop chart,<sup>36</sup> was due to the universality of the song’s pastoral retreat narrative. “Every state has a Luckenbach; a place to get away from things. That’s why it succeeded.”<sup>37</sup>

Jerry Jeff Walker’s Luckenbach recording session became an important milestone in the evolution of the progressive country music movement and was a powerful expression of the “anti-industry” attitude exhibited by many of the genre’s most prominent musicians. At the same time, *¡Viva Terlingua!* reflected contradictions inherent in the notion of an “independent, non-conformist” approach to artistic creativity, since it still relied extensively on the financial backing and marketing expertise of a national label in order to make this “live” album successful. Furthermore, while *¡Viva Terlingua!* offers a broad cross-section of the sounds and lyrical themes prominent throughout the progressive country genre (from the visions of a dying American West in “Desperados Waiting for a Train” to the rollicking honky tonk sounds of “Up Against the Wall, Redneck Mother”), this perspective was shaped, in large part, by the musical predilections and social connections of the musicians involved. As a result, the album represents a

mediated vision of the progressive music scene despite its aura of unmediated “live-ness.”

Another notable irony is that, the success of Walker’s *Viva Terlingua!* allowed him to reinvest in Austin’s music technology infrastructure, since he and Brossky used some of the profits from the record to upgrade Odyssey Sound, the site of Walker’s first Austin recording. This meant that the rudimentary studio which had contributed to the rough, “live” feel of those early recordings could be transformed into a professional studio capable of producing high-quality material for regional and national distribution. This made it possible for emerging Austin bands to make first-rate demo records to send to major record labels.<sup>38</sup>

Consequently, *Viva Terlingua!* stands as a carefully constructed musical manifesto of Austin’s emergent progressive country movement, conveying a sense of spontaneity and freedom to potential audiences and musicians with similar ideologies. Yet, the album also was very much a part of the larger commercial music industry infrastructure, since it relied on the technology, financing, and marketing provided by MCA. In the end, *Viva Terlingua!* represented progressive country’s break with mainstream creative limitations, but it also revealed that most artists, no matter how “independent” they envisioned themselves to be, still had to rely on certain industry conventions in order to have successful recording careers.

Walker’s MCA sessions in Austin and Luckenbach also represent a compromise between the isolation of the professional recording studio and the dynamic interplay of live musical performances. By downplaying the mediating influence of the music industry, highlighting the humanity of the people who helped create the recordings, and situating the albums within specific geographical, social, and temporal contexts, Walker sought to achieve a balance between creative freedom and commercial vitality. However, Walker’s approach was only one of many competing models in the progressive country music community. Others in the Austin scene of the 1970s strove instead to create a local entertainment industry that, while informed by the city’s live music scene, could compete with the major recording and publishing centers in Nashville, New York, and Los Angeles.<sup>39</sup> For example, Eddie Wilson, proprietor of the Armadillo World Headquarters, struggled to transform the old National Guard armory into a concert hall that could host both local bands and national touring acts and be part of a multimedia infrastructure that would rival the nation’s top sound and film studios.<sup>40</sup>

Local radio station KOKE-FM also helped define the emerging music scene by coining the term “progressive country” in 1972 to describe a new radio format that blended together the music of Austin artists with that of such nationally-prominent acts as the Byrds, the Flying Burrito Brothers, Bob Dylan, and the Band.<sup>41</sup> Other high-profile Central Texas musical events,

including the 1972 Dripping Springs Reunion, Rod Kennedy’s Kerrville Folk Festival, and Willie Nelson’s Fourth of July Picnics, sought to capitalize on the local scene, showcase the wealth of Texas talent, and elicit outside investment in Austin’s fledgling music industry.<sup>42</sup> In 1976, the PBS television series *Austin City Limits* began syndication on the Public Broadcasting System, helping to carry Austin’s diverse and dynamic live music scene to audiences across North America.<sup>43</sup>

As a result of these projects and others, Austin gained a national reputation by the 1980s as a thriving center for musical innovation, collaboration, and live performance. City officials soon realized the potential for capitalizing on the community’s vibrant entertainment scene in order to attract tourists and commercial development. On August 29, 1991, the City of Austin passed a resolution proclaiming the town to be “the live music capital of the world” and officially acknowledging that

“music is a driver of the ‘creative economy’ that translates into millions of dollars annually for Austin.”<sup>44</sup> The Austin Music Marketing Office, part of the city’s Convention and Visitors’ Bureau, “promotes...the diversity of Austin music, whether it’s blues, rock and Latino, or jazz,”<sup>45</sup> and the non-profit Austin Music Foundation “strengthens and connects the local music community with innovative programs that empower musicians and fuel Austin’s creative economy.”<sup>46</sup> While many of the venues



Michael McGeary (left) and Bob Livingston (right), clowning around on tour, 1973. Courtesy of Craig Hillis.

that were popular during the heyday of the progressive country movement have long since closed, new venues, many of which are owned and operated by entrepreneurs who learned about the music industry during the 1970s, have filled the void and now offer musical styles that appeal to new generations of fans.

In January 2006, several of the musicians who took part in Jerry Jeff Walker's 1973 Luckenbach sessions gathered in the Luckenbach dancehall to record *Viva Terlingua! ¡Nuevo!: Songs of Luckenbach, Texas*. The event included a live audience of three hundred people, all of whom paid one dollar for admission.<sup>47</sup>

## Notes

1. For a more complete discussion of the progressive country music phenomenon, see Jan Reid, *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2004); Cory Lock, "Counterculture Cowboys: Progressive Texas Country of the 1970s and 1980s," *Journal of Texas Music History*, Volume 3, Number 1, (Spring 2003), 14-23; Gary Hartman, *The History of Texas Music* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008).
2. Kim Martin, "Time is a Pivotal Issue: Texas Artists Just Can't Run on L.A. Time, That's All," *The Gar* 3, Number 5 (June-July 1974), 10.
3. James Neff, "A Big Commotion in Austin," *Country Style* Number 26 (December 1977), 5, 66-67.
4. Pete Axthelm, "Songs of Outlaw Country," *Newsweek* (April 12, 1976), 79.
5. Jeff Nightbyrd, "Highway 71 Revisited," *Crawdaddy* 22 (March 1973), 25.
6. Ed Ward, "Review of *The Lost Gonzo Band* (MCA 487) and *Juz Loves Dem Ol' Greezy Wheels* (London PS 657)," *Rolling Stone* 193 (August 14, 1975), 49.
7. Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1-47.
8. Sociologist Andy Bennett, in his work on the film *Woodstock* (1970), explains the effects of such mediated representations of a musical community on subsequent understandings and interpretations of that community, even among people who were active participants. Andy Bennett, "Everybody's Happy, Everybody's Free: Representation and Nostalgia in the *Woodstock* Film," in *Remembering Woodstock*, Andy Bennett, ed., (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 43-54.
9. "Mr. Bojangles" b/w "Round and Round," Atco 45-6594 (October 1968).
10. Douglas Kent Hall, "Mr. Bojangles' Dance: The Odyssey and Oddities of Jerry Jeff Walker," *Rolling Stone* 176 (December 19, 1974), 9.
11. Bob Livingston, interview with author, June 25, 2007. There is some controversy over precisely how Walker

literally and symbolically, this reunion concert seems to have been a fitting tribute to Walker's earlier ventures in Central Texas. The original sessions, which were a mixture of live and "semi-live" recordings, reflected the larger compromise Walker and others were hoping to achieve between true artistic freedom, including an organic musical exchange between musicians and their fans, and the more pragmatic considerations of creating a commercially-viable product that could be shared with a larger audience well beyond Central Texas. ★

brought Murphey's band into the studio and eventually made them his road band. In *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock*, page 98, Jan Reid remarks that "the best band in town was known to work for the perfectionist Michael Murphey. Walker didn't steal the band; he just happened to be in the right place at the right time. At a rehearsal Murphey blew up over their general lack of discipline and with harsh words stormed out—just as Walker was coming in. In the course of an evening he gained the Lost Gonzo Band." Murphey, on the other hand, recalled to Jack Bernhardt in 1993 that the band left him following a surgical procedure to remove nodes from his vocal cords in 1972, a procedure that rendered his voice useless for over six months and that led to an extended period of depression (Michael Murphey, interview with Jack Bernhardt, June 5, 1993, Jack Bernhardt Papers, FS-1713, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). However, credits in the liner notes to Walker's first Austin album (*Jerry Jeff Walker*, Decca DL 7-5385/MCA 510 [1972]) suggest a much more congenial split, noting Murphey's contributions on acoustic guitar.

