



## Sonobeat Records: Pioneering the Austin Sound in the '60s

By Ricky Stein (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2014). \$19.99 paperback. 128 pp. ISBN 978-1-62619-245-4.  
Also available in e-book format.

A father-son collaborative effort, Sonobeat Records was born out of FM radio and live remote broadcasts and recordings. Bill Josey, Sr., and his son, Bill Josey, Jr. (aka Rim Kelly), recorded dozens of local bands, singer-songwriters, and musicians between 1967 and 1976. The Joseys did not limit themselves to a specific sound or genre. They sought music that was live, a sound that was original and unique. As Ricky Stein writes in his new book, *Sonobeat Records*, “[T]he two music enthusiasts were able to capture the sounds of a budding musical mecca, a city that would proclaim itself the live music capital of the world in decades to come.”

Sonobeat recorded rock, country, folk, jazz, R&B, and gospel and included hundreds of artists, some of whom who were at the top of their game at the time and others who, although novices, went on to become legendary beyond Austin. From Afro-Caravan to Johnny Winter, the Joseys had an ear for quality music that helped build a foundation for the current Texas music scene. In an era when independent and small record labels were mere stepping stones to major record companies, Sonobeat had a strong relationship with radio through the Joseys and was able to promote many local musicians and live music venues.

Stein points out that while New York, Los Angeles, Nashville, Chicago, and other musical hotbeds made their names because of studios and major record labels, the Austin scene began with a much less commercial slant: “Instead, it was the musicians themselves who formed the bedrock of what would become the world-renowned Austin music community.”

Sonobeat founders Bill Josey and Rim Kelly both worked in the radio industry, which allowed them unique access to the growing live-music scene. Much of Sonobeat’s catalog was recorded live—or in live music venues on borrowed or home-crafted recording equipment, fashioned as much for portability as for fidelity.

Stein states that until the late 1960s, “Austin’s musical history was not particularly unique.... [T]here was little to distinguish Austin’s musical landscape from that of any other mid-sized college town.” He adds that live music at fraternity parties and festivals generally covered Top-40 hits and classics.

By the late 1960s, New York City dominated the sheet-music industry and much of the recording industry, and Los Angeles and San Francisco were emerging as the younger, hipper, West Coast center of the music business. However, no one was blending musical styles in quite the same way as Austin musicians.

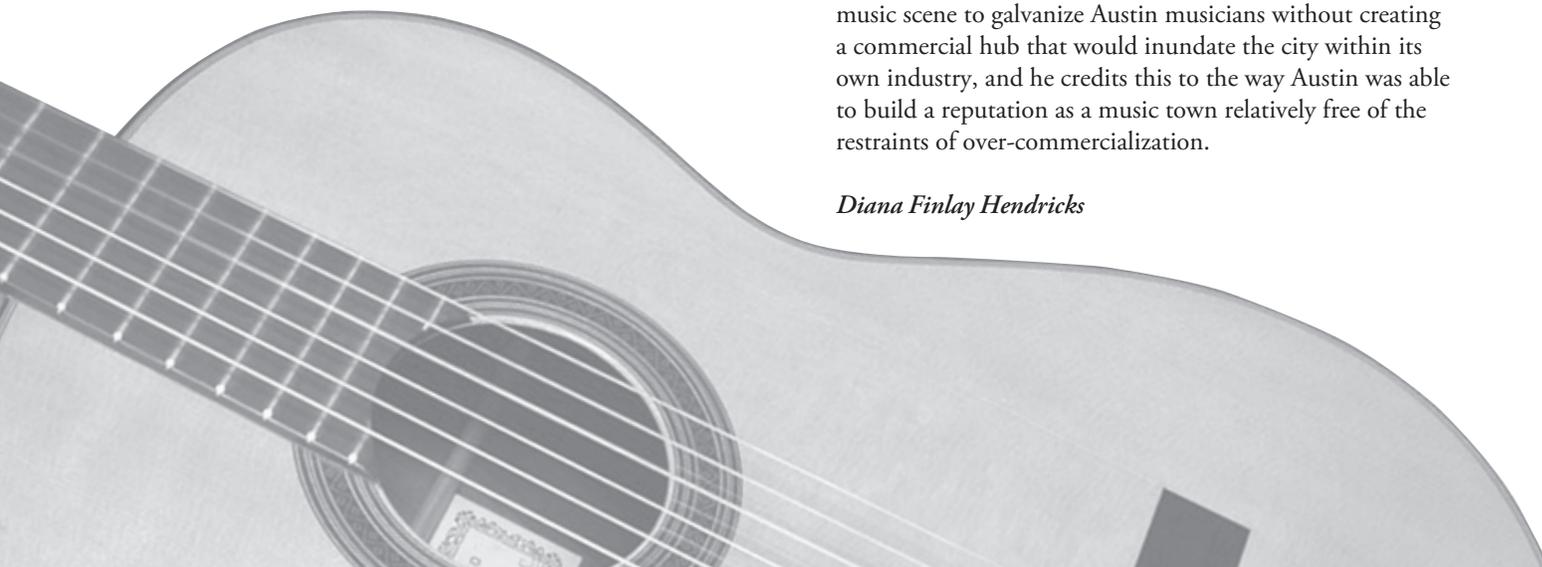
Sonobeat Records chronicled these important musical developments taking place in Austin. In addition to recording such innovative psychedelic rock groups as Shiva’s Headband, Sonobeat captured the emerging progressive country elements of such artists as Rusty Weir, while also including in its catalog the seminal blues-rock guitarist, Johnny Winter, who was based in Beaumont, Texas, but frequently performed in Austin.

