

TEXAS MUSIC HISTORY



The Creation of "Texas Music"
The Many Faces of "Milk Cow Blues"
The South Austin Popular Culture Center

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Letter from the Director



The 2012 issue of the *Journal of Texas Music History* includes three articles that help provide important insight into various aspects of Texas music history. The first explores the impact of legendary musician, Doug Sahm, on the larger musical landscape of Texas and the world. The second article examines the classic song, “Milk Cow Blues,” and highlights how music is a vital, and ever-evolving, part of our cultural vocabulary. The third piece showcases a remarkable archival collection, which is helping preserve and document our musical heritage for generations to come. (Back issues of the *Journal* are available online at: www.txstate.edu/ctmh/publications/journal.html)

This issue of the *Journal* also marks another busy yet productive year for the Center for Texas Music History. During this past year, the Center has continued to work on a variety of ongoing projects while, at the same time, launching several new ones. Through Texas State University’s History Department, the Center continues to offer a variety of graduate and undergraduate courses on Texas music history and has added some new classes, including “Music and Race in the American South.”

The Center’s award-winning *John and Robin Dickson Series in Texas Music* (produced in collaboration with Texas A&M University Press) released a new book by Brain T. Atkinson, entitled *I’ll Be Here in the Morning: The Songwriting Legacy of Townes Van Zandt*. The Center also collaborated with the Texas State Historical Association and the Texas Music Office (in the Office of the Governor) to produce the revised second edition of *The Handbook of Texas Music*, the first and only encyclopedia of Texas music history for which our Texas State students wrote hundreds of articles.

On March 16th, the Center also opened the *Texas Music Roadtrip* exhibit at the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin. This is the largest museum exhibit ever organized on Texas music and will run through October 14, 2012. We’re very grateful to our colleagues at the Bullock Museum and everyone else who contributed time, effort, and resources to make the exhibit such a success. I am especially thankful to Patti Harrison for providing a \$100,000 grant in support of the *Texas Music Roadtrip* exhibit.

Other highlights from this year include the Center’s 70th

birthday tribute concert for legendary Texas singer-songwriter, Guy Clark, on November 2, 2011, at Austin’s Long Center for the Performing Arts. The Center’s popular NPR series, *This Week in Texas Music History*, is now in its fourth year and is broadcast on NPR affiliate stations throughout the Southwest.

Of course, we couldn’t begin to do all that we do without the help of so many friends and supporters. My sincerest thanks to Kathleen O’Keefe, Jennifer Cobb, Twister Marquiss, Jason Mellard, Pam Golightly, César Limón, the Center’s Advisory Board, Mary Brennan & Alan Apel, Frank de la Teja, Mary Alice De Leon, Madelyn Patlan, the Texas State University History Department, Denise Trauth & John Huffman, Perry & Marianne Moore, Gene & Lynn Bourgeois, Michael Hennessey, Ann Marie Ellis, Michael Willoughby, Diana Harrell, Barbara Breier, Gail Randle, Vicki Clarke, Steven Reese, Patti Harrison, Teresa Ward, Mark & Linda Smith, Kent Finlay, Francine Hartman, John & Robin Dickson, Paul & Polly Glasse, Tamara Saviano, Paul Paynter, Randy Rogers, Brady Black, Bill Whitbeck, Daymon & Pat Muehl, Phil & Cecilia Collins, Rod Kennedy, Dalis Allen, Kim & Robert Richey, Joe & Alice Specht, Richard Cheatham, Liz McDonald, Gregg Andrews & Vikki Bynum, Deirdre Lannon, Kevin Mooney, Lanita Hanson, Jim & Cathey Moore, Tracie Ferguson, Ruthie Foster, Randy & Leslie Collier, Tom & Ann Francese, Nina Wright, Elmer & Susan Rosenberger, Rick & Laurie Baish, Nell Hesson, Lucky & Becky Tomblin, Denise Boudreaux, Carol Dochen, Jo & Paul Snider, Darrell & Barbara Piersol, Ralph & Patti Dowling, Dennis & Margaret Dunn, Ron & Judy Brown, Grant Mazak, Mariko Gomez, Cathy Supple, Sharon Sandomirsky & Chris Ellison, Byron & Rebecca Augustin, John Kunz, Bill Musser, Lee & Judy Keller, Ronda Reagan, Glenn & Donna Joy, Luan Brunson Haynes & Elizabeth Brunson Vickers, Mildred Roddy, Billy Seidel, and many others.

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TEXAS MUSIC HISTORY 2012

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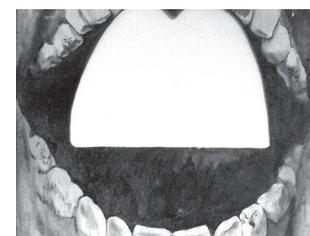
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In order to continue this success, we need your help. Your contribution will help fund continued publication of

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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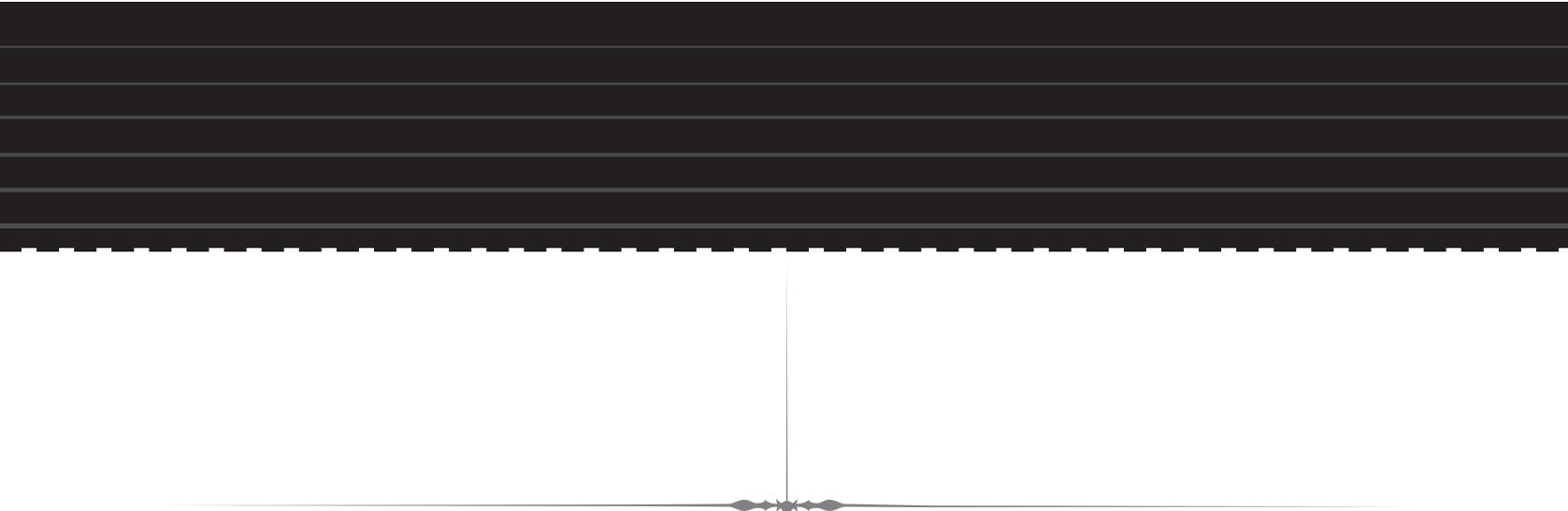
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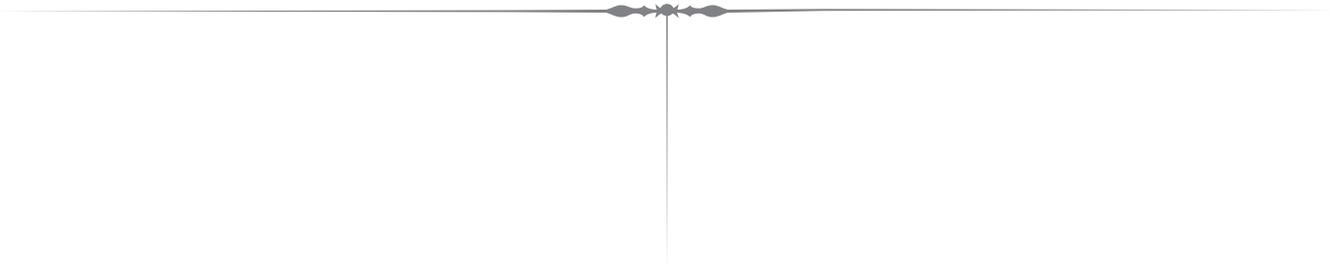
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The Creation of “Texas Music”

Doug Sahm’s Atlantic Sessions and the Progressive-Country Era¹

Travis Stimeling



Doug Sahm at the Armadillo World Headquarters, 1973. Courtesy Burton Wilson



San Antonio native and progressive-country music icon, Doug Sahm, worked as a musician within the Mission City's ethnically diverse, working-class neighborhoods from the age of six, first as a multi-instrumentalist in the local country music scene and later as part of the area's blues and *conjunto* scenes. A third-generation German-American, Douglas Wayne Sahm was born on November 6, 1941. By his 30th birthday, he was widely recognized as a principal figure in the formation of a "Texas music" that brought together the vernacular styles of the Lone Star State's African-American, Anglo-American, and Tejano populations in order to articulate a Texan countercultural identity in the wake of the Civil Rights and Chicano movements, conflicts about the Vietnam War, and widespread economic change throughout the Sun Belt.²

Although Sahm's entire musical career could be described accurately as an effort to celebrate Texan musical traditions within the context of the eclectic aesthetics of garage rock, certain sessions he recorded under the auspices of the Atlantic label in 1972 and 1973 offer a particularly rich distillation of his conception of "Texas music."³ Sahm had already achieved national popularity before he migrated to San Francisco in the late 1960s. He returned from California to Texas in 1971 having recently finished a contract with Mercury Records and was seeking to get back in touch with his Texas roots.⁴

DOUG SAHM AND BAND

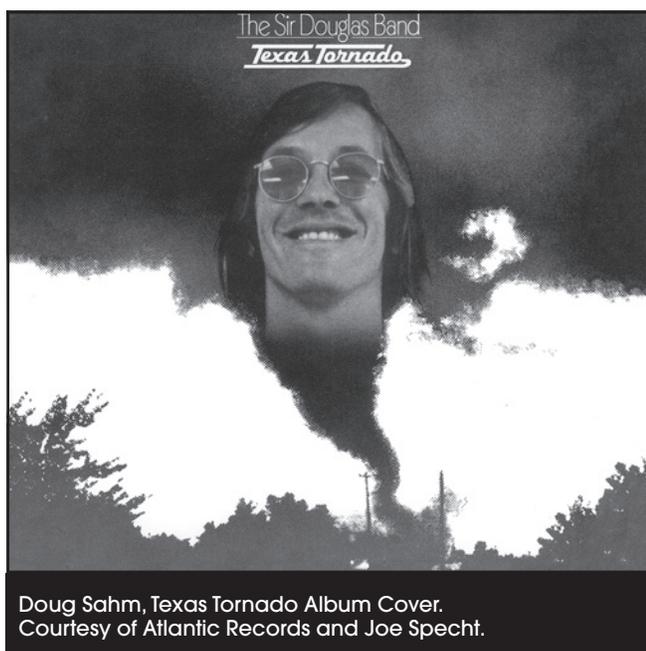


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Album Art by Gilbert Shelton. Courtesy of Atlantic Records and Christopher Hanson.

Sahm's 1973 releases on Atlantic Records, *Doug Sahm and Band* and *Texas Tornado*, covered a broad range of musical styles and included an all-star cast of supporting musicians who represented a variety of ethnic musical influences. This might lead some listeners to consider Sahm's progressive-country-era work as the musicalization of racial tolerance, acceptance, and peaceful cooperation in the aftermath of the civil rights

movement and emerging Chicano movement. At the same time, however, Sahm's understanding of "Texas music" may also be seen as an effort to reinforce the Anglo-Texan colonial impulses of the progressive-country genre. Consequently, using Sahm's Atlantic sessions as a case study, this article demonstrates the need for a critical reading of the popular notion of "Texas music" that more fully accounts for the cultural implications,



particularly those related to the politics of representation, and of the cross-cultural borrowings and exchanges that stand at the center of the Texan vernacular music experience.

In 1972, Doug Sahm met legendary Atlantic Records producer Jerry Wexler, who was in Austin hoping to capitalize on the nascent progressive-country music scene and to sign acts for the label's new Nashville operation. Arguably one of the most adventurous progressive-country artists, Sahm played an important role in shaping Austin's progressive-country scene by providing support for such Austin-based artists as Willie Nelson, Freda and the Firedogs, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and Roky Erickson, and profoundly influencing local and national conceptions of "Texas music" in the process. It was through Sahm, for example, that Wexler met the members of Freda and the Firedogs, who were working as Sahm's backing band at the time. Wexler offered the group a recording contract with Atlantic, which, for a variety of reasons, the group never signed.⁵ Wexler's fascination with Texas music was short-lived, in no small part because many Texas musicians were wary of the national music industry.⁶ Wexler may have been driven primarily by an interest to capitalize on the star power of musicians who had decamped to Austin and the surrounding area in the early 1970s, but the handful of albums that resulted from Atlantic Record's Texas experiment provide valuable insight into a seminal moment in the construction of "Texas music" as an idea and a musical practice.

By mid-1972, Wexler had signed Sahm to his first contract with Atlantic.⁷ Recording at Wally Heider's studios in San Francisco and the Atlantic Studios in New York, Sahm worked with two

core groups of musicians to cut 64 sides in 13 sessions between September 8, 1972, and December 2, 1973. The first group of artists, featured mainly on Sahm's debut Atlantic release, *Doug Sahm and Band*, included such longtime Texas collaborators as keyboardist Augie Meyers, drummer George Rains, and tenor saxophonist Martin Fierro, as well as such nationally known artists as Bob Dylan and Dr. John. There were also session stalwarts Wayne Jackson, Willie Bridges, David "Fathead" Newman, David Bromberg, and Andy Statman, along with the up-and-coming Texas accordion virtuoso, Flaco Jiménez. The second group of artists, billed as The Sir Douglas Band, showcased the talents of several musicians with whom Sahm had played since he was a teenager in San Antonio, including tenor saxophonist Rocky Morales and bassist Jack Barber.

In addition to the sheer talent and experience that these musicians brought to the sessions, the groups that Sahm assembled were quite remarkable in their racial diversity, even if this was not readily apparent to most listeners. The debut album's cover image, designed by Austin cartoonist and *Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* creator Gilbert Shelton, reveals that the recording sessions provided an opportunity for African-American, Mexican-American, Jewish-American, and Anglo-American artists to blend together a wide array of musical traditions, much as Sahm himself had done earlier in the complex racial and ethnic musical landscape of 1950s San Antonio.

Sahm's Atlantic sessions reveal a similar acceptance of diversity, including not only such original compositions as "Nitty Gritty" and "Texas Tornado" but also covers of songs with connections to the richly diverse Texas music scene, as indicated by the material recorded in four sessions held in New York, October 9-12, 1972.⁸ On those dates, Sahm and his all-star group cut 31 songs, including versions of the 1954 pop hit "Mr. Sandman," hillbilly classics such as the Delmore Brothers' "Blues Stay Away from Me," and Darby & Tarlton's "Columbus Stockade Blues," as well as songs written by session participants Atwood Allen, Bob Dylan, and, of course, Sahm himself.

However, the majority of tunes cut in these sessions could be traced to three musical traditions that were becoming key elements of the progressive-country music scene in Austin and the emergent idea of "Texas music"—honky-tonk, Western swing, and electric blues. In each case, Sahm seems to have trained his eye on iconic artists in those three genres, paying particular attention to the ones whose recordings were readily accessible and who had enjoyed relative longevity across Texas: Hank Williams, Bob Wills, and T-Bone Walker. On October 12, Sahm cut Williams's "I Can't Help It (If I'm Still in Love with You)," "Lost Highway" (written by Texan Leon Payne), "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," and "Hey Good Lookin'." In addition, Sahm recorded Bob Wills's "Faded Love" and "Papa



(L-R) Long time Sahl friend and future Texas Tornados drummer, Ernie Durawa, Doug Sahl, and Atwood Allen, early 1970s. Courtesy of Ernie Durawa Collection, Wittliff Collections, Texas State University.

Ain't Salty," a T-Bone Walker standard. Sahl also recorded songs by several artists whose work could be considered part of the periphery of Texas music, most notably songs of "Chitlin' Circuit" favorites Bobby "Blue" Bland and Jimmy Reed, New Orleans rhythm-and-blues songwriter Bobby Charles, and Charlie Pride's contemporary radio hit and salute to Sahl's hometown "(Is Anybody Going to) San Antone."

In essence, these sessions brought together musical styles, key artists, and essential songs that embodied the radio and dancehall soundscapes found throughout Texas at the time. Sahl's approach, however, was somewhat cavalier, freely mixing black and white musical practices that, despite his own youthful experiences as a musical standout in San Antonio, were to a great extent segregated from one another in Texas's racially homogeneous clubs.⁹ Wexler pointed to this aspect of Sahl's music-making as one of the key reasons that he signed Sahl to Atlantic Records, noting that "Doug had the whole repertoire" of blues, Western swing, jazz, rhythm-and-blues, and Tejano music.¹⁰

However, even more than bringing a wide-ranging interest in what Wexler described as "American root music" and what was quickly becoming known in Austin as "Texas music" was Sahl's mastery of the idioms of each genre. As a bluesy singer and a skilled multi-instrumentalist on steel guitar, fiddle, *bajo sexto*, and electric guitar, Sahl moved fluently from the *conjunto* and Western swing-influenced twin fiddle sound of "(Is Anybody Going to) San Antone" to the blazing electric guitar work heard in his cover of Bobby "Blue" Bland's "Your Friends."

