

The Journal of

2009

TEXAS MUSIC HISTORY

Volume 6

Tary Owens, Texas Folklorist and Musician
"Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes"

TEXAS STATE
UNIVERSITY
San Marcos

ISSN 1547-3801

Letter from the Director



As the 2009 issue of the *Journal of Texas Music History* goes to press, the Center for Texas Music History is preparing to celebrate its tenth anniversary. In less than a decade, the Center has launched an impressive number of programs designed to promote the preservation and study of our state's rich and unique musical heritage. The Center has been recognized for its innovative work

by such prestigious organizations as The Smithsonian Institution, PBS, National Public Radio, The Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum, The National Endowment for the Humanities, *Billboard* magazine, *The Los Angeles Times*, and others.

Through Texas State University's History Department and School of Music, the Center offers a variety of graduate and undergraduate courses on Texas music history. In collaboration with Texas A&M University Press, the Center also produces the acclaimed book series, the *John and Robin Dickson Series in Texas Music*. The Center is currently developing the *Texas Music History Online* web site, which will serve as a classroom teaching tool, a research database, and an information resource designed to promote Texas music heritage tourism.

The Center co-produces the very popular NPR series, *This Week in Texas Music History*, which can now be heard on radio stations throughout the Southwest. In addition, the Center launched a new PBS television series, *Texas Music Café*, in January 2009. The Center is once again collaborating with the Texas State Historical Association to produce a revised and updated edition of the highly successful *Handbook of Texas Music*. These are only a few of the many educational initiatives undertaken by the Center for Texas Music History over the past ten years.

We would like to thank everyone who has helped make the Center such a success, especially the following: Gregg Andrews & Vikki Bynum, Dee Lannon, Kevin Mooney, Vincent Messina, Lori Lopez, the Center's Advisory Board, Frank de la Teja, the Texas State University History Department, Denise Trauth & John Huffman, Perry & Marianne Moore, Gene Bourgeois, Ann Marie Ellis, Diana Harrell, César Limón, Vicki Clarke, John & Robin Dickson, Kent Finlay, Rod Kennedy, Paul Paynter, Kim & Robert Richey, Patti Harrison, Teresa Ward, Richard Cheatham, Liz McDonald, Lanita Hanson, Francine Hartman, Jim & Cathey Moore, Rick & Laurie Baish, Nell Hesson, Lucky & Becky Tomblin, Denise Boudreaux, Jo & Paul Snider, Darrell & Barbara Piersol, Phil & Cecilia Collins, Ralph & Patti Dowling, Dennis & Margaret Dunn, Ron & Judy Brown, Grant Mazak, Cathy Supple, Sharon Sandomirsky & Chris Ellison, Byron & Rebecca Augustin, John Kunz, Bill Musser, Lee & Judy Keller, Ronda Reagan, Glenn & Donna Joy, Billy Seidel, and all of our other friends and supporters.

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

Thanks, and best wishes.

Dr. Gary Hartman, Director

Center for Texas Music History
History Department
Texas State University
San Marcos, TX 78666 U.S.A.
512.245.3749
gh08@txstate.edu
www.txstate.edu/ctmh



Center for Texas Music HistoryDirector **Gary Hartman**Assistant Director **Gregg Andrews**Director of Programs **Deirdre Lannon****The Journal of Texas Music History**Editors **Gary Hartman**
Gregg AndrewsArt Director **César Limón**Graphic Designers **Amanda Silva**Contributors **Ruth Sullivan**
Joe SpechtReviews **Kevin Mooney**
John Wheat

The Journal of Texas Music History is published annually by the Center for Texas Music History at Texas State University-San Marcos. The contents of this journal do not necessarily represent the views of the university.

Subscription: There is no charge to receive the Journal. Simply contact the Center for Texas Music History to be placed on our mailing list.

Article Submissions: Please submit manuscripts by e-mail in Microsoft Word, Chicago Style, to gh08@txstate.edu or mail to Journal of Texas Music History, Department of History, Texas State University-San Marcos, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666.