In fact, a December 7, 1968, *Rolling Stone* magazine article, which focused on Texas artists Janis Joplin, Doug Sahm, Steve Miller, and Mother Earth, also poured lavish praise on the “hundred and thirty pound cross-eyed albino with long fleecy hair playing some of the gutsiest fluid guitar you have ever heard”—a 23-year-old Johnny Winter.

As Stein observes, “By recording Austin’s local talent, [Sonobeat] gave voice to the emerging scene and offered a glimpse of what the city would soon become.” He adds another important point later in the book: “In many ways, Sonobeat Records’ commercial shortcomings early on in its existence played as important a role in the formation of the music scene as did its later successes. Because Sonobeat never became a goliath record label...each release would gain a sense of allure that comes with limited quantity and availability.”

Stein asserts that Sonobeat did just enough for the Austin music scene to galvanize Austin musicians without creating a commercial hub that would inundate the city within its own industry, and he credits this to the way Austin was able to build a reputation as a music town relatively free of the restraints of over-commercialization.

*Diana Finlay Hendricks*



## Progressive Country: How the 1970s Transformed the Texan in Popular Culture

By Jason Mellard (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013). \$29.95 cloth. 276 pp. ISBN 978-0-292-75300-6.

Also available in e-book format.

In 1974, Jan Reid's influential *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock* traced the development of Austin's early-1970s music scene, detailing the trend-shifting rise of musicians such as Willie Nelson and Jerry Jeff Walker. Forty years later, with the publication of Jason Mellard's *Progressive Country: How the 1970s Transformed the Texan in Popular Culture*, Reid's book now has a worthy companion, perfect to nestle beside it on the bookshelf. The new book has a larger scope, however, as Mellard traces not only the how the politics, music, and literature of pre-1970s Texas made for the atmosphere described in Reid's book, but also how the Texan circa 1975 has transformed the popular image of the type.

Although the music of the Armadillo World Headquarters' scene sits at the heart of the text, one real strength of Mellard's book lies in the fact that he's able to apply his investigation beyond the music and follow the roots of this shift in Texanness all the way out to branches as far-reaching as the Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush eras and mass-media instances such as *Dallas* and *Urban Cowboy*. Chief among his perceptive uses of research is the finding that the Texan was never, at least in the second half of the twentieth century, a fixed point from which the 1970s cosmic cowboys of the Austin music scene had to shift. The "Typical Texan" Mellard teases out though his extensive look into descriptions of the breed "did not denote specific men who actually existed, but a persona to be desired, a projection of the cowboy that individuals within and without the state's borders continually found ways to appropriate." Each era—and, indeed, each demographic within each era—has its spot at the defining table in establishing the meaning of "Texan."

Therein sits a bigger reason to champion Mellard's findings: his search for Texas includes groups often left from the discussion, be it scholars such as Américo Paredes or gubernatorial candidates such as Frances "Sissy" Farenthold and Ann Richards. Equally impressive are the insights offered on the ways that coalitions outside the traditional Anglo power structure helped cultivate the ever-changing image of Texanhood, especially the explanation of the African-American influence in Texas party politics and the importance of movements made up of groups such as the Brown Berets.

The clarion call that concludes the book offers that "the new millennium's first decade demonstrated one thing." According to Mellard, the rest of the world's image of the Texan has been usurped by politicians dressing up as cowboys, "[e]mbodied in Bush's 'swagger' of 2004 and Perry's 'fed-up' pretensions of 2011," with a modern image of the Texan which "persists as a performative site of exclusionary renditions of American nationality." Mellard isn't in denial about these appropriations of image, stating that the "symbols will not leave us anytime soon. We may combat them or divest from them, but we

cannot wish them away." The boon in this section of the book isn't the admission, however, but the solution.

"Why not, then," Mellard writes, "contest them again, re-fashion and re-figure them to render 'the Texan' more thoroughly conversant in its historical *tejanidad*, geared toward interpreting its frontier past in terms of inclusion, adaptability, and equality rather than combativeness, persecution complexes, and insularity?"

The title of the book and the cover's concert-poster image—which includes musicians Waylon Jennings and Billy Joe Shaver, along with Willie Nelson's pal Darrell Royal, in prominent positions—may lead readers to believe that the discussion of the music scene will dominate the book, à la Jan Reid's *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock*. However, Mellard had something bigger in mind; he uses the music at the heart of Austin as a springboard to a deeper examination of Texas culture. Similarly, some critics might take exception to the placing of Austin at the heart of the descriptions of Texas in the book, but Mellard argues convincingly that Austin's placement is warranted, while still giving plenty of discussion to other major cities, such as Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio. I was pleased to see how much attention was paid to underestimated Texas writers, including Bud Shrake and Gary Cartwright, who, to usurp Waylon Jennings's "Bob Wills is Still the King," have "as much to do with why we're down here as anybody." A look at the list of Texans on the book's final page shows the breadth of Mellard's scope: J. Frank Dobie, Roy Bedichek, Walter Prescott Webb, La Raza Unida, Barbara Jordan, Willie Nelson, Larry L. King, and Doug Sahm all served as both integral figures in the book and in the re-defining of "the Texan."

*Chad Hammett*