Of course, there were other musicians in Austin's 1970s progressive-country scene who blended a variety of ethnic musical genres. This is one reason progressive country appealed to such a broad audience and helped connect young listeners and veteran players in the process of defining this new "Texas music." Yet unlike many other progressive-country artists,

Sahl had been freely mixing all of these musical influences since his teens. Childhood friends and musical collaborators Rocky Morales and Johnny Perez seemed to confirm Sahl's genuine respect and fondness for African-American, Tejano, and Anglo-Texan music early on, when they rechristened him "Doug Saldaña," noting that "Doug...was so Mexican he needed a proper name."¹¹ Furthermore, *Rolling Stone* named Sahl "Chicano of the Year" in its 1970 "Annual Awards for Profundity in Arts and Culture."¹²

Doug Sahl's eclectic musical output reflected his unwillingness to be categorized as simply an "Anglo" artist. "Chicano," a song recorded on October 9, 1972, at Atlantic Records' New York Studios and released on Sahl's 1973 *Texas Tornado* album, was conceived as a *conjunto* song. It featured Sahl on *bajo sexto* (a 12-string guitar commonly used for rhythm in *conjunto* bands) and Flaco Jiménez on accordion. Capturing the spirit, sound, and message of the Chicano movement that was gaining momentum throughout South and Central Texas during the early 1970s,¹³ the song offered a powerful statement of Mexican-American pride:

Chicano, soy Chicano.
 Skin is brown, I'm so proud.
 And I'll make it in my own way.
 Some people call me third world.
 But I know that it's a real world.
 'Cause to me, all I am is Mexican.

The lyrics go on to echo the Chicano movement's call for collective action in celebrating Mexican-American history and culture. He challenges his fellow Chicanos to:

Come together right now.
 And all across the U.S.A.
 Jump up and say
 Chicano, soy Chicano.
 Right on!

In addition to making a powerful lyrical statement of Chicano pride, Sahl prominently featured the sounds of *conjunto* music, a style most often associated with the Mexican-American working class of South Texas. *Conjunto* itself epitomized the remarkable cross-pollination of musical cultures found throughout the Lone Star State. Rooted in Mexican folk music, *conjunto* borrowed the accordion and the polka dance step from German and Czech immigrants and blended those with elements of blues and country. In "Chicano," the musical echoes of Mexicans, Germans, Czechs, Africans, and Anglo-Texans in South Texas are joined by a steel-guitar obbligato, highlighting the complex intermingling of ethnic influences that Sahl had encountered since his childhood.¹⁴

As historian Jason Mellard has argued, Doug Sahn became something of a Chicano "insider" by calling for respect, acceptance, and reconciliation between Anglo Texans and Tejanos.¹⁵ In the years immediately following the release of *Texas Tornado*, "Chicano" appeared on such records as Los Alvarados' 1974 LP *El movimiento chicano*. Indeed, ethnomusicologist and *conjunto* scholar Manuel Peña went so far as to suggest that many Tejanos, as "upwardly mobile, former proletarians (or their offspring)," began "to reexamine their relationship with this suddenly precious cultural resource" following the interest of Sahn and other white artists in the genre.¹⁶

The effectiveness of Sahn's "Chicano" role is further supported by the widespread acceptance of this song by Tejano groups in and around Austin during the 1970s. Rumel Fuentes and Los Pinguinos del Norte's 1975 recording of "Chicano," which appears in Les Blank's 1976 documentary film *Chulas Fronteras*, perhaps best exemplifies the growing impact of the song within the Chicano movement. In this particular performance, Fuentes adds two bilingual verses that bring the political confrontations between Tejanos and Anglo Texans into stark relief, noting that "some people call me violent / 'cause I'm no longer the silent / Pobrecito Mexicano! (Poor little Mexican!)."¹⁷

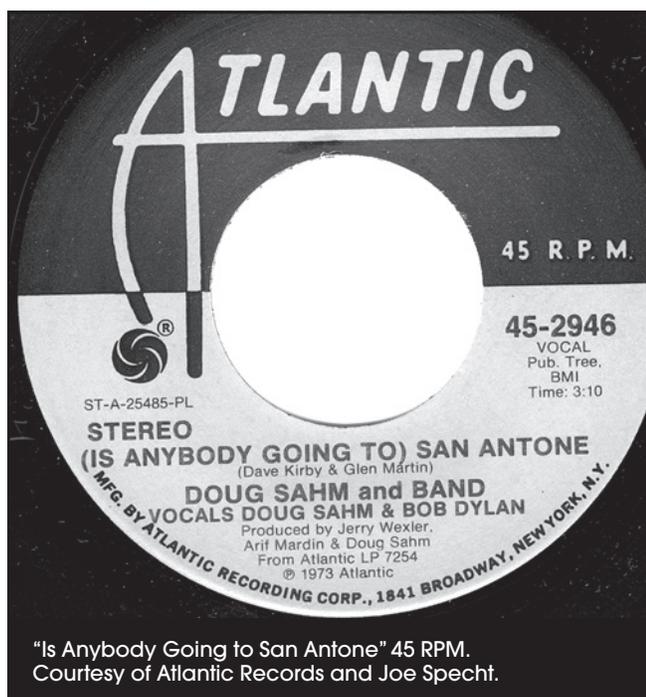
At the same time that Doug Sahn's cultural complexity might be interpreted as an effort to desegregate the musical landscape of Austin in the 1970s, some people might just as easily regard this as another example of the colonial impulse of Texan nationalism. Emerging alongside the establishment of the Republic of Texas in 1836, Texan nationalism, as cultural

geographer D.W. Meinig suggests, has been intimately tied to "a history of conquest, expansion, and dominion over a varied realm, and not only an outward movement of people, but the thrust of a self-confident aggressive people driven by a strong sense of superiority and destiny."¹⁸

When viewed from a different perspective, Sahn's recording of "Chicano" reveals what some might consider the intrusion of Anglo-Texan musical styles into this otherwise Texas-Mexican song. For example, the traditional *conjunto* button-accordion solo is followed by what could be considered the quintessential honky-tonk instrument, the steel guitar. The steel guitarist, David Bromberg, not only plays a break over half of the song but continues to make its presence known throughout the remainder of the recording. Moreover, Sahn also interjects the trademark "a-ha" holler of Western-swing pioneer Bob Wills, who, during the 1930s, already was blending Anglo, African, Mexican, Czech, and other ethnic musical influences found in the Lone Star State. In fact, Wills's "a-ha," which he often used to express happiness or enthusiasm at certain points in a song, is similar to the *grito* shout so commonly heard in Mexican popular and folk music.¹⁹

While this blurring of generic distinctions might be heard in light of Sahn's holistic and multicultural approach to "Texas music," one might just as easily hear this seemingly uncritical blending of otherwise segregated musical practices as yet another chapter in a long narrative of Anglo-Texan colonial dominance. Similarly, Sahn's performance of "Chicano" might be interpreted as a form of "brownface." Dance scholar Juliet McMains, writing of the tendency of competitive ballroom dancers to don dark makeup and spray-on tans, has described this as "a mask of Latinness that might free...[a performer] to step outside his or her own culturally acceptable range of expression" while also "eras[ing] and displac[ing]" authentic Latin presence in performance.²⁰ Consequently, Sahn's personal background, along with his deliberate efforts to include a diverse range of ethnic musical repertoires and a multi-racial cast of studio musicians, served to cast him as one who was sympathetic to the ideals of the Chicano movement. However, the fact that he was white and non-Hispanic certainly added to the complexity of his role in helping shape a "Texas sound."

The 1970s progressive-country music scene in Austin was a cultural space in which a generation of young Texans redefined what it meant to be Texan. They did so by claiming ownership of distinctly Texan forms of expressive culture, including not only music but also fashion, language, and art.²¹ Sahn's recordings and his appearances at Austin's Armadillo World Headquarters, Soap Creek Saloon, and on the PBS series *Austin City Limits* occurred at the same time that other young Texas musicians were borrowing from the state's unique and eclectic musical heritage. In particular, Ray Benson's group Asleep at



"Is Anybody Going to San Antone" 45 RPM.
Courtesy of Atlantic Records and Joe Specht.

the Wheel, along with others such as fiddler Alvin Crow, were helping to revive public interest in Western swing, an eclectic blend of country, jazz, blues, and pop that had emerged from Texas in the 1930s but had declined in popularity by the 1960s. Benson and other Western swing revivalists learned from and often performed with former members of Bob Wills's Texas Playboys. This allowed Benson's Asleep at the Wheel and other young acts to move fluidly between Austin's progressive-country venues and more traditional venues, such as Dewey Groom's Longhorn Ballroom in Dallas.²²

Similarly, Austin musician Bobby Earl Smith, who occasionally played with Sahn, collaborated quite frequently with local restaurateur and Jimmie Rodgers emulator Kenneth Threadgill. Threadgill served as a direct link between Rodgers, arguably the most successful and influential country singer of the 1920s and 1930s, and Texas blues-rock singer Janis Joplin, who had some of her first public performances at Kenneth Threadgill's bar while still a student at the University of Texas during the 1960s. Threadgill's, which had hosted an eclectic mix of musicians since it opened in the 1930s, helped lay the foundation for Austin's vibrant alternative music scene that continues today. Perhaps most famously, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Ry Cooder traveled to San Antonio in 1975 to study with *conjunto* accordionist Flaco Jiménez and *bajo sexto* player Toby Torres after hearing Jiménez's contributions to Sahn's *Texas Tornado*.²³ Such efforts at blending diverse musical influences were common throughout Austin's progressive-country music scene, and it became an important part of articulating the emerging concept of "Texas music" among young musicians, fans, and members of the media.

These collective Texan identities and the free musical borrowings that aided in their formation were shaped in large part by the legacy of Anglo-Texan nationalism. Despite challenges from Chicano and African-American civil rights

groups and official efforts to integrate the state capital during the 1970s, Austin and the University of Texas remained highly segregated throughout the progressive-country decade.²⁴ This meant that the progressive-country music scene existed within a predominantly white, Anglo-Texan milieu in clubs such as the Soap Creek Saloon and Armadillo World Headquarters.²⁵ Consequently, country music historian Bill Malone has suggested that progressive-country musicians created a "Texas music," which "reflected the fusion of cultures [that progressive-country fans] had grown up with" and represented for them "a semblance of tradition in a society given over to feverish change."²⁶

To be sure, progressive-country music certainly celebrated Anglo-Texan culture, musical or otherwise, as the scene's veneration of the cowboy, country music, and Texas "exceptionalism" indicate.²⁷ Yet the case of Doug Sahn suggests that the notion of "Texas music" may not have been a simple reactionary construction; rather, it might just as easily be understood as an effort to reconceptualize the fundamental tenets of Texan identity, effectively celebrating the Lone Star State's cultural diversity and cultural heritage. Unfortunately, this sentiment may have been lost on the national audience for Sahn's Atlantic releases, as evidenced by Greil Marcus's review of *Doug Sahn and Band*, which focuses on the star power of Bob Dylan and laments that the album "may be Sir Doug's dullest."²⁸

A product of the rich multicultural environment of San Antonio, Doug Sahn was a living archive of Texan vernacular musical styles. However, unlike such contemporaries as Western-swing revivalists Asleep at the Wheel, he did not engage with this music primarily as a practitioner of a historically informed performance practice rooted in efforts to preserve the past.²⁹ Rather, as a solo recording artist and in his work as leader of the Sir Douglas Quintet and the Texas Tornados, Doug Sahn freely interpolated elements from disparate musical practices in order to imbue these repertoires with distinctly contemporary meanings. ★

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the POST-45 @ the Rock Hall Conference, Cleveland, Ohio, April 29, 2011. I would like to thank Tracey Laird, Jason Mellard, Karl Hagstrom Miller, and Diane Pecknold, as well as the anonymous reviewers from the *Journal of Texas Music History*, for their insights and suggestions.
- 2 Jan Reid with Shawn Sahn, *Texas Tornado: The Times & Music of Doug Sahn* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 3-15; Chet Flippo, "Like to Send This Out to Everybody. Sir Douglas of the Quintet is Back (in Texas). He'd Like to Thank All His Beautiful Friends All Over the Country for All Their Beautiful Vibrations. He Loves You," *Rolling Stone* 86, July 8, 1971, 28; "Doug Sahn," *1980 Houston Country Scene* (1980): 23; Jason Mellard, "Regional Hybridity in Texas Music: The Case of the Texas Tornados," *Text, Practice, Performance V* (2003): 115-121; Gregory Curtis, "He's About a Mover," *Texas Monthly*, April 1974. My conception of "Texas music" is very much informed by Texas music historian Gary Hartman, who argues that "first and foremost, Texas music is extraordinarily diverse.... [It] has evolved alongside and in conjunction with other forms

- of regional music, and...has deep roots extending to other parts of North America and around the world." Gary Hartman, *The History of Texas Music* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 1-2. See also Rick Koster, *Texas Music* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998), vii-ix. For a broader discussion of the cultural politics of the progressive-country movement, see Cory Lock, "Counterculture Cowboys: Progressive Texas Country of the 1970s and 1980s," *Journal of Texas Music History* 3.1 (2003): 1-10; Travis David Stimeling, "Place, Space, and Protest: Austin's Progressive Country Music Scene and the Negotiation of Texan Identities, 1968-1978," Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2007; and Jason Dean Mellard, "Cosmic Cowboys, Armadillos and Outlaws: The Cultural Politics of Texan Identity in the 1970s," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2009.
- 3 Joe Nick Patoski, "Uno, Dos, One, Two, Tres, Cuatro," *Journal of Texas Music History* 1.1 (2000): 3; Don McLeese, "Sir Douglas Sahn and the Garage as Big as Texas," *Popular Music and Society* 29.4 (October 2006): 447.

- 4 Reid with Sahm, *Texas Tornado*, 73; Mellard, "Regional Hybridity in Texas Music," 119-120.
- 5 Marcia Ball, interview by author, January 18, 2007; Bobby Earl Smith, interview by author, June 2, 2007; Joe Nick Patoski, interview by author, April 1, 2008.
- 6 Jerry Wexler famously described the Austin music scene as a "mirage" in a 1974 interview with *Rolling Stone's* Chet Flippo, "Austin: The Hucksters Are Coming," *Rolling Stone* 158, April 11, 1974, 24. For a more detailed discussion of Austin musicians' attitudes toward the national music industry, see Travis D. Stimeling, *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks: The Countercultural Sounds of Austin's Progressive Country Music Scene* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6-7.
- 7 Reid with Sahm, *Texas Tornado*, 84-85.
- 8 Jazz Discography Project, "Atlantic Records Discography: 1972—session index," <http://www.jazzdisco.org/atlantic-records/discography-1972/> (accessed February 15, 2011).
- 9 For a more extensive examination of musical life in San Antonio's West Side during Sahm's youth, see Allen O. Olsen, "San Antonio's West Side Sound," *Journal of Texas Music History* 5.1 (2005), <http://ecommons.txstate.edu/jtmh/vol5/iss1/>.
- 10 Raoul Hernandez, "A Man and a Half: Jerry Wexler, 'The Funky Jewish King of Black Music,'" *Austin Chronicle* December 1, 2000, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/music/2000-12-01/79616/> (accessed April 5, 2011); Reid with Sahm, *Texas Tornado*, 85-86.
- 11 Reid with Sahm, *Texas Tornado*, 10.
- 12 "It Happened in 1970: Rolling Stone Annual Awards for Profundity in Arts and Culture," *Rolling Stone* 75, February 4, 1971, 47.
- 13 Manuel Peña, *Música Tejana: The Cultural Economy of Artistic Transformation* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 116; Cathy Ragland, "La Voz del Pueblo Tejano: Conjunto Music and the Construction of Tejano Identity in Texas," in *Puro Conjunto! An Album in Words and Pictures: Writings, Posters, and Photographs from the Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio*, eds. Juan Tejeda and Avelardo Valdez (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 214; Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., *Tejano Proud: Tex-Mex Music in the Twentieth Century* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 66.
- 14 Mellard, "Regional Hybridity in Texas Music," 111. On the multi-ethnic nature of *conjunto* elements, see Carlos Jesús Gómez Flores, "The Accordion on Both Sides of the Border," in *Puro Conjunto!* eds. Tejeda and Valdez, 74; Daniel S. Margolies, "Voz de Pueblo Chicano: Sustainability, Teaching, and Intangible Cultural Transfer in Conjunto Music," *Journal of American Culture* 34.1 (March 2011): 41.
- 15 Mellard, "Regional Hybridity in Texas Music," 119. At the same time, as José E. Limón has suggested, the use of the term "Chicano" by a white speaker might easily be read as a racial slur akin to the use of other derogatory racial epithets; José E. Limón, "The Folk Performance of 'Chicano' and the Cultural Limits of Political Ideology," in *And Other Neighboring Names: Social Process and Cultural Image in Texas Folklore*, eds. Richard Bauman and Roger D. Abrahams (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), 206. One finds a similar example in Austin-based Conjunto Aztlan's frequently performed and more militant composition "Yo soy Chicano," which proclaims, "Yo soy Chicano, tengo color / Puro Chicano, hermano con honor. / Cuando me dicen que hay revolución, / Defiendo a mi raza con mucho valor" ("I am Chicano, a man of color/ Pure Chicano, a brother with honor/ When they tell me there's a revolution/ I'll defend my race with much valor"). Conjunto Aztlan, "Yo soy Chicano," *Hecho en Texas: An Anthology of Texas-Mexican Literature*, ed., Dagoberto Gilb (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press in cooperation with the Southwestern Writers Collection, Texas State University, 2006), 272-273. For more on the nature of the Chicano movement in Texas, see Armando Gutiérrez and Herbert Hirsch, "The Militant Challenge to the American Ethos: 'Chicanos' and 'Mexican Americans,'" *Social Science Quarterly* 53.4 (1973): 830-845; Armando Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization: Avant-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); George Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun: Lessons from the Chicano Movement, 1965-1975* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Carlos Muñoz, Jr., *Youth, Identity, Power: the Chicano Movement*, revised and expanded ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2007); Yolanda Alaniz and Megan Cornish, *Viva La Raza: A History of Chicano Identity & Resistance* (Seattle: Red Letter Press, 2008); José P. Garza, "El Grupo: The Initiation of the First Chicano Art Group in Texas, 1967," ed. Felipe Reyes, *Aztlan* 34.1 (2009): 247-291; and David Montejano, *Quixote's Soldiers: A Local History of the Chicano Movement, 1966-1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).
- 16 Manuel Peña, *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto: History of a Working-Class Music* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 110.
- 17 "Remembering Doug Saldaña," ...to the Sublime, November 9, 2000, http://tothesublime.typepad.com/to_the_sublime2009/11/index.html (accessed March 15, 2011).
- 18 D.W. Meinig, *Imperial Texas: An Interpretive Essay in Cultural Geography* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1969), 7. See also Arnoldo De León, "Region and Ethnicity: Topographical Identities in Texas," in *Many Wests: Place, Culture, and Regional Identity*, eds. David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 260-265; Mark E. Nackman, *A Nation within a Nation: The Rise of Texas Nationalism*, National University Publications (Port Washington, NY, and London: Kennikat Press, 1975), 3-5.
- 19 I am grateful to Jason Mellard for drawing my attention to the similarity between this utterance and the *grito*.
- 20 Juliet McMains, "Reality Check: *Dancing with the Stars* and the American Dream," in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., eds. Alexandra Carter and Janet O'Shea (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 266.
- 21 Stimeling, *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks*.
- 22 Floyd Domino, interview by author, June 25, 2007; Joe Nick Patoski, "Alvin Crow...6 Days on the Road," *Pickin' Up the Tempo: A Country-Western Journal* 1 (April 1, 1975): 4-5.
- 23 Joe Gracey, "Conjunto Fever," *Pickin' Up the Tempo: A Country-Western Journal* 1 (April 1, 1975): 2-4. Joe Nick Patoski has observed that *conjunto* was rather difficult to find in Austin during the early 1970s, appearing primarily at the "Sunday *bailes* at *el club Rockin' M*, a country dance hall between Austin and Lockhart during the early 1970s"; Joe Nick Patoski, introduction to *Conjunto: Voz del Pueblo. Canciones del Corazón/Conjunto: Voice of the People, Songs from the Heart* by John Dyer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 7. See also Patoski, "Uno, Dos, One, Two, Tres, Cuatro," 3.
- 24 For more on the efforts to desegregate the University of Texas, see Almetris Marsh Duren, *Overcoming: A History of Black Integration at the University of Texas at Austin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979); Michael C. Gillette, "Blacks Challenge the White University," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 86 (October 1982): 321-344; Richard B. McCaslin, "Steadfast in His Intent: John W. Hargis and the Integration of the University of Texas at Austin," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 95 (July 1991): 21-41; Dwonna Goldstone, *Integrating the 40 Acres: The 50-Year Struggle for Equality at the University of Texas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006); and Gary Lavergne, *Before Brown: Heman Marion Sweatt, Thurgood Marshall, and the Long Road to Justice* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).
- 25 For more on the role of the Armadillo World Headquarters and other live music venues in Austin during this period, see Jason Dean Mellard, "Home With the Armadillo: Public Memory and Performance in the 1970s Austin Music Scene," *Journal of Texas Music History* 10 (2010), 8-21. For an examination of the authenticity of "live" music as part of the progressive-country music scene, see Travis D. Stimeling, "¡Viva Terlingua! Jerry Jeff Walker, Live Recordings, and the Authenticity of Progressive Country Music," *Journal of Texas Music History* 8 (2008), 20-33.
- 26 Bill C. Malone, "Myth, Media, and the Making of Texas Music," *Texas Humanist* (July-August 1985): 9.
- 27 Mellard, "Cosmic Cowboys, Armadillos and Outlaws," 143.
- 28 Greil Marcus, "Doug Sahm: *Doug Sahm and Band* (Atlantic K40466)," *Let It Rock* (April 1973), <http://www.rocksbkpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=669> (accessed November 9, 2011).
- 29 Stimeling, *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks*, 63-76.