© 2001 Center for Texas Music History, Texas State University-San Marcos

ISSN 1535-7104

A member of The Texas State University System

The Texas State University System

Ron Blatchley, Chairman, Bryan | College Station

Trisha S. Pollard, Vice Chairman, Bellaire

Charlie Amato, San Antonio

Kevin J. Lilly, Houston

Ron Mitchell, Horseshoe Bay

David Montagne, Beaumont

Michael Truncale, Beaumont

Greg Wilkinson, Dallas

Donna N. Williams, Arlington

William Clayton Patterson,

Student Regent, San Marcos

Charles R. Matthews, Chancellor, Austin

TEXAS MUSIC HISTORY

c o n t e n t s

8 Tary Owens, Texas Folklorist and Musician:

A Life Remembered

Ruth K. Sullivan

43 "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes":

Slim Willet's Idiosyncratic Chart-Topper Lives On

Joe W. Specht

Reviews

48 A Deeper Blue:

The Life And Music of Townes Van Zandt

John Wheat

49 Texas Blues:

The Rise of a Contemporary Sound

Kevin Mooney

Submissions Review Board

John Dempsey

The University of North Texas, Denton

Craig D. Hillis

The University of Texas, Austin

Bill C. Malone

Madison, WI

Karl Hagstrom Miller,

New York University, New York

Kevin Edward Mooney,

Texas State University-San Marcos

Edward D. Oliphant,

The University of Texas, Austin

Jerry Rodnitzky,

The University of Texas, Arlington

Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr.,

The University of Houston, Houston

Joe Specht

McMurry University, Abilene

Roger Wood

Houston Community College System, Houston

The Center for Texas Music History Board of Advisors

Marcia Ball

Craig Barker

Elizabeth Pittman

Ralph Dowling

Tommy Foote

Tom Frost III

Rod Kennedy

Casey Monahan

Joe Nick Patoski

Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr.

Lucky Tomblin

GET COMMITTED TO TEXAS

et al.: Donors

Donors

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

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

The Journal of Texas Music History, along with all the other important educational 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.

Won't you join us in promoting the preservation and study of Texas music history?

Founding 100 Members' Circle: \$1,000 or more

Gregg Andrews &
Vikki Bynum
Byron & Rebecca Augustin
Richard & Laurie Baish
Mary Brennan & Alan Apel
Gene & Lynn Bourgeois
Ronald & Judy Brown
Richard Cheatham
Randy Collier,
Comp-Utility Corp.
Phillip & Cecilia Collins
John & Robin Dickson,
Dickson Productions
Carol Dochen
Frederick Dominey
Ralph & Patti Dowling
Dennis & Margaret Dunn
Ann Marie Ellis
Tracie Ferguson in memory
of Deschamps "Champ"
Hood & Walter Hyatt
Kent Finlay, Cheatham Street
Warehouse
Marge First
Mariko Gomez
Patti Harrison,
The PSH Foundation
Gary & Francine Hartman
Luan Brunson Haynes &
Elizabeth Brunson Vickers

Nell Hesson in memory
of Gary Briggs
Glenn & Donna Joy
The Joan & Herb Kelleher
Foundation
Rod Kennedy,
Kerrville Festivals, Inc.
Lee & Judy Keller
John Kunz, Waterloo Records
Grant Mazak
James E. & Cathey Moore
William & Michelle Musser
Darrell & Barbara Piersol
The PSH Foundation
Ronda Regan
Robert & Kim Richey
Mildred Roddy
Elmer & Susan Rosenberger
Sharon Sandomirsky
& Chris Ellison
Paul & Jo Snider
Jerome & Cathy Supple
Terry Boothe and the Texas
Heritage Songwriters
Association
Lucky & Becky Tomblin,
The Tomblin Family
Foundation
Nina B. Wright

Associate Members:
\$500-\$999
Balie Griffith

Bobby & Nancy Barnard,
Sundance Records & Tapes
Harcourt Brace, Inc.
Mary Ann Mendoza
Chad Raney,
Lone Star Music.com
Fisher-Rosemount Systems

Patrons: \$100-\$499

Michael & Lulu Abbott
Cody Allen, Austin Guitar
Town
Thomas C. Bailey
Paul Belanger
Tom & Vicki Belinoski
Ed Bergin
Denise Boudreaux
John & Sara Boyer
Elizabeth Bradshaw, Ginny's
Printing and Copying
Lisa Bruce
Alta Campbell
Bob & Nancy Cavendish
Kathie N. Cleveland
Joseph & Janice Collins
Carolyn Conn
Crockett Elementary
Horizons Group
Susan W. Darrow
Dawound Enterprises, Inc.
Elizabeth Denton
Tom & Teresa Duplissey