12. Liner notes for Jerry Jeff Walker's *Jerry Jeff Walker*.
13. Bob Livingston, interview with author, June 25, 2007.
14. Mickey Raphael, interview with author, June 6, 2007.
15. Leslie C. Gay, Jr., "Acting Up, Talking Tech: New York Rock Musicians and Their Metaphors of Technology," *Ethnomusicology* 42, Number 1 (1998), 81-98.
16. Liner notes for Jerry Jeff Walker's *Jerry Jeff Walker*; Livingston, interview with author, June 25, 2007.
17. Jerry Jeff Walker, *Jerry Jeff Walker*.
18. Jerry Jeff Walker, *Viva Terlingua!* MCA 382 (1973).
19. Liner notes for Jerry Jeff Walker, *Jerry Jeff Walker*.
20. Reid, *Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock*, 92.
21. Livingston, interview with author, June 25, 2007. Apparently, Crouch himself used the word "imagineer," a term associated with Walt Disney's escapist theme parks, to describe himself. An account of this appears

- in an anonymous 1976 *Newsweek* article covering his "Non-Buycentennial Day" celebration ("Texas: Hondo's Jamboree," *Newsweek* [8 March 1976], 35).
22. Livingston, interview with author, June 25, 2007.
23. Raphael, interview with author, June 6, 2007.
24. Liner notes for Jerry Jeff Walker's *Viva Terlingua!*
25. Livingston, interview with author, June 25, 2007.
26. *Ibid.*; Raphael, interview with author, June 6, 2007.
27. Livingston recalled, "We were not on the stage. The drummer was up there, but we were all set on the ground. They put a bunch of bales of hay for baffles." (Livingston, interview with author, June 25, 2007).
28. S. Alexander Reed has argued that crowd noise is perhaps the most essential component of a live album. "It is of course naïve to suppose that the capacity for crowd noise to advertise a performance's value lies simply in the bandwagon approach that a hundred thousand fans can't be wrong. Its deliberate use as an identifiable but integrated sign to which attention is drawn both in the recording process...but also on final recordings by virtue of its selective placement and volume, helps to argue that crowd noise need not be auxiliary human buzzing, but that it assumes a foreground role woven through many records." (S. Alexander Reed, "Crowd Noise and the Hyperreal," in *The Proceedings of the First Art of Record Production Conference, 17th-18th September 2006, University of Westminster, London*, www.artofrecordproduction.com, accessed April 25, 2006).
29. Chet Flippo, "Splash," *The Texas Observer* 65 (January 19, 1973), 22.
30. *Idem*, "Hill Country Sound," *Texas Parade* 34, Number 11 (April 1974), 22.
31. Joe Gracey, "City Audiences Honest, Picky," *Austin American-Statesman*, (November 17, 1973), 20.
32. Waylon Jennings, "Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)" b/w "Belle of the Ball," RCA 10924 (1977).
33. Michael Murphey, *Cosmic Cowboy Souvenir*, A&M SP 4388 (1973).
34. "Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)," written by Chips Moman and Bobby Emmons.
35. Hartman, *The History of Texas Music*, 175.
36. Joel Whitburn, *Joel Whitburn's Top Country Singles, 1944-2001* (Menomonee Falls, WI: Record Research, Inc. and

- Billboard, 2002), 170; *idem*, *Joel Whitburn's Top Pop Singles, 1955-2002* (Menomonee Falls, WI: Record Research, Inc. and Billboard, 2003), 356.
37. Waylon Jennings with Lenny Kaye, *Waylon: An Autobiography* (New York: Warner Books, 1996), 271.
38. Bob Livingston, interview with author, June 25, 2007; Hall, "Mr. Bojangles' Dance," 20; Walker's *Collectables* (MCA 450 [1974]) was also recorded at Odyssey.
39. Historian Barry Shank has described this process as "the honky-tonk commodification of an antimodernist critique," in Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock 'n' Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 49.
40. Eddie Wilson, interview with Robert Heard, June 26, 1974, tape recording, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, Austin, Texas; David Menconi, "Music, Media, and the Metropolis: The Case of Austin's Armadillo World Headquarters," M.J. Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1985.
41. Joe Gracey, email communication with author, April 5, 2007; Nelson Allen, "KOKE-FM," *Picking Up the Tempo: A Country Western Journal* (April 1975), 7-8; Rick Gilzow, "Austin Country Radio," *Nashville West* 1, Number 11 (July 1976), 20-21, 42-50.
42. Travis D. Stimeling, "Place, Space, and Protest: Austin's Progressive Country Music and the Negotiation of Texan Identities, 1968-1978," Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2007, 274-300.
43. Clifford Endres, *Austin City Limits* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987); Marty McKenzie, "Mediatin' Music," *Austin Sun* 2, Number 6 (March 25 - April 7, 1976), 1, 20.
44. "City of Austin—Music," www.ci.austin.tx.us/music, accessed January 30, 2007.
45. "Austin Music Office," www.austintexas.org/music/contact, accessed March 18, 2008.
46. "Austin Music Foundation," www.austinmusicfoundation.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=15, accessed March 18, 2008.
47. *Viva! Terlingua! Nuevo!*, Palo Duro Records 4201 (2006); Michael Corcoran, "Revisiting 'Terlingua,'" *Austin American-Statesman* (January 26, 2006), www.austin360.com/music/content/music/stories/xl/2006/01/26inmusic.html, accessed March 18, 2008.



# ***The Accidental Texan:*** ***How Johnny Cuiello Became a Texas Playboy***

Deirdre Lannon



*Drummer Johnny CuvIELLO had never been to Texas when he became one of Bob Wills's Texas Playboys in 1946. Nevertheless, when CuvIELLO worked up a drum-oriented song for the band, Wills insisted on titling it "The Texas Drummer Boy." After the tune became a hit, CuvIELLO himself would come to be known as The Texas Drummer Boy, a nickname belying the fact that he had visited the Lone Star State only briefly while on tour with Wills. CuvIELLO never identified as Texan, but during his time with the Texas Playboys, the patina of a fabricated Texas cowboy image tinted his role in the band, and thus his professional identity.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the fact that he was not a true Texan, unlike many of the other band members, also may have played a role in the abrupt end of his tenure as a Texas Playboy.*

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During the 1930s, Bob Wills, along with Milton Brown and others, had forged a new style of music that incorporated a uniquely Texan blend of jazz, blues, country, and Mexican influences. This fledgling musical subgenre eventually would come to be known as "western swing."<sup>2</sup> Although Wills left Texas not long after his career began to take off, he always maintained a close association with his home state. Many of his songs, such as "Texas Blues," the "Texas Two Step," and his huge hit "San Antonio Rose," included strong lyrical imagery related to the Lone Star State. No matter where he based himself, Wills made sure his band members knew that they were, and always would be, Texas Playboys.<sup>3</sup>

Following a stint in Oklahoma from the late 1930s until the early 1940s, Bob Wills relocated with his Texas Playboys to California in 1943. It was there in 1946 that CuvIELLO joined Wills's famed western swing band. Although CuvIELLO was a member of the group for only a couple of years, he left an

indelible mark on the band, just as his association with a “Texas-based” genre of music would shape his professional identity for the remainder of his life.