The Many Faces of "Milk Cow Blues"

A Case Study

Jean A. Boyd and Patrick Kelly

AMERICAS #1
Western Swing Band

BOB WILLS
and his
TEXAS PLAYBOYS

Number 9
A. In The Mood
B. Texas Playboy
C. Milk Cow Blues
D. And Many More

for THE FIRST TIME... TRANSCRIBED... ALL
THE CHOICE BOB WILLS FAVORITES... MUSIC
THAT MADE THE TEXAS PLAYBOYS THE
NATION'S TOP WESTERN MUSICAL OUTFIT

A Sure-Fire Audience Builder for Your Station
A Powerful Selling-Vehicle for Your Sponsors

TIFFANY MUSIC, INC.
BOB WILLS TRANSCRIPTIC



“The blues is a personal statement made in musical terms which is nevertheless valid for all members of a society.” —Frank Tirro, *Jazz: A History*¹

Frank Tirro’s definition of blues noted above is a broad one, but it contains the essential components for this study of the many incarnations of the song “Milk Cow Blues.” “Milk Cow Blues,” technically a rural blues, has survived in many times and places and has had different iterations in various divergent cultures and genres. This study will focus on “Milk Cow Blues” in the African-American blues context and its transition to a Western-swing standard. How does the structure of a blues, such as “Milk Cow Blues,” facilitate its appropriation by different societal groups? What changes occurred in the music and text of “Milk Cow Blues” to alter its meaning for the two groups under consideration? Is the result of such alteration still a blues? These are questions that we will attempt to answer in this article. But first, why focus on “Milk Cow Blues” as the subject of this case study? The answer is that this one unassuming blues number has been in use since the 1920s, has been reinvented by various communities with different cultural identities and genres, and continues to be reworked today.

Several individuals are credited with originating “Milk Cow Blues,” or at least first recording it. The most often cited is Chicago-based bluesman Kokomo Arnold. Born James Arnold in Lovejoy’s Station, Georgia, on February 15, 1901, the child whose stage name would one day be “Kokomo” grew up working in the fields, picking cotton, as did many African-American boys in the Deep South at the beginning of the new century. Arnold was probably self-taught as a guitarist, perhaps with the help of his cousin, John Wiggs. It may have been Wiggs who showed Arnold how to put a bottleneck (knives could also be used) “onto the little finger of the fretting hand and ‘sliding’ it up and down the strings of a guitar to produce a spine-chilling and almost vocal sound.”² Keith Briggs notes that Kokomo Arnold laid the guitar across his lap, “dobro-style and ran a glass across the strings. He was left-handed and he had a somewhat erratic sense of time—but he was probably the fastest bottleneck guitarist ever to record.”³

From Georgia, Arnold moved north, first to Buffalo, New York, then to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Gary, Indiana, working in steel mills and playing clubs. In the late 1920s, he travelled south again, to Glen Allen, Mississippi, where he learned a new and more lucrative trade—bootlegging. Although he continued to work in nightclubs, bootlegging remained his principal occupation until the repeal of Prohibition in 1933. By 1929, Arnold had moved back north, this time to Chicago, the bootlegging capital of the country. In Chicago, both the bootlegging business and the blues business were more intense and competitive, but Arnold plied both trades until bootlegged alcohol became unmarketable in 1933. After that he was forced to depend on his music and his job as a janitor in a steel mill.

Arnold first recorded in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1933 for the Victor label under the name “Gitfiddle Jim”. For this session, he waxed “Rainy Night Blues” and “Paddlin’ Blues.” Even though these recordings had limited success in terms of sales, they introduced the unique style for which Arnold was recognized throughout his career. In *The Big Book of Blues*, Robert Santelli writes:

“Arnold’s trademarks were his wild and unpredictable sense of time, his penchant for sliding the bottleneck up and down the neck of his guitar as fast as possible, and his occasional use of the vocal falsetto to accent or embellish his guitar antics.”⁴ Describing “Paddlin’ Blues,” Santelli notes that on the recording, the tune “was played with such speed that Arnold’s voice could hardly keep up with his fingers.”⁵

Between September 1934 and May 1938, Arnold was under contract with the Decca label. During those years, he cut 88 sides—seven of which are lost, although several others became big hits.⁶ Arnold’s first two Decca tracks were among his most popular. “Old Kokomo Blues” was a cover of Scrapper Blackwell’s “Kokomo Blues,” named for a popular brand of coffee. Arnold’s cover was the source of his recording and stage name. The second hit from this first Decca session was “Milk Cow Blues.” Both of these tracks were later covered by other artists: “Kokomo Blues”

years and his relationship with Mayo Williams was deteriorating. It was all to end in the following year when Kokomo decided that Williams was not dealing fairly with him and broke away from recording altogether. He had never been a committed bluesman anyway, having, he felt, many other rows to hoe. Not that you would have guessed that from the quality of the recordings that he made during his last sessions; from the contemporary blues reportage of “Mean Old Twister” through to his final, aptly named, display piece “Something Hot,” he maintained an enviable level of excellence.¹⁰

James “Kokomo” Arnold died of a heart attack on November 8, 1968, at the age of 67.¹¹ He left behind a string of hits, including “You Should Not ’A Done It,” “The Twelves (The

Arnold’s trademarks were his wild and unpredictable sense of time, his penchant for sliding the bottleneck up and down the neck of his guitar as fast as possible, and his occasional use of the vocal falsetto to accent or embellish his guitar antics.

was transformed into “Sweet Home Chicago” by Robert Johnson, and “Milk Cow Blues” became “Milk Cow Blues Boogie,” as performed by Elvis Presley (Sun Records, 1954).⁷

In 1938, after recording as a soloist and with various other artists—including vocalist Mary Johnson (ex-wife of Lonnie Johnson), vocalist Alice Moore, pianist Peetie Wheatstraw, and Oscar’s Chicago Swingers, with whom he backed Lovin’ Sam Theard—Arnold left recording, although he apparently continued to play in the clubs of Chicago into the 1940s.⁸ In 1959, record producers Marcel Charvard and Jacques Demetre rediscovered Arnold and tried to convince him to record once again. He showed no interest and also insisted that he no longer owned a guitar, which according to his friend Willie Dixon was not true.⁹ Why would a successful recording artist stop making records and then refuse to return to the recording studio? Briggs explains:

For him [Arnold] music was just another way of making money that was better than working in the mill. He was good and he was popular but he was much less flexible, both musically and personally, than someone like [Big Bill] Broonzy or Chicago’s other slide guitar star, Tampa Red ... [By] March 1937, he had been with Decca for two and a half

Dirty Dozen),” “Monday Morning Blues,” “Things ’Bout Coming My Way,” “Sittin’ On Top of the World,” “Lonesome Southern Blues,” and “Hobo Blues.”¹²

Arnold was an interesting and unique blues figure for whom playing and recording blues was a good way to earn a living. He apparently did not worry about his reputation or his place in blues history—yet his recordings of “Milk Cow Blues” seem to have been the ones most influential on later artists. Arnold recorded no fewer than four different versions of “Milk Cow Blues” within approximately one year. He waxed the first, “Milk Cow Blues” No. 1, on September 10, 1934, and the second, “Milk Cow Blues” No. 2, on January 18, 1935. Arnold cut “Milk Cow Blues” Nos. 3 and 4 during the same recording session on September 11, 1935. All four performances feature similar guitar accompaniment figures and tunes but different texts, the common thread being the ongoing theme of a lost milk cow. Figure 1 presents the variances in the text from the first two versions that Arnold recorded.

A comparison of these two texts is enlightening in terms of Arnold’s performance of rural blues. At first glance, these are two different texts sung to approximately the same tune. The only point of similarity rests in the reference to a milk cow, which of course, represents a woman—the main character’s lover. The

Figure 1:

Kokomo Arnold, "Milk Cow Blues" No. 1, recorded September 10, 1934, in Chicago, Illinois, and "Milk Cow Blues" No. 2, recorded January 18, 1935, in Chicago, Illinois. Both texts were transcribed from the recordings on the CD *Kokomo Arnold: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Vol. 1 (17 May 1930 to 15 March 1935)* (Vienna, Austria: Document Records, 1991).

"Milk Cow Blues" No. 1**Verse 1**

All in good morning, I said, "Blues, how do you do?"
All in good morning, I said, "Blues, how do you do?"
You're mighty rare this mornin', can't get along with you.

Verse 2

I cannot do right, baby, when you won't do right yourself.
I cannot do right, baby, when you won't do right yourself.
Lord, if my good gal quits me, Lord, don't want nobody else.

Verse 3

Now you can read out your hymnbook, preach out your
Bible,
Fall on your knees and pray, the good Lord will help you.
Cause you gonna need, gonna need my help someday.
Mama, if you can't quit your sinnin', please quit your
low-down ways.

Verse 4

Yes, I woke up this mornin' and I looked out a door,
Still I know my family's milk cow, pretty mama,
by the way she lows.
Lord, if you see my milk cow, buddy, I say please
drive her home.
Said, I ain't had no milk and butter, mama, since
my milk cow been gone.

Verse 5

Said, my blues fell this mornin' and my love come
fallin' down.
Said, my blues fell this mornin' and my love come
fallin' down.
Said, I feel, Lord, I'm a dog, mommy, please don't
dog me 'round.

Verse 6

Takes a rockin' chair to rock, mommy, a rubber ball to roll,
Takes a tall cheesin' black, pretty mommy, to pacify my soul.
Lord, I don't feel welcome, please, no place I go,
Oh that woman that I love, mommy, have done drove me
from her door.

"Milk Cow Blues" No. 2**Verse 1**

Says, I woke up this mornin' with my milk cow on
my mind,
Says, I woke up this mornin' with my milk cow on
my mind,
I get to thinkin' 'bout my milk cow leavin', woo-oo,
just couldn't keep from cryin'.

Verse 2

Oh, god, please help me find my cow,
Oh, god, please help me find my cow,
Said, I wants to churn some milk and butter,
I want to churn that stuff right now.

Verse 3

Said, she ain't no high yellow, she's just a tall, cheesin' black,
Said, she ain't no high yellow, she's just a tall, cheesin' black,
Says, she got that sweet milk and butter, woo-oo, that stuff
I sure do lack.

Verse 4

Now, you can pull down your window, pull down your
window blind,
Now, you can pull down your window, pull down your
window blind,
Now don't let your next door neighbor hear you when
you whine.

Verse 5

Now, if you see my milk cow, buddy, please drive
her home to me,
Now, if you see my milk cow, buddy, please drive
her home to me,
Put a ticket on that heifer and send her C.O.D.

Figure 2:

Kokomo Arnold, “Milk Cow Blues” No. 3, recorded September 11, 1935, Chicago, Illinois, and “Milk Cow Blues” No. 4, recorded during the same session. Both texts were transcribed from the recordings on the CD *Kokomo Arnold: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Vol. 2 (18 April 1935 to 21 February, 1936)* (Vienna, Austria: Document Records, 1991).

“Milk Cow Blues” No. 3**Verse 1**

Well, I got myself a milk cow and she keeps me always blue,
Well, I got myself a milk cow and she keeps me always blue,
'Cause she don't do nothin', woo-oo, but drink and ballyhoo.

Verse 2

Well, my milk cow likes the whiskey, and she craves a
gang of men,
Well, my milk cow likes the whiskey, and she craves a
gang of men,
Said, you can take a half a pint of ol' cranko, woo-oo, leave
her in a lion's den.

Verse 3

Everybody's always wonderin', "What's the matter with my
milk cow today?"
Everybody's all a' wonderin', "What's the matter with my
milk cow today?"
Long as she gives sweet milk and butter, woo-oo, she sure
can't drive me away.

Verse 4

Says, I milked my milk cow early this mornin', just at the
break of day,
Well, I milked my milk cow early this mornin', just at the
break of day,
And I had to plea Black Annie, to please keep that bull away.

Verse 5

Now, I ain't gonna call no doctor and I ain't gonna call no
hoodoo man,
Says, I ain't gonna call no doctor, I ain't gonna call no
hoodoo man,
I'm gonna send that bull to the undertaker, please don't
ballyhoo.

“Milk Cow Blues” No. 4**Verse 1**

I can't get my milk in the mornin', I can't get
my cream no more,
I can't get my milk in the morning, can't get my
cream no more,
And I want somebody to come and help me get this bull
from my door.

Verse 2

Said, I went out to my barn this morning, he didn't have
one word to say.
Said, I went out to my barn this morning, he didn't have
one word to say.
He was layin' down by my heifer's side, please, on
a pile of hay.

Verse 3

Then I walked away and I hung my head and cried.
Said, I walked away and I hung my head and cried.
Said, I feel so lonesome, I ain't got my heifer by my side.

Verse 4

Now, there's nothing that I could do, for that ol' bull out-
zeroed me.
Now, there's nothing that I could do, for that ol' bull out-
zeroed me.
When I get myself another heifer, I'm gonna move back to
Tennessee.

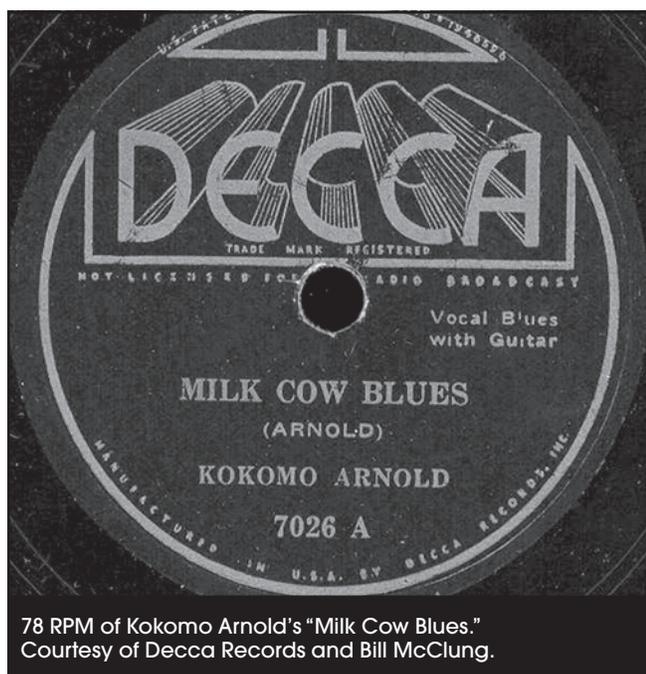
Verse 5

Said, I'm still in love with my milk cow, I just can't stand
the way she do.
Said, I'm still in love with my milk cow, I just can't stand
the way she do.
I don't mind her drinkin' her whiskey, but for something he
will understand.

first set of words includes three four-line stanzas, all of which introduce greater detail to the narrative. Verse three includes a religious note; verse four is the first reference to the main character's missing the sexual attention of the woman, and verse six informs the listener that the woman has driven him away. Stanzas one, two, and five, each three lines long, provide relief from the otherwise downhearted story. The musical setting, like

the poetry, is irregular in its phrase lengths and rhythm patterns.

In his second recording of “Milk Cow Blues,” Arnold further elaborates on the main character's condition. Still suffering from the loss of the woman, he focuses on his desperate state and makes no mention of the woman's faults. When the two texts are read in sequence, the second reads as a continuation of the first. However, stylistic differences exist between the



78 RPM of Kokomo Arnold's "Milk Cow Blues."
Courtesy of Decca Records and Bill McClung.

two versions. Most notably, "Milk Cow Blues" No. 2 consists entirely of three-line stanzas and both the poetry and music are more regular than in "Milk Cow Blues" No. 1. These latter features also apply to Arnold's third and fourth "Milk Cow Blues" recordings. (See Figure 2.)