John Embry
Beth & Jon Erickson
Ray & Mary Margaret Farabee
John Farneti, Jr.
Alton & Dorothy Gattis
Doug Hanners
Johnny Harvey
Ray Hennig,
Heart of Texas Music
Kathleen Hudson, Texas
Heritage Music
Foundation
Kern & Becky Huff
Frank Josserand
Harris Kaffie
William "Skip" King
Jack Lane
Kathryn Ledbetter
David Lippman &
Christina Simpson
Ken & Patty Margerison
Tim & Jennifer Marlow
Eve McArthur
Michael Moeller
Kevin E. Mooney
Perry & Marianne Moore
Alan Munde
Dr. Joseph E. Musser
Bill & Patrice Nance
Julie & George Parker
Jim & Dianne Pape
Rick Perkins
Linda Porterfield

MUSIC HISTORY!

Nolan Porterfield
T. Cay Rowe & Tim Thomson
Curtis Schafer
Donald & Mary Bleve Shaw
Denise & Dennis Smart
Steve Stiles
Everett & Donna Swinney
Phi Alpha Theta History
Honor Society at Texas
State University-San Marcos
Philip & Leslie Tom
Ingrid Weigand & George Dolis
Bill & Kim Whitbeck
Dr. Raymond White

Carol J. Whitcraft
Joe & Lynn Williams
Larry York & Peggy Bradley
Christie Zander
Wayne Zatopeck

Friends:

Up to \$100

Tom Adler
Katheryn & Larry Anderson
Cynthia Beeman
Jay Brakefield
Paula Bosse
Sara Davis Boyer
Ramiro & Jewels Burr
Carol & Kay Burton
Kathie Cleveland

Antoinette Conroy
Jimmie & Teresa Criss
Joe & Ruth Dahlstrom
Mr & Mrs. William Damron
Virginia Z. Deal
Harry & Ellen Factor
Bob & Mary Fulton
Pam Golightly
Frank & Louise Hall
Dennis & Cash Hermes
R. C. Harshman
Kelly Harwood
L. Patrick Hughes
Rumaldo & Teresa Juarez
Carolynn Lankford
Nora Linares-Moeller
Clyde Littlefield

Robert Livingston
Mr. & Mrs. Ronald R. Newsom
Shirley Ogletree
Carolyn Pate
Michael Pierce
Hardeman Smyer
Joe & Alice Specht
Bryan Sperry
Steve Sucher in memory
of Tary Owens
Stan & Jan Tartakov
Cody & Elizabeth Vickers
James & Jane Wilson
Colin Wise
Larry Wolz
Mandy York



YES! I want to support the Center for Texas Music History with a tax-deductible gift that will help to preserve and study the Southwest's musical heritage.

Levels of Commitment (any amount appreciated):

☐ Founding 100 Members' Circle \$1,000 or more ☐ Associates \$500-999 ☐ Patrons \$100-499 ☐ Friends Up to \$100

Thank you for your support!

Name: _____ Address: _____
City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____
Telephone or e-mail: _____

Make check payable to: The Center for Texas Music History

My check is enclosed for: \$ _____

Please charge my:

☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard in the amount of: \$ _____

Card Number: _____ Exp.: _____

Signature: _____

Please clip or mail a photocopy of this section to:

The Center for Texas Music History
Department of History
Texas State University-San Marcos
601 University Drive
San Marcos, TX 78666-4616

**This issue of *The Journal of Texas Music History* is
dedicated in loving memory to Gary Briggs, from
his family and friends.**

*The Center for Texas Music History
also gratefully acknowledges*

*John & Robin Dickson
and Dickson Productions*

&

*The James E. Moore Endowment for
the Center for Texas Music History*


**for their generous support in helping to underwrite *The
Journal of Texas Music History* and our many other
educational programs.**

*Our sincerest thanks to the following members of the
music community for their generous support.*