John Anthony CuvIELLO was born on August 8, 1915, to Italian immigrant parents in Fresno, California, deep in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley. Joseph CuvIELLO and Elizabeth Avigiano came from Maschito, Italy, to the United States in the 1890s, passing through New York with their young family on the way to California. An amateur wine-maker, Joseph had been to Fresno before to visit a relative and envisioned a promising future for his young family there among the region’s grape vineyards. “I’m the second John,” recalls Johnny CuvIELLO, referring to an older brother who passed away before the family left Italy. For a while, it seemed as if the CuvIELLOS might lose their “second John,” as well. With six children to care for in America, Elizabeth watched helplessly as her youngest baby, Johnny, refused to eat, and she prepared herself for the possibility of losing yet another son. However, the local pediatrician, Dr. Jorgensen, prescribed vitamin-rich powdered milk, and the infant soon began to thrive.<sup>4</sup>

the grapes he was supposed to be harvesting. Joseph handled the situation by flinging one of the drying trays at his son and yelling for him to get back to work. CuvIELLO recalls, “I don’t know how he did it, but he would swing it, and it would come right to me. Right there! He had a talent.”<sup>6</sup>

Johnny’s sister married an ex-surgeon who had his own grape farm on which the CuvIELLO family worked. In addition to fresh fruits and vegetables for their own consumption, the CuvIELLOS picked grapes together every year, leaving “the big farm” to travel as far as Santa Cruz, following the grape harvests. Johnny remembers that they were paid a respectable five cents per box, until the arrival of tens of thousands of Dust Bowl immigrants, who were willing to work for much less.

As the youngest child, Johnny never could pick a row of grapes as fast as his older siblings. So, he began looking for another source of income. While his brothers continued working out on the farms, Johnny found employment in Fresno. He sold ice cream from a wagon, served as a school crossing guard, and worked as a paperboy for the *Fresno Bee*. He took all of his

John Anthony CuvIELLO was born on August 8, 1915, to Italian immigrant parents in Fresno, California, deep in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley.

Johnny CuvIELLO grew up very close to his mother, helping her bake bread in the outdoor oven Joseph built to resemble the ones they used back in Italy. Johnny’s early illness left him with a lifelong nervous stomach, but his mother’s minestrone soup and the fresh baked bread seemed to have a curative effect. He attended church with his mother, who cooked mashed potatoes and ravioli before leaving the house in order to ensure the meal would be ready soon after their return. Joseph CuvIELLO, at home amid vineyards but lost in the constrictive laws of the Prohibition era, began making his own wine. He sold small amounts to neighbors and family members who also missed their traditional drink, but he never considered it a business. At one point, someone took issue with his low-level bootlegging and alerted local authorities. The police did investigate, but they were sympathetic, cautioning Joseph to be careful and limit his activities. They left with a sample of the contraband but never bothered the family again.<sup>5</sup>

Before some 3.5 million people fled Texas and Oklahoma for the West Coast during the Dust Bowl of the mid-1930s, ethnic minorities comprised the majority of fruit pickers in California’s Central Valley. The CuvIELLO family, including young Johnny, worked in the grape fields hauling wooden trays and filling them with clusters of fruit to dry into raisins. The sheltered youngest child would often stop, hiding in the vines and eating

wages and handed them over to his mother, who, unbeknownst to him, set the money aside for his own use later. One of the fringe benefits of selling the *Fresno Bee* was the free weekly movie to which the newspaper company treated its delivery boys. CuvIELLO’s friends especially enjoyed watching films starring Rin Tin Tin, “The Wonder Dog,” although teenaged Johnny’s attention often was drawn to the pit band that played before and after the movie. The drummer, in particular, fascinated CuvIELLO, who was enthralled by the speed and control of the drum roll. “I really fell in love with that roll,” he recalls, “it just sounded so good to me.”<sup>7</sup>

Although they had a radio, the CuvIELLO family rarely listened to music around the house, preferring comedy programs, such as *Amos & Andy*. Johnny’s love for the drums came solely from his appreciation of the instrument. He did not think in terms of any specific musical genre or career path. Instead, he simply wanted to perform that “beautiful roll” on the snare and become the best drummer that he could be.<sup>8</sup>

As a teenager, CuvIELLO became more serious about learning to play music. After asking around, he found a classmate who was interested in selling his drums for \$14. He even promised to include basic drum lessons at no extra charge. The kit, which had a 28” bass drum adorned with the silhouette of a naked woman and a light inside for illumination, also included a snare



Johnny CuvIELLO with the Edison Jazz Orchestra, 1932. From the 1932 Edison Observer yearbook. Courtesy Fresno Public Library.

drum with a rope to provide the sibilant sound he wanted. CuvIELLO was thrilled and asked his mother if he could purchase the drums. She produced the money she had been saving on his behalf, and, after making sure her son was serious, allowed him to buy the set. Unfortunately, CuvIELLO's classmate never followed through on his offer of free lessons, so Johnny found himself in possession of what would become the tools of his profession without yet knowing how to use them properly.<sup>9</sup>

Undeterred, CuvIELLO approached one of his teachers in the Music Department, Mr. Bohasky, who agreed to give Johnny daily lessons each morning at 8:00 before school started. The two began with the bass drum, and after two or three weeks, moved on to the snare. Mr. Bohasky taught CuvIELLO how to read snare drum notes by playing eighth and sixteenth note runs on the flute while Johnny practiced alongside him on the drum set. After several lessons, CuvIELLO "got the feeling, and...was off."<sup>10</sup>

At home, CuvIELLO practiced incessantly. Perhaps surprisingly, the racket did not seem to bother his father, who would sip wine and listen approvingly. Although CuvIELLO's mother never voiced any disapproval, her son worried that his constant pounding would become an annoyance. So, he began honing his skills quietly on a rubber practice pad. One day when his mother was entertaining "some Italians who came to visit," Johnny rehearsed in his room, almost silently, on his rubber pad. Later that evening, she remarked that she had not heard him practice yet. CuvIELLO grinned mischievously and said, "I'll do it tomorrow, Mom!" Both of CuvIELLO's parents seemed to genuinely enjoy their son's burgeoning musical talents and wholeheartedly encouraged his development as a performer.<sup>11</sup>

After studying with Mr. Bohasky, CuvIELLO met two other musicians in Fresno, from whom he would learn a great deal about playing. A young drummer named Terry Angell encouraged CuvIELLO to practice alongside him at no charge. This was how CuvIELLO learned to use his wrists and fingers to increase speed and dexterity without tiring out his arms. Although he took only two or three lessons, he practiced the technique tirelessly, and, after about a year, believed that he had it almost mastered. CuvIELLO also befriended a black drummer, whose stick-twirling made a lasting impression on Johnny. Often, his mother Elizabeth would make soup and sandwiches for the boys, as they practiced their intricate maneuvers.<sup>12</sup>

By the early 1930s, Johnny CuvIELLO had become the primary drummer in all three musical groups at his high school, Edison High. The Edison Band marched at festivals and parades, while the Edison Orchestra performed "for all junior high assemblies and for special programs on request."<sup>13</sup> Although he excelled at military rhythms in the marching band and the classical pieces performed by the orchestra, CuvIELLO also sought to expand his musical horizons by joining the seven-piece Edison Jazz Orchestra. This group, comprised primarily of students of Italian and Mexican descent, played weekly noon-time dance concerts, as well as "many programs and clubs including...the Junior-Senior Prom."<sup>14</sup>