Recorded one year and a day after Arnold's first "Milk Cow Blues," versions three and four suggest attempts to recreate its initial success. In "Milk Cow Blues" No. 3, the text offers a more detailed account of the main character's concerns with the woman in question. He even gives his milk cow a name, "Black Annie," and warns off a rival "bull" who threatens to steal her. "Milk Cow Blues" No. 4 provides a climactic final chapter to the storyline, when the main character discovers the woman is involved sexually with another man. He walks dejectedly away with a sense of resignation that he has lost her to his rival. The sequential nature of the two texts is heightened by the fact that they were recorded during the same session.

The fact that Arnold was driven to revisit the milk-cow theme four times in his brief recording career is one indicator of the commercial success of his first "Milk Cow Blues" release and of the popularity of the milk-cow image among blues audiences. An important element in deciphering the blues and a particular target audience for a blues performance is the understood meanings of its textual metaphors. Evidence suggests that the milk-cow metaphor had appeared in black blues circles well before Arnold released his four recordings. One of the earliest uses of the milk cow as a type of nature code in early blues appears in Sara Martin's "Mean Tight Mama," recorded for the Okeh label in December 1928. A contemporary of Ma Rainey,

Martin was a polished entertainer who had been performing on the black Vaudeville circuit since 1915 and recording since 1922. She wrote or cowrote many of the songs that she sang, including "Mean Tight Mama." Martin's lyrics follow:

Verse 1

I'm a mean tight mama, I go to sleep and wake up mad,
I'm a mean tight mama, I go to sleep and wake up mad,
But the man who knows his business will find out I'm not
so bad.

Verse 2

I'm a one-man woman but men don't like my kind,
I'm a one-man woman but men don't like my kind,
They always want a gal who has a dozen men on her mind.

Verse 3

Now my hair is nappy and I don't wear no clothes of silk,
Now my hair is nappy and I don't wear no clothes of silk,
But the cow that's black and ugly has often got the sweetest
milk.

Verse 4

When a man starts jivin' I'm tighter than a pair of shoes,
When a man starts jivin' I'm tighter than a pair of shoes,
I'm a mean tight mama, with my mean tight mama blues.¹³

This text is a bragging-type discourse on the main character's sexual prowess. Carol Batker writes that "the lyrics of the classic blues clearly demonstrate an awareness of the ways in which class issues structured sexual politics during this period."¹⁴ Batker adds, "Sara Martin's 'Mean Tight Mama' reinforces the opposition between middle and working class, representing the working class as sexually more expressive."¹⁵ Martin's lyrics, while acknowledging male expectations of unfettered sexuality among working-class black women, portray her subject as defying this stereotype. Her strength and sexual potency are presented as exceptional by virtue of her loyalty as a "one-man woman." The visual image of the lowly milk cow carries with it a strong sense of domestic stability. The "sweetest milk" rewards a man who takes care of the woman, appreciates her value, and is faithfully committed to her.¹⁶

Son House offers a man's perspective on this analogy in his recording of "My Black Mama, Pt. 1," waxed for Paramount on May 28, 1930, in Grafton, Wisconsin. House's lyrics follow:

Verse 1

Oh, black mama, what's the matter with you?
Said if it ain't satisfactory, don't care what I do.
Hey mama, what's the matter with you?
Said if it ain't satisfactory, baby, don't care what I do.

Verse 2

Say, ain't no heaven, say, there ain't no burnin' hell,
 Say, where I'm goin' when I die, can't nobody tell,
 Oh, there ain't no heaven, oh, there ain't no burnin' hell,
 Oh, where I'm goin' when I die, can't nobody tell.

Verse 3

Well, my black mama's face shine like the sun,
 Oh, lipstick and powder sure won't help her none,
 My black mama's face shine like the sun,
 Oh, lipstick and powder, well, they sure won't help her none.

Verse 4

Well, you see my milk cow, tell her to hurry home,
 I ain't had no milk since that cow been gone,
 If you see my milk cow, tell her to hurry home,
 Yeah, I ain't had no milk since that cow been gone.

Verse 5

Well, I'm going to the racetrack to see my pony run,
 He ain't the best in the world but he's a runnin' son of a gun,
 I'm going to the racetrack to see my pony run,
 He ain't the best in the world but he's a runnin' son of a gun.

Verse 6

Oh Lord, have mercy on my wicked soul,
 Wouldn't mistreat you, baby, for my weight in gold,
 Oh Lord, have mercy on my wicked soul,
 Wouldn't mistreat you, baby, for my weight in gold.¹⁷

Son House's "My Black Mama, Pt. 1" was an important forerunner to Kokomo Arnold's "Milk Cow Blues" for several reasons. Stylistically, it is performed in a country-blues manner similar to Arnold's with House's open-tuned guitar the only foil to his voice, as opposed to the ensemble-driven, urban rendering of Martin's "Mean Tight Mama." Key similarities also exist in the lyric tone and structure that go beyond the obvious "send my milk cow home" couplet in verse four of "My Black Mama, Pt. 1." In the first verse, House sings:

Oh, black mama, what's the matter with you?
 Said if it ain't satisfactory, don't care what I do.¹⁸

Arnold conjures the same sense of frustration with his wayward mate when he sings:

I cannot do right, baby, when you won't do right
 yourself.
 Lord, if my good gal quits me, Lord, don't want
 nobody else.¹⁹

Both House and Arnold express ambivalence towards religion, with House's statement being more pointed:

Say, ain't no heaven, say, there ain't no burnin' hell,
 Say, where I'm going when I die, can't nobody tell.²⁰

Arnold questions whether religion can help his cause:

Now you can read out your hymnbook,
 preach out your Bible,
 Fall on your knees and pray the good Lord will
 help you.
 Cause you gonna need, gonna need my help
 someday.
 Mamma, if you can't quit sinnin', please quit your
 low-down ways.²¹

Both men share a love-hate relationship with their respective women and both want them back. House seems to shoulder some measure of responsibility for her leaving:

Oh Lord, have mercy on my wicked soul,
 Wouldn't mistreat you, baby, for my weight in gold.²²

Arnold places blame squarely on the woman's conduct:

Lord, I don't feel welcome any place I go,
 Oh that woman that I love, mommy, done drove
 me from her door.²³

Another significant similarity between House and Arnold's versions is the use of the four-line stanza. This was one of the more progressive features of Arnold's first recording of "Milk Cow Blues" and was among the elements that influenced the work of Robert Johnson. House's use of the four-line stanza was a clear precedent for Arnold's in terms of articulation. The rapid-fire, patter-like rhythms in Arnold's first recording of "Milk Cow Blues" are almost identical to those used by House in "My Black Mama, Pt. 1." In his four-line verses, House imposed an ABAB arrangement of phrases rather than the more typical AAB; Arnold used yet another four-line-phrase arrangement, ABCD, introducing different wording over the same rhythmic phrasing in each line. Johnson adopted Arnold's formula in his recording of "Kind Hearted Woman," waxed on November 23, 1936, in which he sandwiched the four-line stanza bridge-like between standard three-line verses. Johnson also adapted Arnold's falsetto howl on the third and fourth lines of his bridge. Johnson's final recording, "Milkcow's Calf Blues," from June 1937, features a similar guitar riff to that of Arnold's original, but mixes in verse material borrowed from House's "My Black Mama, Pt. 1."

Other "Milk Cow Blues" recordings from the years preceding Arnold's hit are less similar to "My Black Mama, Pt. 1" and to Arnold's recordings. The most curiously incongruent of these is

the "Milk Cow Blues" waxed by Sleepy John Estes in Memphis on May 13, 1930. Estes's record features an accompaniment provided by piano and mandolin, and at no point in the song's lyric is the milk cow character introduced. The story portrays a secret, adulterous affair that ultimately drives Estes's subject into a debilitating, drunken-like depression, which, in turn, leads to tuberculosis:

Verse 1

Now asks sweet mama, lemme be her kid,
She says, "I might get boogied, like to keep it hid."
Well, she looked at me, she began to smile.
Say, "I thought I would use you for my man a while."
"That you just don't let my husband catch you there."
"Now, just—just don't let my husband catch you there."

Verse 2

Now went upstairs to pack my leavin' trunk,
I never saw no whiskey, th' blues done made me sloppy drunk.
Say, I never saw no whiskey, blues done made me sloppy drunk.
Now, I never saw no whiskey, but the blues done made me sloppy drunk.

Verse 3

Now, some says "a dream," some said, "it was mean,"
"But it's the slow consumption killin' you by degrees."
"Lord, it's the slow consumption killin' you by degrees."
"Now, it's the slow consumption an' it's killin' you by degrees."²⁴

The vast difference in verse structure and musical texture, together with the close chronology of recording dates for House's "My Black Mama, Pt. 1" and Estes's "Milk Cow Blues," indicate that the two songs were conceived independently. Furthermore, it would appear that Estes's version was not directly inspired by Sara Martin's record. Estes's contribution to the milk-cow lineage, however, is perhaps indicative of just how deeply and widely ingrained the metaphor had become in blues culture by 1930. Estes's title would have suggested to a contemporary blues listener the premise of a black woman who provided the kind of "sweet milk" and domestic security for Estes's subject that would have understandably led to his subsequent downfall upon her rejection. Estes's song, therefore, becomes a testimony to the dire consequences befalling one man as he suffered from a case of the milk cow blues.

One other notable addition to the milk-cow blues tradition leading up to Arnold's work was recorded by Big Bill Broonzy in New York circa 1933:

Verse 1

When I got up this morning, she had ev'ry dime I had,
When I got up this morning, she had ev'ry dime I had,
I said, "That's all right, milk cow, your daddy understands."

Verse 2

My milk cow had me fooled, she had t' have ev'rything she need,
My milk cow had me fooled, she had t' have ev'rything she need,
Now, these times they done got hard, baby, she can't eat burs and weeds.

Verse 3

I haven't seen my milk cow in three long weeks today,
I haven't seen my milk cow, mama, three long weeks today,
I haven't had no rich cream, mama, since my milk cow strolled away.

Verse 4

Have you seen a big brown milk cow? She had no horns at all.
Have you seen a big brown milk cow? She had no horns at all.
You don't need no chair to milk her, she will back right in your stall.

Verse 5

If you see my milk cow, please drive her to my door,
Mind, if you see my milk cow, please drive her to my door,
I was really good to my milk cow, I wonder, "Where did my milk cow go?"

Broonzy was one of the most polished, calculating, and commercially minded country-blues performers of his time. Given his predisposition to a market demand-based philosophy, it is not surprising that Broonzy would offer his own milk-cow product to a blues audience already steeped in the popular image's meaning. Broonzy's "Milk Cow Blues" reinforced the theme established by Sara Martin that a woman who is like a milk cow requires a substantial degree of devotion and maintenance but rewards her partner(s) with "rich" love and devotion in return. Broonzy's "Milk Cow Blues" bears enough similarity to House's recording to suggest that he may have at least heard House's version. The evidence does not preclude, however, the possibility that the "please send my milk cow home"-themed lyric is simply an example of the type of wandering line so prevalent in the blues tradition. Arnold's use of the bull imagery in his third and fourth versions of "Milk Cow Blues" also finds precedence in another Broonzy recording, "Bull Cow Blues." Nevertheless, this coincidence lends more credence to the probability that "bull cow" coding, as well as "milk cow" coding, had currency with blues audiences of the time.

The predecessors of Kokomo Arnold's four releases of "Milk Cow Blues" bring the discussion back to Arnold himself and his importance beyond the African-American world of country blues. Arnold's fame spread far beyond Chicago. He became a national star whose name would have been known by blues fans everywhere.²⁵ His country-blues style was embraced by urban and rural black audiences alike. For African Americans who had migrated to the cities in search of opportunity, Arnold's records provided a portal to their rural roots by appealing to a sense of nostalgia for the simpler times amid the noisy, filthy congestion of urban neighborhoods. At the same time, Arnold's skill as a country-blues performer made him a favorite among young blacks who had stayed behind to work the plantations of the South as sharecroppers or modest landowners. A master's thesis published in 1942 interviewed members of 100 families living on the King and Anderson plantations near Clarksdale, Mississippi, and asked about the residents' favorite songs. Arnold's "Milk Cow Blues" was listed among those records most popular with interviewees belonging to the youngest demographic.²⁶

Analysis of the music of these four recordings affirms the basic understanding of the process of creating and recreating the blues. Arnold takes short guitar-solo breaks between vocal phrases, in a call-and-response duet involving his own voice and that of his guitar. What Robert Santelli refers to as Arnold's characteristic "wild and unpredictable sense of time"²⁷ could also be described as an extremely fluid treatment of the 12-bar blues rhythmic structure. Arnold's performance builds on an underlying quarter-note pulse that holds consistently around 100 beats per minute. His guitar fills, however, move freely from straight to swung eighth-notes and from driving triplets to syncopated 16th-note bursts without ever settling into any one subdivision of the beat for more than a measure or two. At times it sounds as if there are two different tempos happening at once, only to have the accents converge on the quarter-note pulse briefly before Arnold inserts yet another guitar fill with a distinctly different subdivision and accent placement. Arnold's masterful control over his guitar playing is always subservient to his vocal phrasing, which is articulated in rhythms that seem to float over the instrumental texture, further adding to the rhythmic complexity of the performance.

One important observation discussed in Patrick Kelly's thesis and supported by this study is the idea of the 12-bar blues form as a fluid container in which to pour expressive details. Those expressive details were and remain more important than overarching form among African-American blues performers. For solo country-blues performers such as Kokomo Arnold, the stretching and shortening of form was just another way of putting their stylistic fingerprint on a performance.²⁸

The four Arnold recordings of "Milk Cow Blues," varied

in text and slightly in musical setting, serve to underscore a fundamental feature of his songwriting style that sets him apart from other commercially successful bluesmen of this time. Elijah Wald has observed that Kokomo Arnold was not a "careful songwriter," adding that Arnold's songs "were simply collections of more or less random, floating verses, which he undoubtedly assembled differently on different occasions, or strung together into one long song that we only hear slices of on his three-minute recordings."²⁹

Variances in lyrics and music relate to the spontaneous creation and recreation through improvisation of each performance, recorded and not recorded. Undoubtedly, Arnold altered musical and textual phrases each time he played and sang "Milk Cow Blues," drawing on an endless supply of oral-tradition musical figures and textual turns-of-phrase and imagery. Each time he did this, he added to the catalogue of possibilities upon which other performers could build their own versions of "Milk Cow Blues." This speaks clearly to the question of who deserves credit for originating a specific blues in the oral tradition—and the answer is nobody in particular. Rather than being problematic in terms of blues and popular music development, this freedom to recreate is fundamental to the continuation of both. David Hatch and Stephen Millward use "Milk Cow Blues" to illustrate this process in their book, *From Blues to Rock: An Analytical History of Pop Music*:

Throughout the history of pop music, development has consistently involved both continuity and change. Each set of performances which has been perceived, at the time or with hindsight, as crystallizing a new tradition invariably blends new elements or structures with recycled ones. Thus the transformation of one or more traditions typically combines the exploitation of and contributions to existing traditions ... This filtration obviously adds to the richness of the traditions in pop music. And it is far from being a recent phenomenon ... Elvis Presley's version of Sleepy John Estes's "Milk Cow Blues," called "Milk Cow Blues Boogie" by Presley, owed more to versions by Bob Wills and possibly to other western swing recordings than to Estes's original ... The process is not merely sequentially additive. With several musical generations of interpretations to choose from it is possible for a new band to choose any one version or, of course, elements from a combination of all those available.³⁰

Though the authors of this article disagree with the pivotal status Hatch and Millward assign to Sleepy John Estes's version of "Milk Cow Blues," we do subscribe to the process

of development in popular music that they detail in their book, especially as we follow "Milk Cow Blues" into the genres of Western swing and rock.

"Milk Cow Blues," which held properties of identity for African Americans in the early 1900s, had an entirely different meaning for white Western-swing fans in the American Southwest who added it to their repertory of dance favorites. "Milk Cow Blues" became popular with Western-swing audiences in the late 1930s and 1940s and retains its "favorite" status today. The fact that this tune is a blues was of little consequence to white audiences, and catalogue advertisements for Arnold's original "Milk Cow Blues" made no allusions to any kind of sexual premise. Instead, they feature a comic-book-style caricature of a hapless milk cow while touting the song as "the greatest record ever made."³¹ The overtly sexual aspects of the milk-cow code that carried deep, cultural meaning with black blues audiences were neatly sanitized by the Western-swing crowd. White listeners chose to ignore the sexual innuendos in the lyrics and to treat them as humorous and only slightly risqué. Apparently, their main concern was that Western-swing bands laid down a heavy and quite regular beat to which they could dance.

Since it followed the basic form of the blues, "Milk Cow Blues" was a favorite of players for whom its simple structure provided ample opportunity for improvised solos. The musicians who created Western swing were among the most skilled players of their time and place. The draw of the blues for white musicians of the Southwestern-swing tradition, such as Cliff Bruner, Cotton Thompson, Aubrey "Moon" Mullican, and Junior Barnard, was its form and unique aesthetic. For musicians who have internalized the blues form and mastered the syntactical elements of its content, the blues is a musical playground for improvisation. Its formal simplicity allows for a kind of free-wheeling expression not so easily rendered over more complex harmonic progressions.³² The "cry" of the bent blue note has found a place in virtually every popular genre to evolve in America since the 1920s. It has also found resonance internationally, most famously in 1960s England, where such artists as the Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton blended it with their own unique aesthetic experience to create modern rock. Given the ability of black American blues to appeal to musicians across such wide cultural and geographic distances, it is little wonder that the music would find a deep resonance among white Southwestern American musicians who experienced the development of the rural and urban blues in far closer proximity to their own homes.

Western swing had its greatest appeal among white, Southwestern audiences who were rapidly transitioning from a rural to urban existence during the 1930s and 1940s. The Depression era that spawned Western swing was fraught with

tension between the old, rural way of life and the new, industrial, urban experience. Country-blues musicians, such as Kokomo Arnold, were marketed to newly urbanized blacks, just as Western-swing dances catered to rural whites who increasingly found work in the cities.

The blues itself had developed in African-American culture during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a way of mediating the tension between the old and new.³³ The end of slavery created a whole new set of problems for free blacks. Jim Crow in the South along with his urban cousin, James Crow in the North, created an environment for African Americans that in many ways resulted in a living climate just as difficult and demeaning as slavery itself. The blues form represented tradition, i.e., "the old," while the ever-changing, improvisational content was a musical commentary on the present, i.e., "the new."