Christine Albert & Chris Gage
American National Bank
Clifford Antone & Antone's Records
Bobby Arnold & Mark Erickson
at the Fire Station Studio
Denby Auble at Blue Corn Music
Austin Lounge Lizards
Marcia Ball
Cedryl Ballou & the Zydeco Trendsetters
Craig Barker
Bobby & Nancy Barnard
at Sundance Records
Ray Benson & Asleep at the Wheel
Clay Blaker & Neobilly Records
Ponty Bone
Denise Boudreaux
Ted & Linda Branson at Out of the Past
The Bob Bullock
Texas State History Museum
Adam Carroll
W.C. Clark & Vicky Moerbe
at Crossfire Productions
Slaid Cleaves
Harry Coffman and the Western Swing
Music Society of the Southwest
Conjunto Los Pinkys
Kevin Connor & Bryan Beck at KGSR-FM
Mike Daily & D Records
Bianca de Leon
Val Denn & Gigi Benno
at the Val Denn Agency
David Dennard at Dragon Street Records
Tommy Detamore
Michael Devers at Big 9 Management
Robin Devin at 36 D Management
John & Robin Dickson
at Dickson Productions
Kiran Dix
Ralph & Patti Dowling
Denise Dunn
Joe Ely
Emusic.com
Tracie Ferguson at Gruene Hall
Jenni Finlay & Paper Napkin Music
Kent Finlay at Cheatham Street Warehouse
Rosie Flores
The Nancy Fly Agency
Ruthie Foster & Cyd Cassone
Tom Frost III

Charlie Gallagher & Craig Hillis
Paul Paynter at the Gambrinus Company
Susan Gibson & Scott Melott
Eliza Gilkyson
Jimmie Dale Gilmore
Pat Green
Joel Guzmán, Sarah Fox, & Aztex
Butch Hancock
Debora Hanson
Terri Hendrix & Lloyd Maines
Ray Hennig
Gary & Tracy Herman
Caroline Herring
Dan Herrington at Dualtone Music Group
Sara Hickman
Tish Hinojosa & Marvin Dykhuis
Champ Hood
Judy & Ray Wylie Hubbard
Rondal Huckaby
Kathleen Hudson
at the Texas Heritage Music Foundation
Humanities Texas
Ken Irwin, Bill Nowlin, & Ellen Taintor
at Rounder Records
Michael Jarrett
Flaco Jiménez & Victoria Castillo
Lathan Johnson
at Bridge Entertainment Adam Kay
Kathleen & Robert Earl Keen
Rod Kennedy & Dalis Allen
at Kerrville Festivals, Inc.
Shelley King
Tai Kreidler, Curtis Peoples, & Andy
Wilkinson at Texas Tech University
John Kunz at Waterloo Records
Jimmy LaFave
Jim Lauderdale
Kitty Ledbetter
Bob Livingston
Vickie Lucero & Julie Carr
at the Propaganda Group
Houston Marchman
Barbara Martin
Grant Mazak at Mazak Music
Delbert McClinton
Booka & Edith Michel
at Loudhouse Records
Katy Moffatt
Casey Monahan at the Texas Music Office

Lisa & Roberta Morales
Wendy Morgan
Alan Munde & Joe Carr
Emilio Navaira
Jerry Naylor
Gary P. Nunn
Katheleen O'Keefe & Cody Braun
Jaime Oldaker
Gwil Owen
Tary Owens & Maryann Price
Roger Polson & Cash Edwards
Karen Poston
Toni Price
Mattson Rainer at KNBT-FM
Stewart Ramser at Texas Music magazine
Willis Alan Ramsey
Michele Ramshur
Chad Raney at Lone Star Music.com
Kimmie Rhodes
Slim Richey & Francie White
Step Rideau & the Zydeco Outlaws
Randy Rogers
Tom Roudebush at Wyldwood Studio
Pat & Seabo Rountree
Shake Russell & Dana Cooper
Tom Russell & Andrew Hardin
Chris Ryback
Benjamin Serrato & Los Jet Set
Billy Joe Shaver
Clay Shorkey at the Texas Music Museum
Larry Sloven at High Tone Records
George Strait & the Ace in the Hole Band
Sugar Hill Records
Marcelo Tafoya
Texas Heritage Songwriters Association
Texas Department of Agriculture
Kimiko Tokita at the Fitzgerald Hartley Co.
Lucky Tomblin
Django Walker
Susan & Jerry Jeff Walker
John Wheat at the Center for American
History at UT Austin
Bill Whitbeck & Rodney Hayden
Lavelle White
Bradley Jay Williams
Burton Wilson
Eddie Wilson
Jay Woods at New West Records
Danny Roy Young


A black and white portrait of Tary Owens, a man with dark, wavy hair and glasses, looking slightly to the left. He is wearing a patterned shirt over a dark t-shirt. A hand is visible on his shoulder, suggesting a close relationship. The background is blurred.

Sullivan: Tary Owens

**Tary Owens,
Texas Folklorist and Musician:
A Life Remembered**

Ruth K. Sullivan

Tary Owens and his wife Maryann Price at their home in Austin, March 2000.
Courtesy Ralph Barrera and the *Austin American-Statesman*.