CuvIELLO, who also played with a jazz ensemble outside of school, recalls that it was in these jazz bands that he "really got the experience."<sup>15</sup> The saxophonist and trumpeter in his school band, who were fairly accomplished musicians, showed CuvIELLO how to make their songs swing. They all read music

and played such jazz standards as “It Had to be You” and “My Confession” from music charts.<sup>16</sup> This solid grounding in jazz would prove crucial to his future involvement with western swing, a musical genre that superimposed jazz methods, songs, and styles onto stringed instruments primarily associated with country music.<sup>17</sup>

Although the members of the Edison Jazz ensemble were teenagers, the advanced level of their musicianship allowed them to perform at professional engagements, such as weddings, parties, and community functions.<sup>18</sup> One member of the group was the brother of boxer Young Corbett III, who won the worldwide welterweight championship in February 1933. The band played several events for the sports hero, even making a trip north to San Francisco, a noted jazz hotspot.<sup>19</sup>

CuvIELLO’s drumming skills brought him local acclaim and eventually led to a job offer from a burlesque show in Fresno’s Chinatown neighborhood. Although his teachers advised against taking the position, since he was still in high school, CuvIELLO decided to consult with his biggest supporter and the ultimate authority figure in his life—his mother. As he recalls, “I told her...they got a job for me over here, but that’s where the women—they’re naked, but they got a string on them.” After thinking it over, his mother decided that Johnny could take the job playing his beloved drums for money, despite the racy nature of the show.<sup>20</sup>

As a result, CuvIELLO’s first steady professional gig turned out to be performing in a burlesque theater, even though he was still in high school. “I learned to play shows on stage—stage shows,” CuvIELLO said of his first real job as a drummer. “It was a good training for me.” The piano player and trumpeter particularly impressed CuvIELLO, who “learned hard” from these seasoned professionals.<sup>21</sup> He would get out of school at 3:00 P.M., rush over to the theater for his first show at 3:30, and play one more at 6:00. His brother-in-law accompanied CuvIELLO to the theater and stayed with him through the shows, making sure he kept out of trouble and got home safely. Wide-eyed, Johnny collected autographs from all the dancers and musicians, yet never compromised the importance of his craft.

After graduating from high school, CuvIELLO continued to work in burlesque, appearing at the Rex Theatre in Fresno, and taking odd gigs as they came. He attended Fresno State College, where he played in the concert, symphony, and military bands.<sup>22</sup> Despite being a paid professional and also performing at the college, CuvIELLO continued taking private lessons and worked incessantly to hone his skills. He made a weekly trip to Los Angeles to learn from a drummer whom his friend Terry Angell had recommended, practicing exercises for control and dexterity. “I started gettin’ wise,” he remembers, “I learned the basics real good.”<sup>23</sup>

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December

1941, CuvIELLO received his draft notice from the United States Army. Despite his enthusiasm for joining the military, his frail physique almost kept him from serving. The weight requirement for his height was 120 pounds, and at the time he weighed only 119. However, the night before his physical, his mother cooked a big spaghetti dinner for him, and, the next morning, he weighed in at exactly 120 pounds. Stationed in Hawaii, CuvIELLO played not only in the military marching band, but also in a jazz ensemble organized to perform for the officers club and at dances. After nearly five years of service, CuvIELLO was released from the Army “on points” just as World War II ended.<sup>24</sup>

Bob Wills also had served in the Army, albeit briefly. Upon his release in 1943, he relocated with most of his band from Tulsa, Oklahoma, to Los Angeles, California. Although Wills was a native Texan and had formed his first western swing bands in the Lone Star State, he had moved to Oklahoma in 1934, in part, because of conflicts with influential Texas radio personality and future governor, W. Lee “Pappy” O’Daniel.<sup>25</sup> Musicologist Jean Boyd notes that it was this first relocation, from Texas to Oklahoma, that caused Wills to change his band’s name from “The Playboys” to the “Texas Playboys” as a way to emphasize his historical and cultural ties to his home state.<sup>26</sup> With this new move to California taking Wills so far from his original base of operations, he had perhaps even more reason to underscore his ties to Texas.

During his years in Oklahoma, Wills had established a touring circuit centered on his home base of Tulsa. Although he periodically traveled to more distant locations, touring within a small radius allowed the band to drive home after each engagement, which was Wills’s preferred mode of operation. Wills found the performance circuit in Los Angeles to be very competitive. Although he got regular work in western movies and continued to sell out local dance halls, Wills was never truly comfortable in Hollywood. In addition, being located in southern California made it difficult to tour the rest of the Golden State. So, in 1945, Wills moved his band and family to a ranch outside of Fresno in central California’s San Joaquin Valley. Here he hoped to replicate the type of successful touring circuit he had built back in Tulsa.<sup>27</sup>

By 1946, Johnny CuvIELLO had finished his military service and returned to Fresno, where he quickly found work with the Shorty Wells band, playing frequently at the Fresno Barn. CuvIELLO also was hired by Jack O’Neil to play on Fresno radio station KMJ. There CuvIELLO performed twice weekly with a three-piece band and provided percussive sound effects, such as using a wooden block to imitate the sound of a horse galloping. Although immersed in music, CuvIELLO was still relatively unaware of the popular music of the day, preferring to learn his songs from sheet music or from whichever band leader hired him.<sup>28</sup>

While working at KMJ, Cuiello learned that a nine-piece band would be arriving to perform on the air. Since he had been playing primarily with Wells's five-piece combo, Cuiello was intrigued by the thought of such a large ensemble. So, he decided to go down and listen. After fortifying himself with a bowl of his mother's minestrone soup, he headed to the station, not knowing that he was about to make the acquaintance of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys.<sup>29</sup>

When Cuiello looked through the studio window and saw the band setting up, he decided he wanted to meet the drummer, who was tuning his snare drum. Cuiello walked over and shook hands with the young man, who introduced himself as Billy Jack Wills, Bob Wills's younger brother. Cuiello told Billy Jack that he also played drums, and Wills immediately asked Johnny if he would finish adjusting the snare. "I was tuning his drum up. I was tuning it the way I like it, with nice tension and everything," Cuiello recalls, and after hearing him try the drums out, the younger Wills asked him to sit in for a few songs. Billy Jack

only because his clothes did not match those of the rest of the band, Cuiello gladly accepted the position after Wills offered to provide the western shirt, ten gallon hat, and cowboy boots that comprised the standard Texas Playboy uniform in the mid-1940s. Cuiello, the California jazzman of Italian heritage, was suddenly and irreversibly "westernized."

Cuiello soon played his first dance with Bob Wills in Selma, California, a small town north of Fresno. Accustomed to the loose structure of the burlesque band, Cuiello was surprised at the length of the sets they performed. "The band just kept playing, no break...we kept playing. And that was the first job with him, and I was getting tired, you know, and you keep going."<sup>33</sup> Hungry, tired, and unsure as to when they would stop, Cuiello unwrapped a sandwich his mother had packed for him. "I was eating the sandwich while I was playing. Well, the guys all looked at me like, 'hey, you are gonna get canned, man. You're eating that sandwich while you're playing with him.'"<sup>34</sup> After the show, guitar player Junior Barnard spoke

## Cuiello's first steady professional gig turned out to be performing in a burlesque theater, even though he was still in high school.