This dynamic has worked in the same way in every culture that has embraced the blues. It has, of course, manifested along different relative terms in each case and the authors by no means suggest that the harsh plight of emancipated African Americans was in any way directly comparable to the struggles faced by Depression-era whites forced by financial hardship to leave their farms and ranches. However, it is important to recognize that the blues has performed vital cultural work, besides its obvious value as pure entertainment, for a variety of listeners living under many different social circumstances.

In their discography of Western swing, Cary Ginell and Kevin Coffey note that the first 78-rpm, Western-swing recording of "Milk Cow Blues" was made by a Houston area band—Cliff Bruner's Texas Wanderers—on February 5, 1937, at the St. Anthony Hotel in San Antonio.³⁴ Bruner, who emerged as one of the outstanding fiddlers of the Western-swing genre, began his career with Milton Brown's Musical Brownies in Fort Worth. After Brown's death as the result of an automobile accident in 1936, Bruner worked for a time with "Pappy" Lee O'Daniel's Hillbilly Boys and then formed his first Texas Wanderers band in Houston. While fronting his own band, Bruner also worked with Louisiana country-music recording artist and politician Jimmie Davis. At some point in late 1936—Bruner was never specific with dates—he left Houston and Davis and moved to Chicago for some months in the winter. He was young and bored and had never been to Chicago, although he had heard of its reputation as a musical hotbed. In Chicago he was contacted by a bar owner who was attempting to redefine his bar as a Western club and wanted to hire a country band. Bruner put together a combo for the Corral Club and helped the owner redecorate in a Western motif. Bruner stated that this Corral Club combo was one of the best bands he had ever fronted. However, he eventually became homesick for Texas and returned to Houston, where he organized another Western-

Figure 3:

Kokomo Arnold, “Milk Cow Blues” No. 1, recorded September 10, 1934, in Chicago, Illinois, transcribed from the recording of “Milk Cow Blues” on the CD *Kokomo Arnold: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order, Vol. 1 (17 May 1930 to 15 March 1935)* (Vienna, Austria: Document Records, 1991), compared to “Milk Cow Blues,” recorded February 5, 1937, at the St. Anthony Hotel in San Antonio, Texas, by Cliff Bruner’s Texas Wanderers, transcribed from the recording of Bruner’s “Milk Cow Blues,” on the CD *Texas Music* (Los Angeles: Rhino Records, 1994).

Kokomo Arnold’s first version**Verse 1**

All in good morning, I said, “Blues, how do you do?”
 All in good morning, I said, “Blues, how do you do?”
 You’re mighty rare this mornin’, can’t get along with you.

Verse 2

I cannot do right, baby, when you won’t do right yourself.
 I cannot do right, baby, when you won’t do right yourself.
 Lord, if my good gal quits me, Lord, don’t want nobody else.

Verse 3

Now you can read out your hymnbook, preach out
 your Bible,
 Fall on your knees and pray, the good Lord will help you.
 Cause you gonna need, gonna need my help someday.
 Mama, if you can’t quit your sinnin’, please quit your low-
 down ways.

Verse 4

Yes, I woke up this mornin’ and I looked out a door,
 Still I know my family’s milk cow, pretty mama, by the way
 she lows.
 Lord, if you see my milk cow, buddy, I say please
 drive her home.
 Said I ain’t had no milk and butter, mama, since my milk
 cow been gone.

Verse 5

Said, my blues fell this mornin’ and my love come
 fallin’ down.
 Said, my blues fell this mornin’ and my love come
 fallin’ down.
 Said, I feel, Lord, I’m a dog, mommy, please don’t
 dog me round.

Verse 6

Takes a rockin’ chair to rock, mommy, a rubber ball to roll,
 Takes a tall cheesin’ black, pretty mommy, to pacify my soul.
 Lord, I don’t feel welcome, please, no place I go,
 Oh that woman that I love, mommy, have done drove me
 from her door.

Cliff Bruner’s version**Verse 1**

I’m howlin’ “Good mornin’, blues how do you do?”
 I’m howlin’ “Good mornin’, blues how do you do?”
 I went away this mornin’, ’cause I can’t get along with you.

Verse 2

Now, I can’t do right, baby, when you don’t do right
 yourself.
 I can’t do right, baby, you don’t do right yourself.
 Now, if my good gal quits me, I don’t want nobody else.

Verse 3

Piano Solo Chorus

Verse 4

Now, I woke up this mornin’, I looked outdoors,
 I know my mama’s milk cow, I can tell the way she lows.
 Now, if you’ve seen my milk cow, woo, won’t you drive her
 on home.
 Now, I ain’t had no milk and butter, woo, since
 my cow’s been gone.

Verse 5

Fiddle Solo Chorus

Verse 6

Now, blues fell this mornin’, and my love come fallin’ down,
 My blues fell this mornin’, and my love
 I’d be a low down dog, mama, but please don’t
 dog me around.

swing band. At the beginning of 1937, Cliff Bruner's Texas Wanderers recorded "Milk Cow Blues" for the Decca label.³⁵

Did Cliff Bruner hear a recording of "Milk Cow Blues" in Chicago or perhaps hear Kokomo Arnold perform the number in a Chicago club? Or, because of the pervasive blues culture in Texas, did he know of it before moving to Chicago? These are questions that only the late Bruner could answer. What is certain is that his was the first recording of "Milk Cow Blues" by a Western-swing group. His Texas Wanderers band for this recording session consisted of a stellar group of Western-swing performers: Bruner was the lone fiddle player and sometimes vocalist; Hezzie Bryant played bass; Fred "Papa" Calhoun, formerly of the Musical Brownies, played piano; Dickie McBride, who would go on to be a Western-swing band leader himself, played guitar and sang; Leo Raley played electric mandolin and provided the vocal on this recording; Red Raley

was a Western-swing band, not a blues band, and its audience expected to be able to dance to this music and to hear solo choruses from their favorite players. Bruner and company inserted instrumental choruses in place of verses three and five of Arnold's recording. The choice of these two verses likely had to do with Bruner's understanding that his fun-seeking audiences would not be interested in mixing religious commentary with Saturday-night dancehall antics. Part of the identity of the white Southwesterners who embraced Western swing was an evangelical, mostly Baptist, mindset that regarded dancing and drinking as sinful. They did not want to be reminded of their transgressions while dancing to "Milk Cow Blues." Bruner's change of the last verse of his version likely occurred in response to his previous edits, which would render Arnold's last verse incongruent in Bruner's cover. Furthermore, neither bandleader Bruner nor vocalist Raley would incorporate a verse about "a tall

What is certain is that (Cliff Bruner's) was the first recording of "Milk Cow Blues" by a Western-swing group.

also played guitar and sometimes sang; and Joe Thames played tenor banjo.

Texas swing, like the big-band swing of the same era, is ensemble music that is first and foremost made for dancing. The tempos fall within a range comfortable for dancing, and the steadily bouncing beat lends the musical phrasing a relaxed predictability that listeners demand in order to anticipate movement and dance with confidence. In contrast, the rhythmic intricacies typical of Arnold's performances are also designed to create movement, but not in a happy-go-lucky, "get lost in the beat" kind of way. The polyrhythmic texture creates musical tension that supports the lyric. It is a storytelling event with words and music intertwined into a one-time performance, preserved for the ages only by the recording itself. Unpredictable phrase lengths and constantly shifting rhythmic superimpositions are two of the surest ways for a performer or band to clear a dance floor. Given these musical differences, it is similarities in the lyric that tie Bruner's recording to Arnold's first "Milk Cow Blues." (See Figure 3.)

Red Raley's sung lyrics follow Arnold's "Milk Cow Blues" No. 1 text closely. He even copies Arnold's falsetto howls in the signature verse four. Cliff Bruner's Texas Wanderers' recording of "Milk Cow Blues" appears to be a cover of Arnold's first recording; however, it is a cover with adaptations to satisfy a different audience and genre. Cliff Bruner's Texas Wanderers

cheesin' black, pretty mommy" into a performance intended for whites. Despite these changes to Arnold's first recording, Cliff Bruner's Texas Wanderers captured the essence of "Milk Cow Blues" while transforming it into a Western-swing number that would appeal to their audiences.

Was Bruner's the recording that introduced "Milk Cow Blues" into the Western-swing genre, or did bands acquire the tune in other ways? According to Marvin "Smokey" Montgomery—longtime banjoist and historian for the legendary Western-swing group, the Light Crust Doughboys—all of the bands played the same repertory, each in its own unique way. In an interview, Montgomery explained how this worked in the case of Kansas City bandleader Benny Moten's popular tune, "South": Columbia A&R man Art Satherley sent the Moten recording to the Doughboys and asked them to cover it. Montgomery confessed that the band had misgivings about doing so, because the Moten recording was entirely instrumental. However, once the Doughboys' version was released, it became a big seller and was copied by Western-swing bands throughout the Southwest and in California.³⁶

Was this the process with "Milk Cow Blues," once Cliff Bruner's Texas Wanderers released their recording? Did other bands pick up the tune and play and record it each in its own way, or was "Milk Cow Blues" already part of the oral tradition from which all drew? Johnnie Lee Wills, younger brother of

Figure 4:

Lyrics, “Milk Cow Blues.” Arnold’s “Milk Cow Blues” No. 1, Bruner’s recording of “Milk Cow Blues,” and Johnnie Lee Wills’s recording, transcribed from the recording of “Milk Cow Blues” on the Johnnie Lee Wills and His Boys CD, *From the Vaults: Decca Country Classics, 1934-1973* (Universal City, California: MCA Records, 1994).

Arnold’s First Recording

Verse 1

All in good morning, I said, “Blues,
how do you do?”
All in good morning, I said, “Blues,
how do you do?”
You’re mighty rare this mornin’,
can’t get along with you.

Verse 2

I cannot do right, baby, when you
won’t do right yourself.
I cannot do right, baby, when you
won’t do right yourself.
Lord, if my good gal quits me, Lord,
don’t want nobody else.

Verse 3

Now you can read out your
hymnbook, preach out your Bible,
Fall on your knees and pray, the good
Lord will help you.
Cause you gonna need, gonna need
my help someday.
Mama, if you can’t quit your sinnin’,
please quit your low-down ways.

Verse 4

Yes, I woke up this mornin’ and I
looked out a door,
Still I know my family’s milk cow,
pretty mama, by the way she lows.
Lord, if you see my milk cow, buddy,
I say please drive her home.
Said, I ain’t had no milk and
butter, mama, since my milk cow
been gone.

Bruner’s Recording

Verse 1

I’m howlin’ “good mornin’, blues,
how do you do?”
I’m howlin’ “good mornin’, blues,
how do you do?”
I went away this mornin’, ‘cause I
can’t get along with you.

Verse 2

Now, I can’t do right, baby, when you
don’t do right yourself.
I can’t do right, baby, when you don’t
do right yourself.
Now, if my good gal quits me, I don’t
want nobody else.

Verse 3

Piano Solo Chorus

Verse 4

Now, I woke up this mornin’, I
looked outdoors,
I know my mama’s milk cow, I can
tell the way she lows.
Now, if you’ve seen my milk, woo,
won’t you drive her on home.
Now, I ain’t had no milk and butter,
woo, since my cow’s been gone.

Johnnie Lee Wills’s Recording

Verse 1

Well, I woke up this mornin’ looked
outdoors,
I can tell my milk cow, I can tell by
the way she lows.
If you see my milk cow, please, drive
her on home,
‘Cause ain’t had no milk and butter,
woo, since my cow’s been gone.

Verse 2

Well, you’ve got to treat me right,
day by day,
Get out your little prayer book, get
down on your knees and pray,
‘Cause you’re gonna need, you’re
gonna need my help someday.
Yes, you’re going to be sorry, woo,
you treat me this way.

Verse 3

Piano Solo chorus

Verse 4

Well, good evenin’, don’t that sun
look good going down?
Well, good evenin’, don’t that sun
look good going down?
Now, don’t your bed look lonesome
when your lover ain’t around.

Figure 4: Continued

<p>Verse 5</p> <p>Said, my blues fell this mornin' and my love come fallin' down. Said, my blues fell this mornin' and my love come fallin' down. Said, I feel, Lord, I'm a dog, mommy, please don't dog me round.</p> <p>Verse 6</p> <p>Takes a rockin' chair to rock, mommy, a rubber ball to roll. Takes a tall cheesin' black, pretty mommy, to pacify my soul. Lord, don't feel welcome, please, no place I go, Oh that woman that I love, mommy, have done drove me from her door.</p>	<p>Verse 5</p> <p>Fiddle Solo Chorus</p>	<p>Verse 5</p> <p>I've tried everything to get along with you, And now I'm going to tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm going to stop cryin' and leave you alone. If you don't believe I'm leavin', you can count the days I'm gone. 'Cause you won't see, you won't see my sweet face no more. Yeah, you'll just be wonderin', baby, where in this world I'm gone.</p>
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the more famous Bob Wills, is credited in a number of sources with popularizing "Milk Cow Blues." According to Ginell and Coffey, Johnnie Lee Wills and His Boys recorded "Milk Cow Blues" on April 28, 1941, at the Sound Recording Studio in Dallas, Texas, for the Decca label. (Decca Records lists him as Johnny Lee Wills.) Performers on that session included Johnnie Lee Wills playing tenor banjo; Junior Barnard on electric guitar; Harley Higgins on guitar and vocals; Millard Kelso at the piano; Cotton Thompson on fiddle and lead vocals; and Luke Wills on the bass. (See Figure 4 for a comparison of the lyrics from this Johnnie Lee Wills recording with those of Arnold's first version and Bruner's release.)

The "Milk Cow Blues" lyrics sung by Cotton Thompson in the Johnnie Lee Wills version use several key lines from Arnold's original but with significant changes and additions. First, Thompson deploys the signature milk-cow verse as the first stanza of the Wills recording, which helps catapult the song to Western-swing anthem status. This change places the comical element of the story—the milk-cow image—up front for the listeners, before any hint of double entendre is introduced. Second, the Wills version reclaims the religious imagery of Arnold's original. However, both the Bible reference and the call for the wayward lover to "quit your sinnin'" are left out. Thompson replaces these omissions with a plea for the woman simply to treat the main character right "day by day." This change retains some of the religious flavor of Arnold's original lyric without Arnold's ambivalent tone, thus creating a more sympathetic atmosphere for the male subject.

Third, the three-line verse beginning with "Well, good evenin'" that follows the piano solo seems to have been an original addition by singer Thompson. This is not to say that he or some other members of the band had not heard this couplet elsewhere. However, it is interesting to note that the "new" verse follows the same rhyme scheme as Arnold's original fifth stanza. The way in which Thompson drags out his drawn-out enunciation on this verse is one of the highlights of his vocal performance. The "don't your bed look lonesome" answering phrase is only a mild sexual reference in comparison to the types of coded allusions found in milk-cow-type songs from the black blues tradition and in this case again reinforces a sympathetic tone for the lonely subject.

Finally, there is the extended last verse that also seems to be a Thompson creation—or that of one of his fellow band members. Structurally, this verse has precedence among the milk-cow song family in the similarly extended first verse of Sleepy John Estes's "Milk Cow Blues." Whereas no actual connection in terms of lyrics exists between the first verse of the Estes example and Thompson's final verse, it seems an unlikely coincidence that Thompson would stumble upon the same unusual verse structure in a milk-cow-themed song purely by chance. (See Figure 5.) This evidence of mixing and recasting found lyrics and using borrowed phrase structures is wholly consistent with the practices we have noted in the milk-cow-themed songs from the black blues tradition and also conforms to the Hatch and Millward formula quoted above. Johnnie Lee Wills and his singer, Cotton Thompson, employed these techniques of adaptation

Figure 5:

Comparison of structures of John Estes's recording of "Milk Cow Blues," Verse 1, and Cotton Thompson's vocal on the recording of Johnnie Lee Wills's version of "Milk Cow Blues," final verse.

Estes, "Milk Cow Blues,"	Thompson, vocal, "Milk Cow Blues,"
Verse 1 Now asks sweet mama, lemme be her kid, She says, "I might get boogied, like to keep it hid." Well, she looked at me, she began to smile. Say, "I thought I would use your for my man a while." "That you just don't let my husband catch you there." "Now, just—just don't let my husband catch you there."	Verse 5 I've tried everything to get along with you, And now I'm going to tell you what I'm gonna do, I'm going to stop cryin' and leave you alone. If you don't believe I'm leavin', you can count the days I'm gone. 'Cause you won't see, you won't see my sweet face no more. Yeah, you'll just be wonderin', baby, where in this world I'm gone.

and alteration to design a tune that suited the cultural scene and meshed with the identity of the white Southwesterners who constituted the Western-swing audience.

But what of Cliff Bruner's seminal contribution and its possible influence on Johnnie Lee Wills's approach? Evidence of this can be found in the subtle evolution of the melodic and rhythmic articulation of a key motive in Arnold's original. Example 1 illustrates changes that were made to an important textual-musical phrase of Arnold's original recording.

The top staff of Example 1 shows the vocal melody as sung by Kokomo Arnold over the first four bars of the signature fourth verse to "Milk Cow Blues." The melodic contour, while quite active, is limited largely to whole-step and half-step slurs that revolve around the tonic. The rhythmic phrasing, however, is varied and highly syncopated, qualities that both mark Arnold's vocal style and are idiomatic to African-American blues performance. The middle staff shows singer Leo Raley's treatment of the same phrase on Bruner's recording (this melody has been transposed to C from its original key of G major for purposes of comparison). As discussed above, the quarter-note pulse in Arnold's performance is relegated to the background; it is felt more than heard, so that the emphasis is on the vocal phrasing and constantly shifting accents in Arnold's guitar fills. In Bruner's version, however, the quarter-note beat is prominent in the rhythm section. Raley's vocal phrasing is far more tied to the downbeat accent and slurs are minimal as compared to Arnold's vocal. It is interesting to note that Raley chooses to center his "melody" almost solely on the dominant. Perhaps this was in order to add climactic intensity to this pivotal verse in the song. Whatever the reason, the result is a nearly recitative-like reading with only a few basic syncopations to break up the delivery.

The bottom staff of Example 1 shows the first four bars of Cliff Bruner's fiddle solo before the final verse (also transposed to C major). Here Bruner punches the downbeat relentlessly in a phrase that is clearly modeled on Raley's vocal articulation. The fiddle/violin is one of those stringed instruments that, similar to the slide guitar, can slur notes smoothly and seamlessly, much like the human voice. This makes the fiddle well equipped to approximate the vocal-derived articulations that mark the blues aesthetic. Bruner's use of the interval of a third, with the tonic placed on top, creates the overall harmonic effect of a series of jazzy-sounding sixth chords before he breaks into a more melodically active, swung single-note line in measure four.