Shortly after the death of Austin-based musician and folklorist Tary Owens on September 21, 2003, Brad Buchholz, writing for the Austin American-Statesman, remarked that, "Tary Owens devoted most of his life to music, though only rarely to his own. The greater mission, to Owens, was to champion the music of forgotten or unsung Texas bluesmen—to put their songs on records, to place them on a stage, to encourage a larger public to celebrate their artistry."¹

Owens began that mission in the 1960s, when he attended the University of Texas at Austin and studied with noted folklorists Américo Paredes and Roger Abrahams. Funded by a Lomax Foundation grant, Owens traveled around Texas recording a variety of folk musicians, including guitarists Mance Lipscomb, Freddie King, and Bill Neely, as well as barrelhouse piano players Robert Shaw and Roosevelt T. Williams, also known as the "Grey Ghost." Owens remained involved in the lives of these musicians for the next several decades and, in some cases, was largely responsible for helping rescue them from obscurity and resurrect their professional careers.

Tary Owens worked with a number of other important Texas artists throughout his life, including Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark, Kris Kristofferson, Johnny and Edgar Winter, and Janis Joplin, whom he befriended in high school in Port Arthur and remained close to until her death in 1970. Although Owens was a musician himself, he devoted most of his time and energy to preserving and promoting the music and the careers of others. Fortunately, because of his efforts to document a wide range of styles found throughout Texas, Owens has helped provide all of us with a much more complete understanding of the unique and complex musical heritage of the Lone Star State.

Tary Kelly Owens was born in Toledo, Ohio, on November 6, 1942, less than one year after the United States entered World War II. Shortly after Tary's birth, his father, Louis Owens, a farm boy from East Texas, was drafted into the U.S. Army and went to Georgia for basic training. Mary Charlotte Owens took her infant son and spent the next three years living in a variety of locales, beginning in Georgia close to the army post where Louis trained. After her husband shipped out to fight in the Pacific, Mary moved back and forth from Ohio to southern



A young Tary Owens

Illinois to live with her parents, Helen and John Kelly, then to Texas to stay with the Owens Family, and eventually back to Ohio. Before Louis's discharge from the service in 1946, Mary took Tary on train trips to visit his father at a variety of army bases where he was posted. These train rides form some of Owens's earliest memories and helped shape the direction of his adult life:

When I was first exposed to music, it was big band music on trains, riding trains during World War II, following my father around to various army bases... It seemed like every train had a band on it at the time. And I'd sing with the band, stuff like, "Cross the Alley from the Alamo"...my parents knew I loved singing and they got me enrolled when I was about three years old in a dancing and singing school in Toledo, Ohio.²

While his parents loved music, neither of them actually played a musical instrument. Both grandfathers, however, were accomplished musicians. Owens related the story of his family's musical heritage:

My Texas grandfather...played every stringed instrument there was and could also play organ, piano, and he had a mandocello, which is a pretty rare stringed instrument...He'd been a dance hall fiddler in the area of Athens and Murchison in East Texas. And apparently his father [also was a fiddle player]...the fiddling had been passed down for several generations of Owensens. They were fiddlers in North Carolina and Alabama and Texas...And one of my uncles played in the Light Crust Doughboys.³

As a teenager, Owens discovered rock and roll. Hearing Chuck Berry on the radio singing "Maybellene" fascinated Owens. "I'd never heard anything like that before, and it just took my total attention."⁴ However, it was Elvis Presley who had the biggest impact on Owens, as well as millions of other white teenagers, by blending together traditional "Anglo" music, especially country, with African-American musical styles. As music historian Joe Specht describes it, "Many white teens were already in tune with the rhythm and blues sounds that were in the air, but Elvis effortlessly mixed white hillbilly or country music with black R&B like no one before." Presley's style of music influenced many other performers, including Texas musicians and future Rock and Roll Hall of Famers Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison. As it turns out, Texas also had an important impact on Presley's career. During 1955, he made two hundred appearances in fifteen states, and, "At least eighty of these, or almost 40%, were in Texas." The tremendous popularity Presley gained in the Lone Star State at the beginning of his career helped propel him into the national spotlight. As Elvis himself later said, "I sorta got my start in Texas."⁵