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Wills "was drumming [for the Playboys] whenever they didn't have a drummer," Johnny remembers, "but he wanted to go back on the bass fiddle."<sup>30</sup>

Cuiello was reluctant to jump in, since he had never played with a nine-piece band before. However, Billy Jack Wills urged him to try and assured him that it was only practice. So, Cuiello agreed to try a song or two. The band, none of whom he knew, began a loose practice session, jamming on segments of songs and making sure their instruments were in tune. Cuiello played along without inhibition or nervousness, completely unaware that he was performing with one of the top acts in the nation.

As the Texas Playboys warmed up, two men "in civilian hats" walked into the room. "I didn't know Bob Wills or Tommy [Duncan, lead vocalist]. I said 'these are promoters' to myself 'I might get a job!' I thought they were promoters." Duncan took his place at the microphone, and Wills took his fiddle out of the case. After the briefest of introductions, Wills called out for his hit song "San Antonio Rose," asking rhetorically "ready boys?" The band took off. Johnny's jazz technique and obvious talent blended seamlessly with the group, and although he was completely unfamiliar with the song, he performed well enough to be invited to join the band.<sup>31</sup>

As Cuiello recalls, when the song ended, "Wills asked 'Do you want to go to work for me?' We rehearsed another hour. Then we made a transcription [recording]."<sup>32</sup> Hesitant

with the new, unfamiliar member of the band. "I didn't know who Bob Wills was, so Junior Barnard had to tell me 'hey, that's the big Bob Wills, he's a famous man, a big man!'" Barnard said if Wills had seen anyone eating on the bandstand, he would have fired him. Cuiello was impressed and recalls, "the next night I didn't eat no sandwich!"<sup>35</sup>

Although Cuiello's stint with Bob Wills could have ended as abruptly as it began, they would go on to play together for two years. Among other accomplishments, their musical partnership resulted in the *Tiffany Transcriptions*, a series of songs recorded for radio, which historian Charles Townsend and others believe reveal the unmatched breadth of Wills music and his band's unparalleled musical versatility. Currently available through Rhino Records, the *Tiffany Transcriptions* sound as vital and potent today as they did sixty years ago.<sup>37</sup>

In early 1947, after more than a year with the Playboys, Johnny Cuiello contributed the only song to the band's repertoire which highlighted the drums. He had started composing a song with lyrics, so he brought his words and melody to Playboy steel guitarist Herb Remington, who had become a good friend and frequent roommate on the road. In a hotel room in Chicago, Remington picked out the melody as Johnny sang it. Using only a practice drum pad and an un-amplified steel guitar, the two arranged the song as an instrumental, in which several instruments would trade verses with the drums. After about an hour, Cuiello

and Remington believed they had something special, so they approached Bob Wills. As Cuiello recalled, “I went to Bob. I said ‘Bob, I got a song I’d like to do, with the drums.’ He said ‘Sure!’ That was one great thing about Bob. If you had any song you wanted to sing, yes sir, he would give it a chance.”<sup>38</sup>

At the time, the Playboys were making a studio recording for MGM Records, and Wills was more than willing to try out the new song during the session.<sup>39</sup> Since Cuiello had only performed

it on a practice pad, he had to improvise quickly on his drum kit. “I just started off naturally and picked up on a tom-tom.”<sup>40</sup> The improvisational nature of jazz was never more evident in a Texas Playboys recording session. “I picked it up and did it, and I felt—I felt something swinging.”<sup>41</sup> Influenced by another song in the Texas Playboy repertoire, “Hawaiian War Chant,” this uncharted adventure allowed for extended hot solos from Tiny Moore’s electric mandolin and Herb Remington’s steel guitar.



Johnny Cuiello performing with Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys on an ABC radio broadcast, 1946. Courtesy Johnny Cuiello.

The result was a lively, drum solo-driven tune featuring the Texas Playboys with their California-born percussionist, recording an improvisational jazz number, which had been written in Chicago, Illinois. Although other soloists had contributed songs to the group's repertoire and even had tunes named after them, this was the first time a drummer had taken the spotlight for more than a short solo. Wills believed the song would be a hit, so he featured it, along with CuvIELLO's

rousing drum solo, in the band's live performances. Reflecting his identification with his roots, both true and fabricated, Wills named the song "Texas Drummer Boy," a nickname which, from that moment on, would be inextricably linked to Fresno, California's Johnny CuvIELLO.

Despite the success of their musical collaboration, differences between CuvIELLO and certain other Texas Playboys began to cause friction within the band. Cliques formed, and although he considered Herb Remington and Junior Barnard to be close friends, CuvIELLO felt increasingly isolated from the rest of the group. CuvIELLO recalls that Eldon Shamblin, in particular, seemed to dislike him, and since Shamblin acted as road manager for the band, this created tension. "Eldon was kind of jealous of me. I didn't drink with them, and I wasn't from Texas. Some of the guys—they didn't want me in the band—they wanted the other drummer to come back."<sup>42</sup>

The Playboys remained headquartered in Fresno for the duration of CuvIELLO's tenure, and the tour bus would regularly pick him up and drop him off at his parents' house. However, in late 1947, according to CuvIELLO, the bus dropped him off but never came back to pick him up. He heard later that Eldon Shamblin had told Bob Wills that CuvIELLO had not shown up at the specified time.<sup>43</sup>

With "Texas Drummer Boy" due for release in early 1948, the dismissal of CuvIELLO proved to be short-sighted, since the intricate drum rhythms he had played on the song were difficult to replicate. The record was released, and it did indeed become a hit, as audiences requested it at Texas Playboys concerts throughout California and the Southwest. Wills asked successive drummers to play it, but few could match CuvIELLO's skill and unique style. Eventually, Wills dropped the song from the band's repertoire.<sup>44</sup> Johnny CuvIELLO, the Italian-Californian had left his mark on the Texas Playboys, and the title of Texas Drummer Boy would forever be his and his alone.

CuvIELLO went on to perform with many other acts in the burgeoning California country music scene. In addition to having played years earlier behind the popular comedy group, The Three Stooges, CuvIELLO also worked with such prominent artists as Buck Owens. CuvIELLO played sessions for Capitol Records, led his own band at the legendary Blackboard Club in Bakersfield, and became a successful songwriter. In the 1960s, however, he married and left professional music for a more stable career at Lockheed. By the early 1990s, western swing had experienced a resurgence in popularity, and CuvIELLO found himself in demand at Texas Playboy reunions and other western swing events throughout the country. Today, Johnny CuvIELLO, still known as the Texas Drummer Boy, continues to play his signature song to appreciative crowds across the country, going strong at 93 years of age. ★