The top staff of Example 2 shows Cotton Thompson's vocal rendition of the same four-measure lyric phrase in Johnnie Lee Wills's 1941 recording of "Milk Cow Blues." Taking into account that this is now the opening stanza of the song, Thompson gives the line a sparse, clearly enunciated treatment over the first two measures. His entrance on the "and" of beat one in the second full bar after a full-beat rest gives the phrase a laid-back feel that accentuates the lazy "woke up this mornin'" imagery of the lyric. Measures three and four contain a far more clearly etched melody than that seen in either Arnold's or Raley's performances.

Thompson carries this melodic sensibility over from the first four bars of the fiddle introduction. Here the driving rhythmic repetition suggests a clear reference to the opening bars of Bruner's solo (Example 1, lower staff). However, the fiddler uses open string drones to pad his double stops and create a fuller texture—although he does include a few slurred thirds, as did Bruner in measures three and four.

Are these nuances in the fiddle introduction of Johnnie Lee Wills's version of "Milk Cow Blues" a tip of the hat to Bruner's solo? It is impossible to say for sure, but given Bruner's reputation as one of the great Western-swing fiddlers, it seems

Example 1.

C

Pt. Arnold Vocal
Says I woke up this mor-nin' and I looked out - doors, says

Pt. Raley Vocal
I - woke up this morn-in', I looked out - doors. I

Pt. Bruner fiddle solo

3
I know my ma - ma's milk cow, pret - ty ma - ma, Lawd, by 'th way she lows.

3
know my ma - ma's milk cow. I can tell the way she lows.

Example 1: The top staff is Kokomo Arnold's vocal melody over the first four measures of Verse four in his "Milk Cow Blues." The middle staff is vocalist Leo Raley's melody on the same lyric in the 1937 recording by Cliff Bruner's Texas Wanderers. The bottom staff is the first four bars of Cliff Bruner's fiddle solo from the same recording. The examples from Bruner's recording have been transposed from their original key of G major to C major for purposes of comparison.

Example 2.

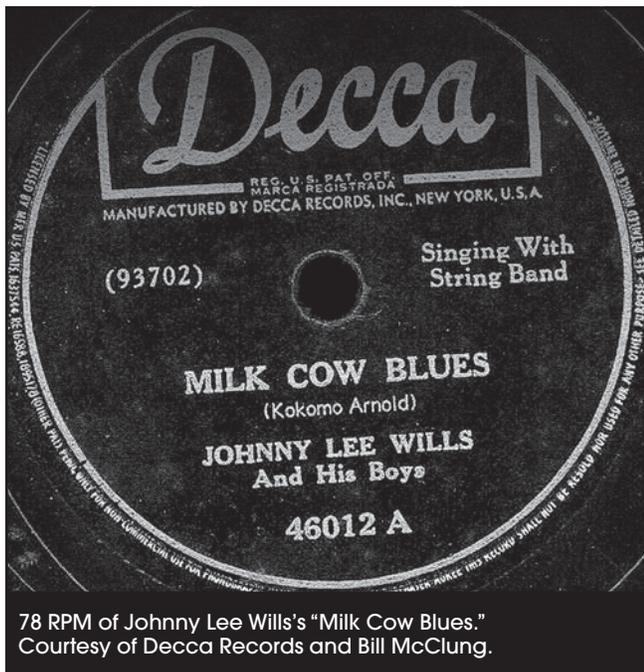
A

Pt. Thompson vocal
Well I woke up this morn - in, looked out doors,

Pt. Thompson fiddle intro

3
I can tell my milk cow, I can tell by th' way she lows.

Example 2: The top staff shows Cotton Thompson's vocal melody over the first four measures of the first verse on Johnny Lee Wills's 1941 recording of "Milk Cow Blues." The lower staff is the first four measures of Thompson's fiddle intro to the same recording.



78 RPM of Johnny Lee Wills's "Milk Cow Blues."
Courtesy of Decca Records and Bill McClung.

plausible that the fiddler on Wills's version might be inclined to quote Bruner. What is certain is that the fiddle introduction that appears on the Johnnie Lee Wills recording of "Milk Cow Blues" has become the standard introduction for all other Western-swing fiddlers to begin this song. It is the initial call for dancehall listeners to get out of their seats and pack the dance floor night after night. Simply put, if the fiddler is not playing something quite similar to the fiddle introduction on the Johnnie Lee Wills recording, then he/she is not playing the "real" version of "Milk Cow Blues." This insistence on a melodic theme in the fiddle introduction and sung portion of the signature verse of "Milk Cow Blues" belongs to a European-derived aesthetic. Such stringent musical associations would be foreign to traditional blues conventions. Based on his performance on Johnnie Lee Wills's 1941 recording, it was Cotton Thompson, with the support of Johnnie Lee Wills and the rest of his band, who deserves the credit for transforming "Milk Cow Blues" into the format that would become the standard for all other Western-swing bands to follow.

The process by which "Milk Cow Blues" went from a barely concealed ode to sex to a "kick up your heels" dancehall anthem is consistent with other white appropriations of black music. Consider Bill Haley's polite rendition of Big Joe Turner's raunchy "Shake, Rattle and Roll" or Pat Boone's crooning of Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti." In white hands, these songs of potent sexual meaning became far less threatening due to the ways in which they were delivered. When Johnnie Lee Wills's older and more famous brother Bob recorded "Brain Cloudy Blues," a song that was closely related to "Milk Cow Blues," and

then the actual "Milk Cow Blues," he based both on Johnnie Lee's 1941 recording. Perhaps to further delete any suggestive lyrics from these recordings, singer Tommy Duncan replaced Thompson's phrase "don't your bed look lonesome when your lover ain't around," with "don't your home look lonesome when your lover ain't around." This is a tiny adjustment, but it successfully removes overt sexual innuendo from the song.

"Milk Cow Blues" was assimilated into the canon of Western-swing standards, where it remains today. The fiddle motif, verse arrangement, and lyrical turns of phrase that first surfaced on record with Johnnie Lee Wills's band in 1941 most likely evolved gradually over time during nightly performances. Nevertheless, the commercially successful 1941 recording set the standard features of "Milk Cow Blues," and although other Western-swing bands would play and record "Milk Cow Blues" countless times over the next several decades, virtually all would maintain these features with only slight variations. This preserving of the integrity of a particular performance is also more related to a European aesthetic than to the culture of the blues.

Even Cotton Thompson himself added to the "Milk Cow Blues" legacy when he recorded "New Milk Cow Blues" with Texas pianist Aubrey "Moon" Mullican in 1948. For this performance, Thompson sang the following on the extended final verse:

Now, my soul is mighty happy since I found
somebody new,
And now I'm going to tell you what I'm gonna do.
Gonna give you lots of lovin' and I'll always be true,
When I hear you call your papa, I'll come runnin'
home to you.
'Cause I hate, today, that I hung my head and cried,
I've got a brand new milk cow, woo-oo, and I'm
satisfied.³⁷

Apparently Cotton Thompson, like Kokomo Arnold before him, understood fully the storyline continuum that is a culturally engrained feature of the way in which blues song families propagate.

The most famous of the Wills brothers, Bob Wills, recorded "Milk Cow Blues" after he and vocalist Tommy Duncan waxed a cover with the same tune featuring a different first-verse text, "Brain Cloudy Blues," in 1946 in California for the Columbia label.³⁸ It is this recording that Hatch and Millward claim provided most of the lyrics for Elvis Presley's 1955 cover, "Milk Cow Blues-Boogie."³⁹ Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys were headquartered in Fresno, California, in 1946, and their radio show was broadcast on various radio stations throughout the West and Southwest. Because Wills and the band were travelling constantly and could not appear at all of the radio stations that carried the show, they depended on "transcriptions" to fulfill their radio obligations. Transcriptions were recordings

that included not only songs, but also banter among band members, which gave radio audiences the impression that they were hearing the group perform live. The Tiffany Music Company of San Francisco, California, made transcriptions of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys' shows that were copied and distributed to all interested radio stations. Each transcription began with the Playboys' theme song, and then proceeded with a series of other popular selections played by the band. In his comprehensive discography of the Tiffany Transcriptions, Bob Pinson lists Bob Wills's recording of "Milk Cow Blues" in the middle of the list (master number SSR602RE), attributed to Kokomo Arnold with Tommy Duncan as vocalist.⁴⁰

"Brain Cloudy Blues" is an interesting side note in this story. Its arrangement fits the mold set by Thompson and the Johnnie Lee Wills band right down to the obligatory milk-cow fiddle introduction. The most significant change in terms of the lyric is the replacement of the four-line first verse, which carries the milk-cow imagery, with the standard three-line stanza that follows:

My brain is cloudy, my soul is upside down.
Yeah, my brain is cloudy, my soul is upside down.
When I get that low-down feelin', I know the blues
must be someplace around.⁴¹

The rest of Tommy Duncan's singing mimics Thompson's vocals and text almost verbatim, with only the slightest changes.

Musically speaking, the Bob Wills band adds a stop-time treatment to the extended final verse of "Brain Cloudy Blues," another feature that has become a standard part of "Milk Cow Blues" in Western-swing performances. This climactic addition is punctuated by an ensemble lick borrowed from Benny Goodman's "Moonglow." Wills's subsequent recording of "Milk Cow Blues" brings back the first verse from the Johnnie Lee Wills recording, but retains the stop-time rhythmic treatment in the final stanza with a slightly different ensemble lick to finish the song. Bob Wills's guitarist, Junior Barnard, plays gritty, hard-driving solos on both "Brain Cloudy Blues" and "Milk Cow Blues," and it is entirely possible that Barnard's work on either of these tracks would have caught the attention of Elvis Presley's lead guitarist, Scotty Moore. Barnard's playing style had deep roots in the syntax of the blues, and these tracks display a level of fluency with "gut bucket" blues-guitar phrasing that would not be heard from other white guitarists for at least another decade.

With the above mention of Elvis Presley's recording of "Milk Cow Blues" it becomes clear that this tune has appeared in contexts other than black blues culture and Western swing. In 1954, Presley released his version of this much-loved blues song on the Sun label, renaming it "Milk Cow Blues Boogie." A published sheet-music version of this performance is available online from Musicnotes.com. The text from the online score follows:

Verse 1

Well I woke up this mornin' and I looked out the door,
I can tell that old milk cow, I can tell the way she lowed.
Now, if you see my milk cow, please rock her up on home.
I ain't had no milk and butter since that cow's been gone.

Verse 2

Well, I tried to treat you right day by day.
You hide your little pray'r book, get down on your knees
and pray,
Boy, you're gonna need your lovin' daddy here someday.
Well, then you're gonna be sorry you treated me this way.

Verse 3

Well, good evenin', don't that sun look good goin' down?
Well, good evenin', don't that sun look good goin' down?
But don't that old moon look lonesome when your baby's
not around.

Verse 4

Well, I tried everything to get 'long with you.
I'm ah gonna tell you what I'm gonna do;
Ah, I'm ah gonna quit my cryin'.
I'm gonna leave you alone.
If you don't believe I'm leavin' you can count the days I'm
gone.
I'm gonna leave, you're gonna need your lovin', daddy here
someday.
Well, then you're gonna be sorry for treating me this way.⁴²

The comparison of lyrics supports Millward and Hatch's observation that it was the elder Wills's recording of "Milk Cow Blues" that was the primary source for Presley's rockabilly adaptation. As we have already noted, Bob Wills's version was a remake with only slight alterations of his younger brother Johnnie Lee's recording. Presley and company begin their rendition with only a plodding acoustic guitar as accompaniment to mimic the mid-tempo quarter-note drive of the Western-swing treatment. After drawling the first two lines of the beginning verse, Presley stops his band and calls for a more up-tempo, rocking approach. The band then launches into the faster rockabilly groove that was their specialty. Lead guitarist Scotty Moore plays a 24-bar solo chorus that suggests the influence of Junior Barnard and has nothing to do with the short answering guitar passages provided by Kokomo Arnold. In this tongue-in-cheek poke at the older swing tradition, Presley underscores the idea that the "Milk Cow Blues," and perhaps popular music in general, has now undergone a changing of the guard. It has been adapted to the cultural aesthetics of a new generation, a tide change in which the blues also would play an important role.

This discussion of the numerous incarnations of "Milk Cow Blues" could go on for many more pages. Such country stars as

George Strait, Willie Nelson, and Tim McGraw; rockers such as Eddie Cochran, The Kinks, Aerosmith, and Elvis Costello; and a variety of Western-swing bands have recorded “Milk Cow Blues” subsequent to the time period under discussion in this essay. In each genre and cultural scene, “Milk Cow Blues” has been altered musically and textually to meet the needs of a different audience, a cultural group in transition attempting to navigate between its past and present, the old and the new.

The reason “Milk Cow Blues” can so readily assume different incarnations relates to the basic nature of the blues, which is always fluid and simple. Modifications include alterations to text and to the rhythm, phrase structure, and basic form of the music. Textual metaphors must be re-crafted to satisfy the belief systems, including matters of race and religion, of each individual cultural group. Changes in its text speak volumes about the cultural identities of the various users of “Milk Cow Blues.” The fluidity and simplicity of the song’s form opened windows of opportunity for blues and Western-swing musicians, as well as their rock-music imitators, to display their improvisatory skills in full virtuosic choruses. Early rock artists, such as Elvis Presley, reconfigured an old form to a new beat, putting rhythm front and center and giving the lead guitar a platform along with the vocals to set a younger generation into motion in the 1950s.

In the mid-1960s, British groups such as the Rolling Stones and Cream took American blues records, including “Milk Cow Blues,” and extracted motifs that, in their original

contexts, were simply improvised licks thrown out in ever-changing performances. Then these British artists recast these motifs and deployed them as recurrent themes around which cover versions could be fashioned with the borrowed thematic material becoming the hook. In this way, rock was modernized to meet the needs of British and American youth living in a world dominated by war and the dissolution of their societies. Throughout the late 1960s and into the present, rock guitarists have become harsher, louder, and have played even longer choruses than did Scotty Moore on the Elvis Presley recording. Drummers have gouged out the rhythms more violently. Audiences have cringed at the volume while getting totally lost in the music itself.

Some music critics and historians argue that country audiences are still looking for “real country music,” that which is genuine and speaks to their lives.⁴³ For them, “Milk Cow Blues” and all of its blues relatives express the reality of broken relationships and lost ideals. For each culture, past and present, “Milk Cow Blues” has become something different, something explicit to the identities of the members of that culture. In these different contexts, is “Milk Cow Blues” still a blues? In Frank Tirro’s terms—“a personal statement made in musical terms which is nevertheless valid for all members of a society”—the answer is yes. Though “Milk Cow Blues” has changed its face and has been reincarnated many times, it has remained a blues with meaning for each community that adopts it. ★



Elvis Presley at the Big D Jamboree, Dallas, Texas, 1955. Courtesy David Dennard and Dragon Street Records.

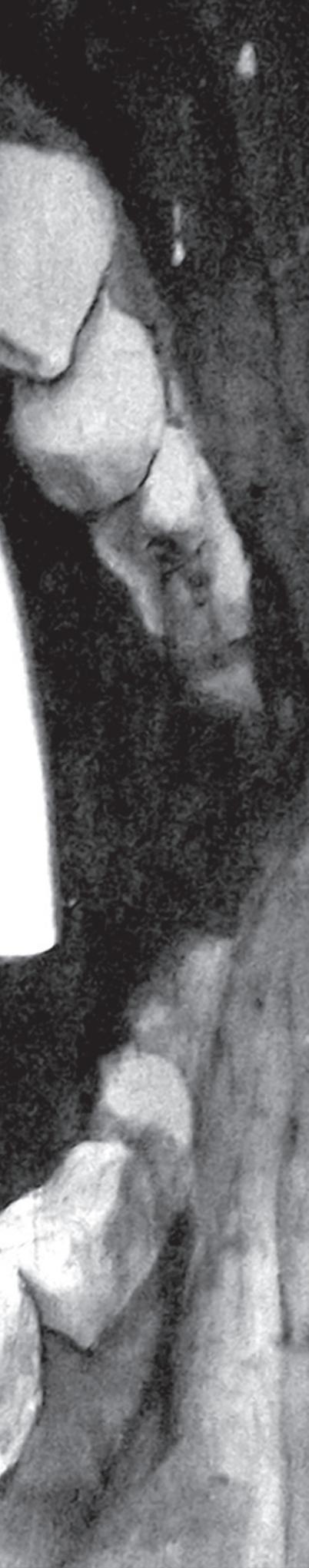
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- 15 Ibid.
- 16 For a discussion of sexual metaphors and other types of lyrical symbolism found in the music of pioneering Texas blues artist Blind Lemon Jefferson, see Luigi Monge and David Evans, "New Songs of Blind Lemon Jefferson," *Journal of Texas Music History* 3.2 (Fall 2003): 8-28.
- 17 This text was transcribed from the recording of "My Black Mama, Pt. 1" on Son House, Leroy Williams, Willie Brown, Fiddlin' Joe Martin, and Alan Wilson, *Son House* (New York: Columbia Legacy, 2003), CD.
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- 28 Patrick Kelly, "The Blending of African-American and European Aesthetics in the Guitar Performance of British Blues from 1965 to 1967," master's thesis, Baylor University, 2010, 40-41.
- 29 Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, 135.
- 30 David Hatch and Stephen Millward, *From Blues to Rock: An Analytical History of Pop Music* (Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 1989), 42-43.
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- 32 For more on the importance of how the basic blues structure lends itself to improvisation, see Gary Hartman, *The History of Texas Music*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 67-68.
- 33 For one of the most detailed studies of the history of blues music, see Bill Wyman, *Blues Odyssey: A Journey to Music's Heart and Soul* (New York: DK Publishing, Inc., 2001). For a thorough examination of blues music in Texas, see Alan Govenar, *Texas Blues: The Rise of a Contemporary Sound* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008) and Roger Wood, *Down in Houston: Bayou City Blues* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).
- 34 Cary Ginell and Kevin Coffey, *Discography of Western Swing and Hot String Bands, 1928-1942* (Westport, Connecticut, and London: Green Wood Press, 2001), 21; For more information on Cliff Bruner's Texas Wanderers, as well as a number of other western swing bands, see Jean A. Boyd, *Dance All Night: Those Other Southwestern Swing Bands, Past and Present* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2012), 81-92.
- 35 Cliff Bruner, interview by Jean A. Boyd, Houston, Texas, August 14, 1991; transcript in the Texas Collection, Baylor University.
- 36 Marvin "Smokey" Montgomery, interview by Jean A. Boyd, Dallas, Texas, August 29, 1998; transcript in the Texas Collection, Baylor University; quoted in Jean A. Boyd, *We're the Light Crust Doughboys from Burrus Mill: An Oral History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 68.
- 37 This text was transcribed from the recording of "New Milk Cow Blues" on Moon Mullican, *I'll Sail My Ship Alone* (Beckenham, Kent, England: Proper Records, 2002), CD.
- 38 Charles R. Townsend, *San Antonio Rose: The Life and Music of Bob Wills* (Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 251.
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- 41 This text was transcribed from the recording of "Brain Cloudy Blues" on Bob Wills & His Texas Playboys, *The Essential Bob Wills: 1935-1947* (New York: Columbia Legacy, 1992), CD.
- 42 Published under license from Alfred Publishing Co., Inc., authorized for use by Jean Boyd, <http://www.musicnotes.com>.
- 43 For a discussion of the "authenticity" of country music and other genres, see Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Ron Eyeran and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004); Bill C. Malone, *Don't Get Above Your Rasin': Country Music and the Southern working Class* (Urbana University of Illinois Press, 2002); Jefferey J. Lange, *Smile When You Call Me a Hillbilly: Country Music's Struggle for Respectability, 1939-1954* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2004).