## Notes

1. Analysis of the phenomenon of western clothing and the “cowboy image” in country music can be found in, Bill C. Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers: Southern Culture and the Roots of Country Music* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), Bill C. Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, Second Revised Edition, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), and Holly George-Warren and Michelle Freedman, *How the West was Worn* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001).
2. For more on the evolution of western swing and the history of Bob Wills, Milton Brown, and other pioneers of the genre, see Deirdre Lannon, “Swingin’ West: How Hollywood Put the ‘Western’ in Texas Swing,” M.A. Thesis, Texas State University-San Marcos, 2007, Charles R. Townsend, *San Antonio Rose: The Life and Music of Bob Wills* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1986), Cary Ginell and Roy Lee Brown, *Milton Brown and the Founding of Western Swing* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), Jean Boyd, *The Jazz of the Southwest: An Oral History of Western Swing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), Rush Evans, “Bob Wills: The King of Western Swing,” *Journal of Texas Music History*, Volume 2, Number 2, 16-29, John Mark Dempsey, *The Light Crust Doughboys are on the Air: Celebrating Seventy Years of Texas Music*, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2002), Jean Boyd, “We’re the Light Crust Doughboys from Burrus Mill”: *An Oral History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).
3. Louise Rowe, conversation with author, May 23, 2005.
4. Johnny CuvIELLO, conversation with author, May 20, 2004.
5. Ibid; See also James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), for a discussion of the Dust Bowl migration and its role in transplanting the regional culture of Texas and Oklahoma to the West Coast.
6. Johnny CuvIELLO, conversation with author, May 20, 2004.
7. Johnny CuvIELLO, conversation with author, Sept. 7, 2005.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Johnny CuvIELLO, conversation with author, May 20, 2004.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. *The Edison Inventor Yearbook*, 1933 (Fresno County Library), 49.
14. Ibid.
15. Jean Boyd, *Oral Memoirs of Johnny CuvIELLO and Steve Hathaway, An Interview Conducted 7 July 1993* (Waco: Baylor University Institute for Oral History, 2001), 17.
16. Johnny CuvIELLO, conversation with author, May 20, 2004.
17. Boyd, *Jazz of the Southwest*, 2; See also Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 158-174; Gary Hartman, *The History of Texas Music*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 143-147; Duncan McLean, *Lone Star Swing: On the Trail of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997).
18. Johnny CuvIELLO, conversation with author, May 20, 2004.
19. Michael Egan, “Johnny CuvIELLO,” *Western Swing Newsletter*, September 1990, 3.
20. Johnny CuvIELLO, conversation with author, Sept. 7, 2005.
21. Johnny CuvIELLO, conversation with author, May 20, 2004.
22. Egan, “Johnny CuvIELLO,” 4.
23. Ibid.
24. Johnny CuvIELLO, conversation with author, September 7, 2005.
25. Charles R. Townsend, “Bob Wills,” in Roy Barkley, ed., *The Handbook of Texas Music*, (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 356-357.
26. Boyd, *We’re the Light Crust Doughboys from Burrus Mill*, 13
27. Townsend, *San Antonio Rose*, 235.
28. Johnny CuvIELLO, conversation with author, Sept. 7, 2005.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Boyd, *Oral Memoirs of Johnny CuvIELLO*, 44.
34. Ibid.
35. Johnny CuvIELLO, conversation with author, May 20, 2004.
36. Townsend, *San Antonio Rose*, 250.
37. For more information, see: [www.Rhino.com](http://www.Rhino.com)
38. Johnny CuvIELLO, conversation with author, May 20, 2004.
39. CuvIELLO remembers recording at a studio in the Wrigley Building in Chicago, but Townsend’s discography lists the location as Hollywood. The song was also recorded for the *Tiffany Transcriptions*.
40. Boyd, *Oral Memoirs of Johnny CuvIELLO*, 16.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.



## Texas Dance Halls: A Two-Step Circuit

by Gail Folkins, photography by J. Marcus Weekley. Voice in the American West Series. (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2007). Pp. 208. Acknowledgements, photos, and index. ISBN-13: 978-0896726031 cloth; ISBN-10: 0896726037 paper.

## Pat Green's Dance Halls & Dreamers

by Luke Gilliam, photography by Guy Rogers III. (Dance Halls and Dreamers Publishing LLC, 2008). Pp. 184. Introduction and photos. ISBN-13: 978-0292718760 cloth; ISBN-10: 0292718764 paper.

Gail Folkins and J. Marcus Weekley have produced a delightful chronicle of their travels through a series of popular Texas dance halls. For Folkins, an English professor, her account of *Texas Dance Halls: A Two-Step Circuit* has been a personal adventure. Her husband is a bass player in a country band, and having spent considerable time in these singular venues, she describes herself as “a dance hall wife.” (p. xiii.) Her academic credentials, coupled with her “family fieldwork,” have served her well in this multi-dimensional analysis of Texas’s historic halls.

In eighteen essays that highlight twenty dance halls, the author describes these institutions as “community and cultural centers” that have “served as meeting places where fraternal organizations met to conduct business in support of local farmers, merchants, and other residents.” (p. xiv.) Folkins paints a picture of an Old World-New World conduit that has acted as an instrument of immigrant acculturation as well as “an important link in the transmission of ethnic culture from one generation to the next.” (p. xiv.) She touts the role that the dance hall plays in the careers of aspiring Texas bands, as well as their historical significance in the careers of many established Texas music icons.

These observations and insights come together to define Folkins’s concept of “place.” She then layers in the human element by focusing on the oral histories of the individuals “who keep dance hall culture strong—hall owners, musicians, patrons, and friends.” (p. xiii.) Her informants offer captivating tales of haunted halls. They relate family histories intertwined with a particular venue or community. They tell stories of bootleggers and local characters, or stories of the famous Chicken Ranch in La Grange, which operated with impunity as late as the mid-1970s. Folkins expands the personification of the venues with such biographical observations as her treatment of Alice Sulak, the owner of Sefcik Hall and fifty-year veteran saxophonist who regularly takes the Sefcik stage with her group, “The Melody Five.” In addition, Folkins successfully blends personal and public perspectives with such accounts as her discussion with Gary McKee of the Fayette County Historical Commission. As McKee points out, “Someone can celebrate an entire lifetime in a dance hall, from baptism, to birthday parties, to wedding and funeral receptions.” (p. 45.)

Folkins’s analysis of the synergistic blend of place and people is artfully reinforced by Weekley’s crisp monochromatic photography. He captures the detail and individual spirit of the halls, as well as the mood and movement of its patrons, proprietors, and players. A typical shot might feature a stationary backdrop, such as a stage or a wall decorated with antique signs, set against a crowd of swirling dancers, moving as blurred swaths of light, as they outpace the speed of the shutter. The resulting composition presents an image of modern movement contrasted with the staid visual anchor of the historic hall. This dynamic technique is reinforced by a variety of contextual shots—exteriors, detailed interiors, portraits, and performance photographs—to produce an overall visual component that truly enriches the accompanying text.

Despite such wonderful features, there are certain aspects of the book that some readers might find a bit tedious. Folkins writes with a sharp eye for detail, but perhaps too much detail at times. Is it necessary, for example, to introduce new characters with (seemingly) compulsory descriptions of their attire? A steady stream of fashion-based terms—lace-trimmed blouse, hot pants, summer top, tall boots, cobalt-blue suit, handkerchief hem, periwinkle hospital scrubs—runs throughout the text. On another note, there might have been more research undertaken on certain points of musicology. For example, linking the introduction of the accordion into the Lone Star State solely to German and Czech immigrants to Texas overlooks the parallel migration of the instrument from Central Mexico north through Monterrey into the Rio Grande Valley.

These minor critical comments, though, pale in comparison to the larger value of this well-crafted book. Folkins and Weekley highlight several important elements of Texas dance hall culture—gender, race, and ethnicity—which have been largely overlooked in other ethnographies. Women play a significant role in this book by taking the lead in a number of “two-step” stories, including Terrie Chase, owner of Saengerhalle, the mother-daughter team of Marian and Glynis Tietjen who manage the Swiss Alps Dance Hall, such world-class musicians as Cindy Cashdollar, featured in an essay on Gruene Hall, and such dynamic personalities as the sax-playing grandmother, Alice Sulak, who runs Sefcik Hall.

Folkins goes on to explain the ubiquity of the African-American cowboy in Texas cultural history by describing an event at Wright's Park, a dance hall outside of Schulenburg. "This group [of African American riders] looks as if they've just stepped off the Texas range in the early nineteenth century, when according to historians half the cowboys were African American or Hispanic American." (p. 155.) Although the cowboy's heyday is more accurately placed in the post-Civil War period, when the Texas cattle drives moved north to the railheads beyond the Red River, Folkins brings to light an important and frequently overlooked aspect of Texas "frontier" history. Cowboys and trail drivers of the period usually did not resemble Clint Eastwood, Eric Fleming, and the television cast of *Rawhide*; they were generally a much darker hue. The author and photographer bring the significance of the historical African American into twenty-first century dance hall culture with their treatment of the Juneteenth celebration at Wright's Park. Finally, in the chapter, "Dancing in the Park with Little Joe y la Familia," they highlight the seminal influence of Hispanic culture in the "Two-Step Circuit" and in Texas music history.