The South Austin Popular Culture Center

Stephen F. Austin





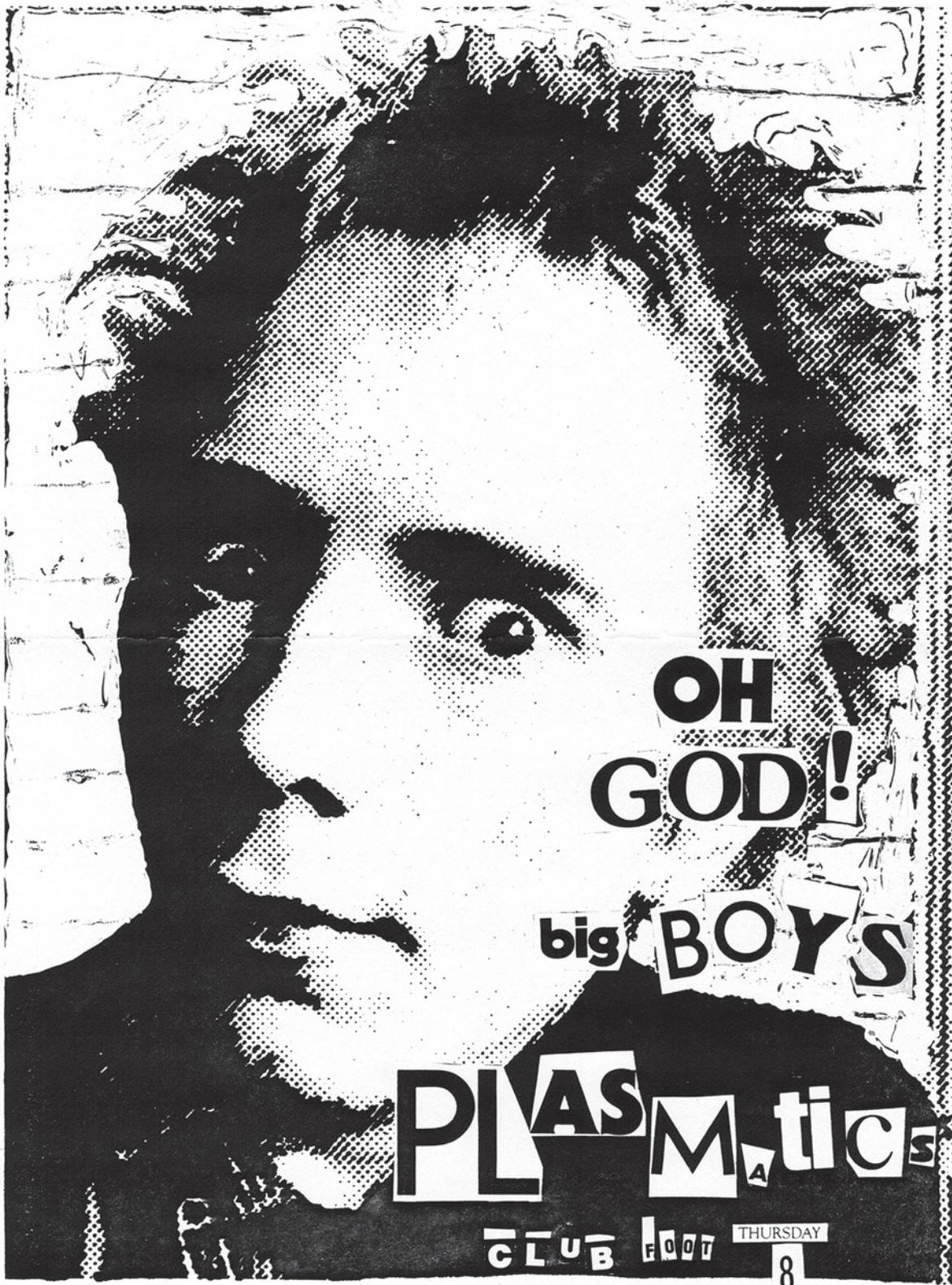
On August 7, 1970, the Armadillo World Headquarters opened at 525½ Barton Springs Road in South Austin. This part of the city, located just south of the Colorado River and only blocks from downtown Austin, has historically been a working-class neighborhood populated mainly by Anglos and Hispanics. Although it may have been near the downtown business district, the State Capitol, and the University of Texas, the area seemed in many ways economically, socially, and culturally distant from the city's commercial, political, and educational centers just across the river.

37

The opening of the Armadillo World Headquarters, also known as the Armadillo or simply the "Dillo," helped change the cultural and economic status of South Austin. And while this part of town had long had its own unique and eclectic culture, the Armadillo served as a catalyst for Austin's burgeoning countercultural music scene in the 1970s. It also reinforced a feeling of pride among local residents in their self-declared quirkiness, perhaps best expressed by what would eventually become an unofficial slogan representing the city's unique cultural character: "Keep Austin Weird."¹

From its first concert on August 7, 1970, until its final show on December 31, 1980, the Armadillo World Headquarters provided a focal point for Austin's musical counterculture. However, the Armadillo's role in shaping the city's cultural identity was by no means limited to music. The core group of artists responsible for the venue's posters and handbills also created a large body of visual imagery that helped define and reflect the cultural spirit of South Austin. Artists such as Jim Franklin, Jack "Jaxon" Jackson, Bill Narum, and Ken Featherston comprised the Armadillo's so-called "Art Squad," which was responsible for many iconic posters promoting Austin's music scene. The creative energy that linked music, visual arts, and journalism during these years went a long way toward defining a modern sense of what it meant to be Texan.

At the height of the Armadillo's popularity in the mid-1970s, members of the Art Squad considered launching a collective effort to showcase, preserve, and promote Austin artists and their work. However, it would be 2004 before organizers founded the South Austin Popular



Club Foot handbill. Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.



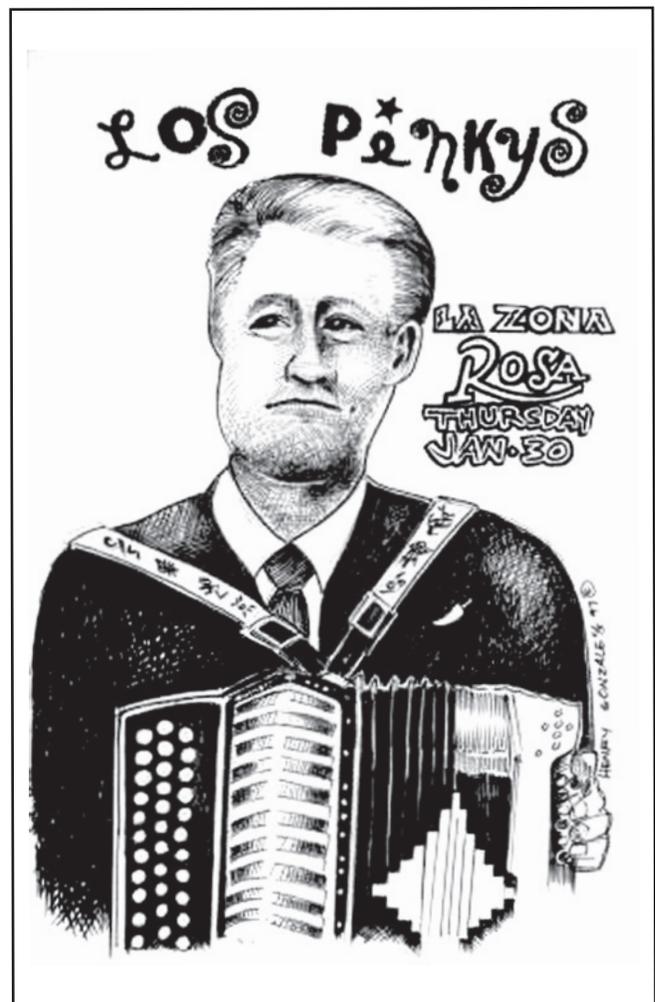
Outdoor stage mural designed by Kerry Awn. Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.

Culture Center, which in 2005 was formally established as a 501(c)3 tax-exempt organization at 1516-B South Lamar Boulevard.²

Starting with efforts to collect, store, and display concert posters from the Armadillo Art Squad, the center has worked to preserve the legacy of Austin's counterculture and popular arts through exhibitions, collection, and scholarship. Executive director Leea Mechling began displaying the pieces collected by the center in solo exhibitions, initially featuring the core group of the Art Squad. Jim Franklin was the first artist whose work the center put on exhibit in 2004. For the next year, each member of the Armadillo Art Squad enjoyed his turn in the spotlight, with exhibitions of the music-related posters, handbills, comics, and artwork of Kerry Awn, Danny Garrett, Guy Juke, Henry Gonzalez, Bill Narum, Micael Priest, Sam Richardson, and Sam Yeates.

The South Austin Popular Culture Center's focus has since grown to encompass much more than the poster art of the Armadillo years. While the original motivation was to preserve Austin's countercultural creative energy that radiated from such iconic live music venues as the Armadillo World Headquarters, Threadgill's, the Vulcan Gas Company, the Austin Opry House, and Antone's, the center's move to become a collecting and exhibiting institution for photography, prints, ephemera, and literature has helped to widen the conversation about the Austin cultural scene.

With over 64 exhibitions to date, the South Austin Popular Culture Center continues to collect and preserve past and present representations of Austin culture. The center's exhibition space is open to the public Thursday through Sunday from 1:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. Typically, the center includes the featured artist

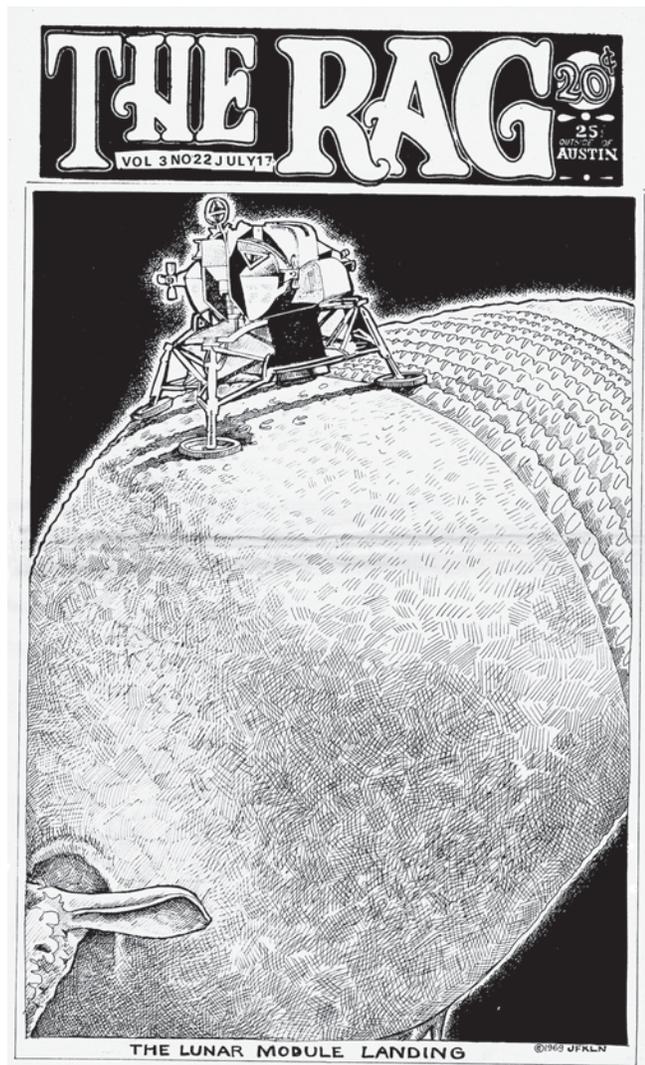


Henry Gonzalez poster for Los Pinkys. Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.

and other pioneering cultural figures in each exhibit's opening reception. This allows visitors to meet and interact directly with the artists responsible for the iconic images.

As one might expect, music is often part of the exhibit festivities. Several Texas bands, including the Uranium Savages, Joe King Carrasco, the Nortons, and Van Wilks, along with members of Greezy Wheels and Krackerjack, have performed on the center's outdoor stage, which includes a colorful background mural festooned with such comical characters as Wonder Warthog, the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, Hank Hill, and Oat Willie.

The center's diverse exhibits have ranged from the underground comics of Gilbert Shelton to the eccentric sculptures, paintings,



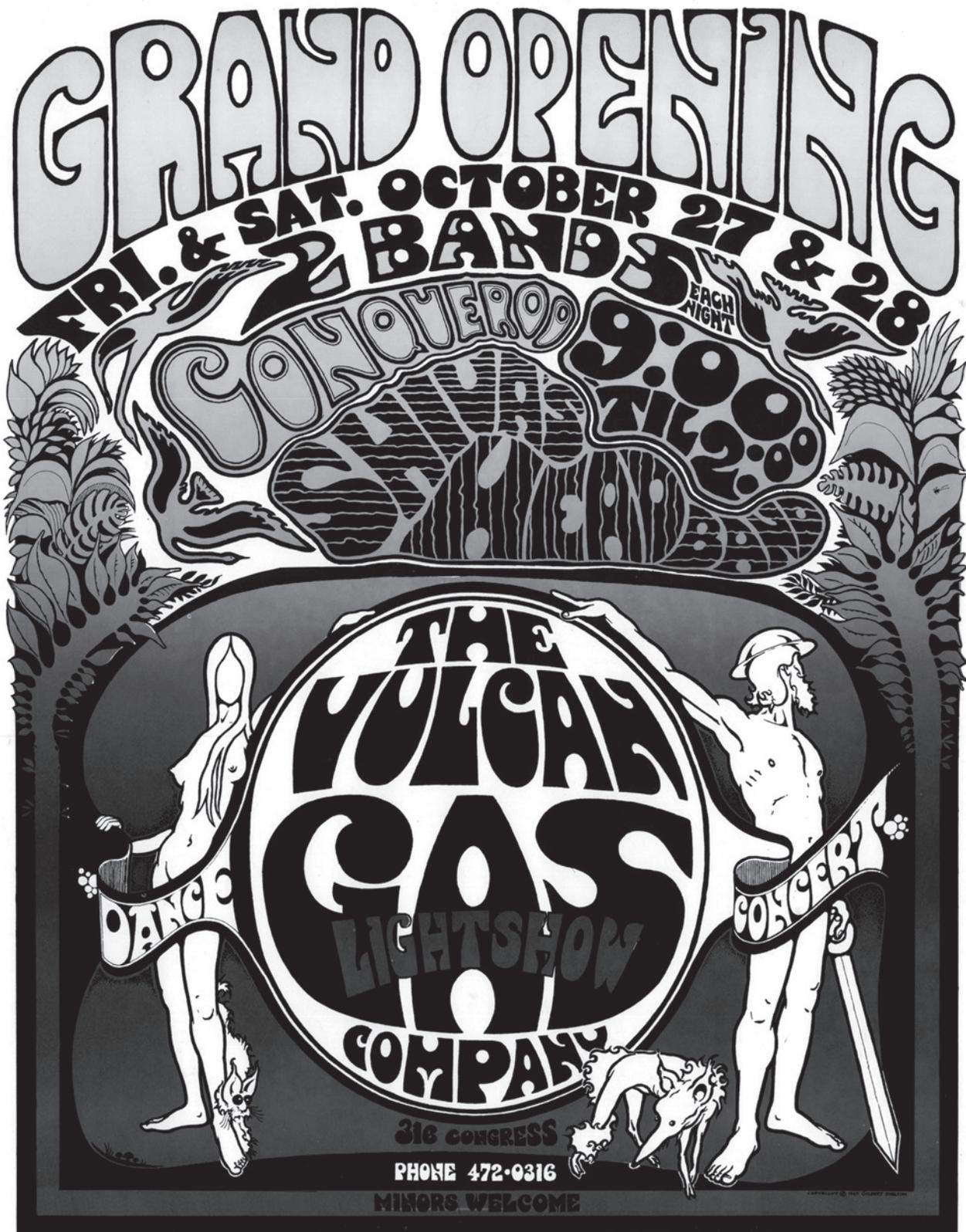
Jim Franklin cover for *The Rag*.
Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.



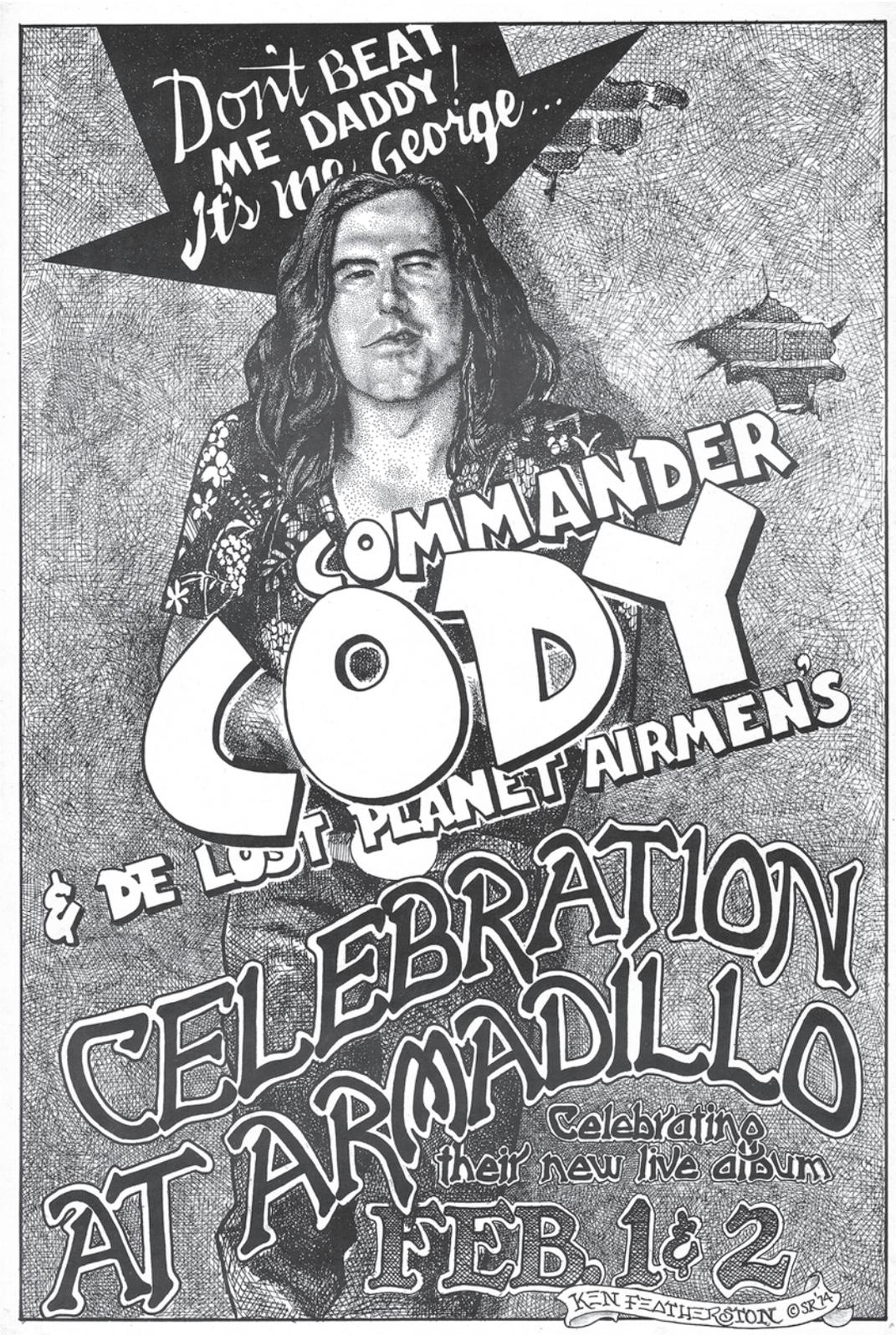
Hub City Movers, *The Chicken Song*.
Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.

and public works of Bob "Daddy-O" Wade. The center also has focused on contemporary Austin culture with such exhibits as the "Punk Pioneers," which showcased Austin's punk scene of the 1980s. To that end, the center has highlighted modern art with the collection of Jim Harter's surrealist works and Lindsey Kuhn's silk-screened posters, originally designed for display in the punk clubs along Austin's Red River Street.

Furthermore, the South Austin Popular Culture Center's exhibitions have covered Austin's countercultural press by featuring publications from the contemporary *Austin Chronicle*, as well as its alternative predecessors, the *Austin Sun*, the *Rag* and the *Ranger*. In addition, the center has amassed a large collection of photography documenting the evolution of the Austin music scene. Exhibits have featured renowned photojournalist Alan Pogue, Mack Royal's chronicling of the Ritz Theatre, and a collection of recently unearthed photographs by Van Brooks



Gilbert Shelton poster for the Vulcan Gas Company's opening night. Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.



Ken Featherston poster for Commander Cody. Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.

that include Austin images of music icons Patti Smith, the Allman Brothers, Willie Nelson, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, and Janis Joplin at her last performance in Central Texas.

The primary strength of the South Austin Popular Culture Center lies in its extensive collection of posters, handbills, flyers, and photographs documenting the Austin scene. Although the center's archives skew heavily toward Austin's visual culture, the collection also spans a wide range of publications and ephemeral artifacts, including the clothing of local artists and musicians, the Jim Franklin-designed ticket window from the Vulcan Gas Company, small airplanes and cars turned into decorative art, and even a lock of Elvis Presley's hair.

The center provides access to its collection for scholars and researchers upon request. Director Mechling also hopes to expand the center's online digital archives in order to increase public access. While it is not formally affiliated with any university or governmental research institution, the South Austin Popular Culture Center is an important resource that welcomes anyone wishing to learn more about the city's cultural history.

The center plans to continue diversifying and expanding its role in documenting the unique culture of Central Texas and also hopes to serve as a model for historical and cultural

Charlie Parker in Sweden 1950

Recorded November 24, 1950 at Halsingborg, Sweden.

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Vintage ad by Henry Gonzalez. Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.

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Jim Franklin poster for Willie Nelson's Fourth of July Picnic.
Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.

preservation efforts in other Texas cities, including the new South Texas Popular Culture Center in San Antonio. The South Austin Popular Culture Center's emphasis on Austin's history and local culture will help to preserve and perpetuate the countercultural tradition that has made the city the creative capital it is today. For more information, including exhibitions, events, and collections, please visit the center's website: www.SouthAustinCenter.org. ★

Notes

- 1 For more on the Armadillo World Headquarters, see Jason Dean Mellard, "Home with the Armadillo: Public Memory and Performance in the 1970s Austin Music Scene," *Journal of Texas Music History* 10 (2010): 8-21. See also John Wheat, "Armadillo World Headquarters," *Handbook of Texas Music*, 2nd ed., Laurie E. Jasinski, ed., (Denton: Texas State Historical Association, 2012), 19-21.
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The Austin Chronicle Music Anthology

Edited by Austin Powell and Doug Freeman, foreword by Daniel Johnston, introduction by Louis Black (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011). \$45.00 cloth, \$29.95 paperback. 336 pp. ISBN 978-0-292-72270-5 cloth, 978-0-292-72318-4 paperback.

For over 30 years, *The Austin Chronicle* has delivered progressive perspectives and alternative journalistic visions to the Austin community. Founded in 1981 by publisher Nick Barbaro and editor Louis Black, the *Chronicle* promotes, analyzes, critiques, and defines all things Austin—film, art, literature, theater, food, politics, and, of course, music. Not only has *The Austin Chronicle* been the premiere publication documenting the vibrant musical scene that gave rise to the “Live Music Capital of the World,” the *Chronicle* itself has become a significant aspect of the musical culture with its promotion of Austin music to an international audience.

Celebrating the relationship between the *Chronicle* and the Austin music community, the University of Texas Press published *The Austin Chronicle Music Anthology* in 2011. This volume of over 200 articles and reviews, strengthened by scores of iconic photographs, was edited by respected veteran music journalists Austin Powell and Doug Freeman. Despite stylistic changes in the *Chronicle* throughout the decades, the articles reveal a seamless consistency that exhibits the expertise of the *Chronicle* staff. Black, whose weekly editorials set the intelligent tone that characterizes *The Chronicle*, introduces the anthology with his observation that “the Austin scene has never been about only one kind of music or style but rather the full past of music honored with cross-breeding and constant reinvention into innovative explorations.”

Many critics have portrayed Austin music, and often the *Chronicle* as well, as a community of self-absorbed elitists who have hyped an image that has become a catchy Chamber of Commerce slogan and promotion. Those critics are wrong. However, they are correct in that there is a community—a community of singers, songwriters, clubs, promoters, journalists, and devoted fans. This community emerged in the 1960s and grew to maturity during the 1970s and 1980s. Now there are three generations of participants in the evolution of Austin music. For 30 years, *The Chronicle* has served as their journalistic voice.

Talented and passionate writers have been the trademark success of the *Chronicle*. No one exemplifies that more than veteran journalist Margaret Moser. Moser writes the first of three introductory essays that cover the 1980s, the 1990s, and the 2000s. By the 1980s, it was evident that Austin music had matured and evolved beyond the so-called “progressive country” era, which was so closely associated with the Armadillo World Headquarters, Soap Creek Saloon, Willie Nelson’s Fourth of July Picnics, and other venues. Blues-rock and alternative sounds were emanating from the various incarnations of Antone’s Nightclub and scores of other locations. Moser was there to experience it all, and her voice is as trusted and respected today as it was 30 years ago. In addition to her introduction to the 1980s, the “best of Moser” is included in all three sections with articles ranging from the Doug Sahm experience at Soap Creek Saloon to profiles of such diverse artists as The Fabulous Thunderbirds, Joe Ely, and the Skunks.

Three of Austin’s premiere journalists of the 1980s—Jeff Whittington, Michael Corcoran, and John T. Davis—have several contributions in the 1980s section. Whittington, the original music editor of the *Chronicle*, was the father of *The Austin Chronicle* Music Poll and the Austin Music Awards. Corcoran, always with his pulse on the Austin creative community through a long career at the *Austin American-Statesman*, is at his best tapping into the emotion and passion of the artist. Examples in this volume include profiles of Joe “King” Carrasco, Dino Lee, and Stevie Ray Vaughan. Davis has been a premier journalist in Austin since the mid-1970s and has no equal in bridging the cultural gap between the so-called “progressive country” period of the 1970s and the emerging blues scene. His Austin Music Award previews are a valuable addition in this volume.

Raoul Hernandez introduces the 1990s with a reminder of that timeframe, the “death of Stevie Ray Vaughan on August 27, 1990, and Doug Sahm’s on November 18, 1999.” Hernandez has served as *The Chronicle* music editor since 1994, and his tenure has been notable in its commitment to that powerful reality, the diversity of Austin music. Highlights of the 1990s section include Lee Nichols’s features that range from Don Walser to the Dixie Chicks to Jerry Jeff Walker. There are three of Ken Lieck’s weekly must-read “Dancing About Architecture” columns. The 1970s-era Austin resident Chet Flippo, later of *Rolling Stone* magazine fame, gives his take on the “cosmic cowboy” phenomenon and an invaluable review of the albums that defined that era. Appropriately, the last essay on the 1990s is Joe Nick Patoski’s portrayal of a night at Soap Creek Saloon with the Texas Tornado himself, Doug Sahm.

The final section on the 2000s is introduced by Christopher Gray, *Chronicle* columnist from 2003 until 2007, and includes several of his own profiles and reviews. Despite more freelance writers and more attention to South by Southwest, the *Chronicle* remains respectful of the traditions and roots of Austin music throughout the 2000s. Notable articles include profiles of Patty Griffin and Jimmy LaFave by renowned music critic Dave Marsh. Audra Schroeder and Belinda Acosta add their voices to the recent collection, and Moser’s interview with Clifford Antone relives “those magic moments” with one of the spiritual fathers of the Austin sound.

For those seeking a scholarly history or a thematic survey of the last 30 years of Austin music, this anthology is not for you. For those seeking an entertaining and informative experience in the community of Austin music, you will find the best of music journalism.

Larry Willoughby

I’ll Be Here in the Morning: The Songwriting Legacy of Townes Van Zandt

By Brian T. Atkinson, forewords by “Cowboy” Jack Clements and Harold F. Eggers, Jr. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2011; John and Robin Dickson Series in Texas Music, sponsored by the Center for Texas Music History, Texas State University). \$24.95 cloth. 272 pp. ISBN 978-1-60344-526-9.

In the HBO New Orleans-based television series *Treme*, real-life singer-songwriter Steve Earle plays the character Harley, a respected street musician. In a scene from season two, Harley pushes an up-and-coming violinist, Annie, to articulate what qualities a song must have to be “great.” They’re discussing John Hiatt’s “Feels Like Rain,” which Annie believes speaks through the metaphor of weather and love to the struggles of enduring life in New Orleans in its dark, post-Katrina years.

Older and wiser in the ways of both New Orleans and songwriting, Harley gives

Annie a brief but illustrative history lesson: “Hiatt wrote that song twenty years ago, darlin’, when you still had training wheels on your bike and nobody had ever heard the name Katrina ... *That’s* what makes it a great song.”

What distinguishes the great from the good, following this line of thought, is a song’s ability to transcend time and place, evoke shared experience or emotion, and to speak life’s themes in a common language. Or, as Chip Taylor says beautifully and simply in Brian Atkinson’s book, *I’ll Be Here in the Morning*, “In the best kind of music, I don’t care if I don’t know the specific names or the specific places. If it’s told from a true heart, I’ll be there, and I’ll know those people and I’ll get that feeling.”

Reading Atkinson’s compilation of musings on the legacy of Texas singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt is a little like eavesdropping on Harley and Annie as they walk the New Orleans streets, or standing in a room full of musicians come to pay tribute to one of their fallen. From mainstays of Texas music, such as Guy Clark and Kris Kristofferson, to newer, genre-straddling artists, such as Scott Avett and Grace Potter, the musicians interviewed here reveal deeply personal stories of the singular impact of Townes Van Zandt’s music and fashion a colorful and complex portrait of the man himself.

Van Zandt’s struggles with addiction and the physical and emotional tolls it exacted are as much a part of his image as the songs. Those who knew him still bear the scars of watching someone they loved and respected self-destruct. Ray Wy-

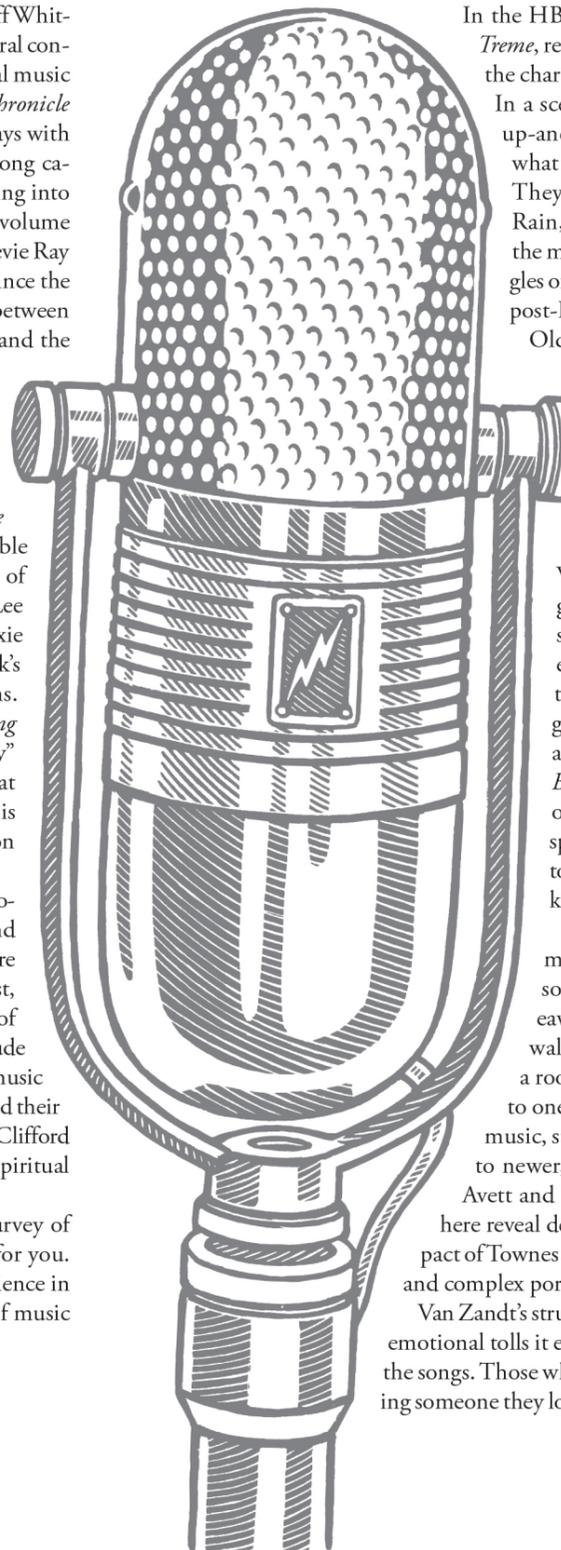
lie Hubbard evokes palpable discomfort in describing nights when it was “just magical to watch him perform...and then there were the nights when you got this feeling in your stomach and would just think, ‘Okay, Townes, that’s enough.’” Texas musician Darden Smith’s mother, upon witnessing a drunken and disappointing performance of Van Zandt’s, told her son, “[I]f that’s who you’re looking up to, I’ve made some terrible mistakes.”

Fortunately, the people speaking from the pages of *I’ll Be Here in the Morning* are overwhelmingly balanced in their recollections of a man who, as filmmaker Graham Leader puts it, was “just a mass of contradictions.” They bear witness to Van Zandt’s dedication to the rootless life of a touring musician while watching him undermine opportunities for greater commercial success. They hold him up as a giant among songwriters who remained genuine and approachable despite cult-figure status, living almost more comfortably in the margins than in the spotlight. They recount with fondness and pain his oft-overlooked sense of humor and that he delighted in jokes and was a sharp-witted trickster whose songs tapped like no one else’s the vein of vulnerability and longing.

If Van Zandt’s songs came to him the way the holy spirit speaks to saints, then these remembrances are a kind gospel—and indeed, the reverential tone with which some voices here speak is befitting religious mystery. Van Zandt wrote unflinchingly about the human condition, and he did so in a way that illuminated the beauty that could live on the underbelly of ugliness and tragedy. Butch Hancock explains it here another way: “Poetry jumps between concepts, one line right up against another ... If the tone is right, then the jump does extraordinary things for your empathy with the work.” The gift of Van Zandt’s poetry is in great part acceptance, without judgment, of darkness and light together. It allows grace to live alongside poverty and broken spirits.

Hancock may be one of the most memorable voices that Atkinson records, and his description of the transformative power of art stands as perhaps the most apt summary of the influence of Townes Van Zandt: “The rare mark of any kind of art” is that “it pulls you in and sends you out with more than you came in with—and more than you suspected was there.” Overwhelmingly, these are fellow practitioners of art who see and embrace the paradoxes of their missing troubadour. *I’ll Be Here in the Morning* is a bittersweet tribute to songs that bear the timelessness and truths that, as Harley reminds Annie, make the good songs great, and a testament to the fact that the songwriting legacy of Townes Van Zandt is alive and well.

Emily Spiegelman



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Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Music at Millikin University, where he coordinates the Musicology curriculum and directs the Millikin Big Bluegrass Band. He is the author of *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks: The Countercultural Sounds of Austin’s Progressive Country Music Scene* (Oxford University Press, 2011) and has articles on American music in such publications as the *Journal of Texas Music History*, *American Music*, *Popular Music*, *Popular Music and Society*, and *West Virginia History*. In addition to his research on country music, he is also interested in recording practice and music and energy policy.

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