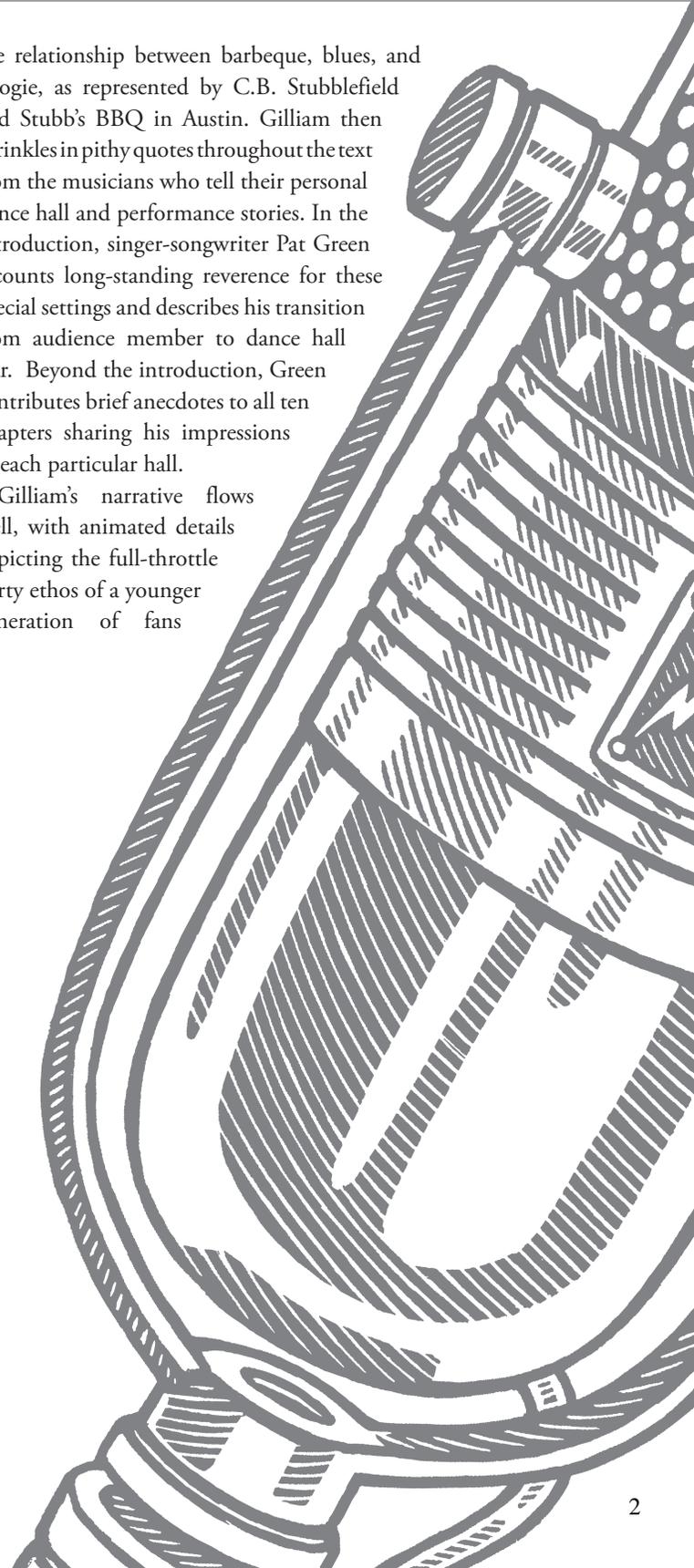
Folkins's scholastic approach in this well-researched, well-written offering, coupled with Weekley's creative photographic interpretations, make for an excellent book and a lasting contribution to Texas cultural history. *Texas Dance Halls: A Two-Step Circuit* is part of the Voice of the American West series from Texas Tech University. If this book is any indication of the quality of others in the series, I look forward to reading more of their fine publications.

In *Pat Green's Dance Halls & Dreamers*, Luke Gilliam and Guy Rogers III make another valuable contribution to what might be described as the twenty-first-century romantic renaissance of the Texas dance hall. In a treatment of ten venues, journalist Gilliam guides the reader through the performance world of a new generation of singer-songwriters—Jack Ingram, Kevin Fowler, Cory Morrow, Randy Rogers, Pat Green, Cross Canadian Ragweed, and Wade Bowen—while highlighting the ageless contributions of Willie Nelson, the power and depth of Ray Wylie Hubbard's solo show, and the honky-tonk spark and spirit of Robert Earl Keen.

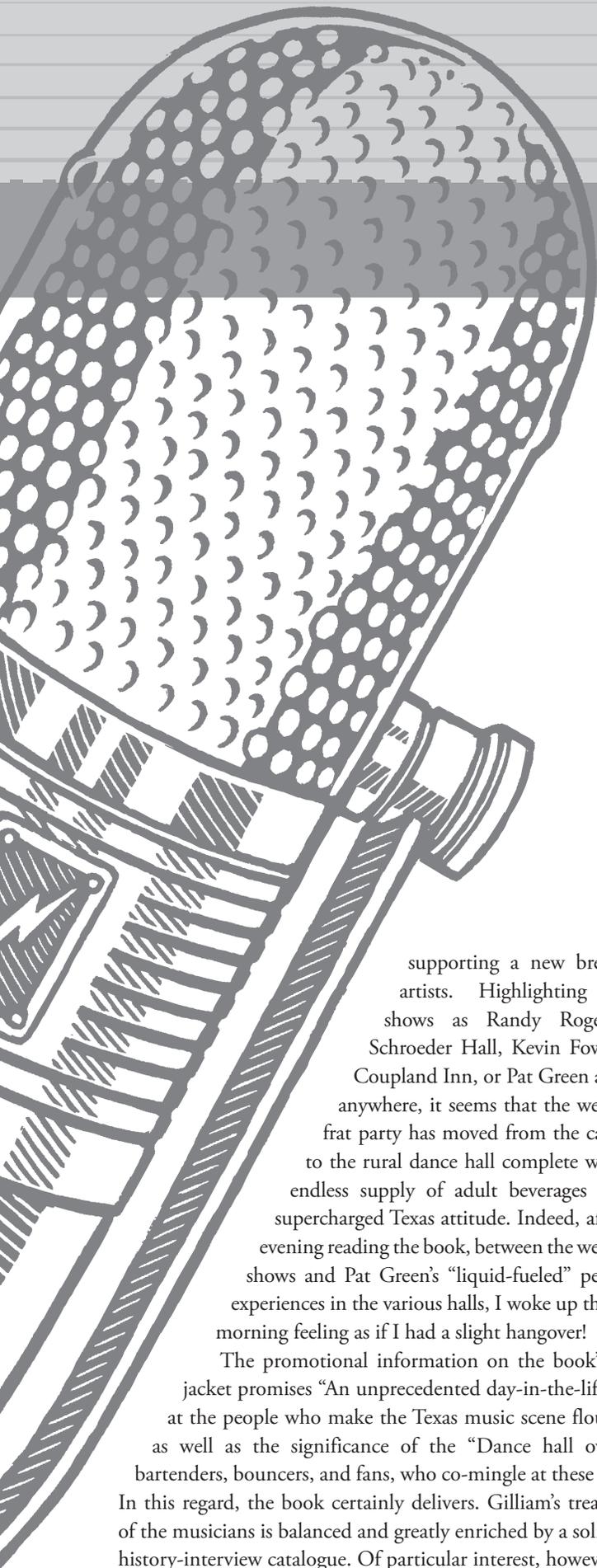
Although Gilliam touches on the social utility of the halls, he focuses mainly on the contemporary scene from the artist's perspective and includes insights from the colorful characters that own, manage, and work in these halls. The author enhances the stories with sidebars in the various chapters, including Hondo Crouch's role as "Imagineer" and impresario in Luckenbach, or

the relationship between barbeque, blues, and boogie, as represented by C.B. Stubblefield and Stubb's BBQ in Austin. Gilliam then sprinkles in pithy quotes throughout the text from the musicians who tell their personal dance hall and performance stories. In the introduction, singer-songwriter Pat Green recounts long-standing reverence for these special settings and describes his transition from audience member to dance hall star. Beyond the introduction, Green contributes brief anecdotes to all ten chapters sharing his impressions of each particular hall.

Gilliam's narrative flows well, with animated details depicting the full-throttle party ethos of a younger generation of fans



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supporting a new breed of artists. Highlighting such shows as Randy Rogers at Schroeder Hall, Kevin Fowler at Coupland Inn, or Pat Green almost anywhere, it seems that the weekend frat party has moved from the campus to the rural dance hall complete with an endless supply of adult beverages and a supercharged Texas attitude. Indeed, after an evening reading the book, between the weekend shows and Pat Green's "liquid-fueled" personal experiences in the various halls, I woke up the next morning feeling as if I had a slight hangover!

The promotional information on the book's dust jacket promises "An unprecedented day-in-the-life look at the people who make the Texas music scene flourish," as well as the significance of the "Dance hall owners, bartenders, bouncers, and fans, who co-mingle at these halls." In this regard, the book certainly delivers. Gilliam's treatment of the musicians is balanced and greatly enriched by a solid oral history-interview catalogue. Of particular interest, however, are the biographical sketches of the aforementioned "dance hall

owners, bartenders, bouncers, and fans." As mentioned, some of the sketches, including Hondo Crouch and C.B. Stubblefield, appear in the sidebars, but the bulk of the biographical information flows through the text. For example, Gilliam provides accounts of such colorful characters as Larry Kelso, the larger than life "one-man circus" and owner of the Coupland Inn; "Grandmamma" Jo Nicodemus, the manager of The Sons of Hermann Hall, whose selfless dedication to live music has won her the affection of countless musicians; or Robert Gallagher, Billy Bob's tenured entertainment director with an encyclopedic knowledge of the Texas music scene, are valuable contributions to the documentation of the twenty-first-century dance hall renaissance.

The photography of Guy Rogers III is more than simply a classy supplement to the book's attractive layout; it is the aesthetic binder that pulls together the book's many fascinating stories. Not only does Rogers do a first-rate job with the "physics" of photography in his shooting technique, but his composition and subject choices clearly illustrate his talent as a photojournalist. His craftsmanship draws the viewer into the fabric and feel of the scene by capturing the excitement and revelry while still maintaining the distinct personality of the various venues. Rogers creates an inclusive photo journal by incorporating detailed shots, such as Ray Wylie Hubbard's eagle-claw fingernails coaxing guitar strings into action, and images that collectively depict the vast expanse of Billy Bob's Texas, the "World's Largest Honky Tonk." Any reader who spends some time with this book will feel right at home visiting these dance halls and honky tonks.

Both of these books explore important aspects of Texas dance hall culture. Folkins delves into the larger questions of historical significance and the efficacy of the dance hall as a pragmatic social institution in Texas communities. Gilliam places the hall and honky tonk in the contemporary entertainment arena with a special focus on the musical torch passing to a new generation. *Dance Halls* and *Dreamers and Dance Halls: A Two-Step Circuit* play a vital role in documenting the history of the dance hall tradition in Texas, while also celebrating the dynamic twenty-first-century dance hall renaissance, which promises to keep the dance hall tradition alive and flourishing for generations to come.

*Craig Hillis*

## The History of Texas Music

by Gary Hartman. John and Robin Dickson Series in Texas Music. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), Pp. 304. Acknowledgements, photos, and index. ISBN-13: 978-1-60344-002-8 cloth; ISBN-10: 1-60344-002-X paper.

Music is most often categorized by genre. Generally, the only exception to this is when a community carves out a niche for its “local musicians.” However, something unique happens in Texas; the definition of “local” becomes expanded to “Texan,” and artists and performances are categorized both by their genre and by their state.

Is there anything that links these Texas performers together, other than where they have lived? Many people have argued “yes,” but few have attempted to elaborate with an answer based in historical research. Gary Hartman’s latest book fills that gap. *The History of Texas Music* directly addresses the question of what makes “Texas music” Texan? Hartman posits that the state’s unique history has created a sense of place unlike any other, and that it is this perception of *place* that unites various genres of music under the banner of “Texas music.”

*The History of Texas Music* is divided into sections based on ethnic cultural traditions. Each section is framed with a survey of the larger forces that have shaped the people addressed within that chapter. This is an interesting approach that provides flexibility to the reader. Often, survey texts cover their material chronologically, requiring that the reader interact with the book from start to finish. With Hartman’s text, each chapter is sufficiently free-standing. Not that you would want to stop reading after just one or two chapters – the prose is wonderfully approachable, and the breadth of material provides enough movement to keep even the most casual reader engaged.

Hartman is naturally inclusive in his writing and is aware of how socio-political issues impact the success of a musician. He analyzes the importance of race and class in the creation and promulgation of different musical genres. And, unlike many other texts on music, female performers are not relegated to their own chapter; the inclusion of female musicians is free-flowing and not at all gratuitous. Anyone familiar with Hartman’s other work will recognize that these references to race, class, and gender were not forcibly inserted into the text, but rather are natural extensions of the author’s interest in creating a holistic picture of Texas music history.

Published by an academic press, *The History of Texas Music* could easily be adapted to a classroom, but

Hartman has intentionally written for a much broader audience. It can be difficult to write a book about music for an audience that might not be musically-trained. However, because of his professional background in presenting Texas music to a broad audience (whether through teaching, as the founding director of The Center for Texas Music History, or through his recently-created National Public Radio program, *This Week in Texas Music History*), Hartman is skilled at discussing music in a way that does not require any special knowledge on the part of the reader.

*The History of Texas Music* offers two additional strengths that separate it from many other texts. First, Hartman has compiled an outstanding collection of photos and images to complement the prose. While some of the images are taken from live performances and naturally convey the excitement of those shows, many are stock footage publicity photos and run the risk of not adding much to the text itself. However, Hartman and his editors have intentionally selected photos that had not been overly-used in other settings. Other refreshing and seldom-seen images are generously included throughout the text.

Another great strength of *The History of Texas Music* is the “Recommended Listening” section included at the end of each chapter. It has always been very confusing to me as to why so many books about music either do not include listening samples (which can be prohibitively expensive for a press to include) or do not include information on where to find samples of the music being discussed. Hartman provides a list of recommended recordings for the reader to consult, along with easily comprehensible descriptions of how a listener can actually detect the differences between musical performances. In this way, Hartman’s text is not only an informative study on the history of Texas music, but also a reference guide to certain technical aspects of performance. The book is at its best when including these details, and they are an asset to the reader.

*The History of Texas Music* includes an enormously generous Notes section, and the Bibliography is extensive enough to keep anyone interested in additional research busy for years. Hartman has contributed a meaningful study on the history of Texas music and has admirably addressed the long-standing question of what makes music from this region unique. The book is a strong addition to any collection on Texas music.

Cathy Brigham

# Our Contributors

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