In 1956, when Tary was only fourteen, the Owens Family moved to Beaumont, Texas. During World War II, Beaumont's crucial role in the booming Gulf Coast petrochemical industry had led to rapid population growth, as Americans from a variety of racial, ethnic, social, and cultural backgrounds flocked to the region. By the 1950s, Beaumont, along with the neighboring cities of Orange and Port Arthur, formed an area known as the "Golden Triangle" of the Upper Texas Gulf Coast.⁶ The unique combination of ethnic and cultural influences found in the Golden Triangle helped foster a complex and colorful musical environment, which would have a profound effect on Tary Owens and others of his generation, including Port Arthur native, Janis Joplin.⁷

As rich and diverse as the entire state's musical culture is, the Golden Triangle, where Tary and his family settled, is particularly eclectic. This area has been fertile ground for important developments in blues, country, Cajun, zydeco, rock

and roll, and many other genres. Although the eclectic ethnic makeup of the local community allowed Owens to broaden his musical horizons, the tumultuous racial dynamics of the South during the late 1950s also proved difficult for him to deal with. As he would later state:

In some ways coming to Texas was a move backward...because we were right in the middle of the...integration issue. I had gone to school in the North with black kids, not many, but there were one or two in most of the classes that I was in. And I didn't think much of it. But we got to Beaumont and I...rode the bus to school, and every street corner by the bus stands there would be black women, middle-aged black women wearing starched white outfits as maids or cooks. And they would be standing waiting for the bus and all the kids would be screaming obscenities at them out the window of the bus. It was just horrible.⁸

Owens was shocked by this kind of blatant racial prejudice and felt alienated from his peers. Although Louis Owens had been raised in Texas, Tary observed that "my father didn't have

knew he wasn't black, but all the music he played was "black" music...Of course, I loved it."¹¹

While living in Beaumont, Owens also met future blues guitar legend Johnny Winter and his brother Edgar, who had their own radio show on Saturday afternoons. According to Owens, the Winters were a "teenage kind of Everly Brothers band" and called themselves "Johnny and the Jammers." The three often had long, earnest discussions about blues music and R&B.¹²

In 1957, the Owens Family moved to Port Arthur, seventeen miles south of Beaumont. Port Arthur was largely a working-class community, in which nearly everyone's livelihood depended in one way or another on the oil refineries and petrochemical plants. As Owens observed, "Port Arthur was a rough town. If you went to school there, you were going to be challenged."¹³

For Owens, surviving in such surroundings required that he quickly find his own circle of like-minded friends. In September 1957, he enrolled at Thomas Jefferson High School, where he and a small group of classmates developed a bond that would last for the remainder of his life. His deep passion and wide-ranging appreciation for music practically guaranteed that Owens's cadre of friends also would be music enthusiasts. One such pal was Janis Joplin, who would become what some have

11

When I was first exposed to music, it was big band music on trains, riding trains during World War II, following my father around to various army bases...It seemed like every train had a band on it at the time.

an ounce of prejudice in him, and neither did my mother. I just hadn't been exposed to that intolerance and hatred and hostility."⁹

Despite having to grapple with the unfamiliar social environment in which he found himself, Owens did benefit from the diverse and prolific music scene around him. He listened to local radio and attended concerts by a variety of regional and national groups that performed in the Beaumont area. J.P. Richardson, later known as "The Big Bopper," was born in nearby Sabine Pass in 1932, and started his musical career as a disc jockey on Beaumont radio station KTRM.¹⁰ Years later, Owens acknowledged the impact that Richardson had on him:

'The Big Bopper,' J.P. Richardson, who at that time still hadn't recorded any songs of his own...was the afternoon, drive-time, school-time, 4-7 PM disc jockey and he mimicked a black man. Most people

called "the best white blues singer in American history" and "the greatest female singer in the history of rock 'n' roll."¹⁴ Although Joplin's meteoric rise to superstardom later separated her from many of her Texas friends, she and Tary stayed in contact until her death in 1970.

During his first year at Jefferson High, Owens and Joplin were in a social studies class together. He remembered that one of the topics which generated heated debate in the class was "the issue of integration and the issue of race, and Janis and I were the two 'nigger lovers' in the class. We started getting called that by the other kids...She and I became friends during that time; we were allies in the social studies class."¹⁵ Soon Owens and his friends discovered Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*, which fired their imaginations and made them long to be part of the "beat generation":

[We] wanted to be beatniks, but were just too young. I couldn't even grow a beard. We read books,

which was *verboden* in Port Arthur. And we were starting to listen to jazz, because by 1958, as far as I was concerned, rock and roll was over with. The Big Bopper, Buddy Holly, and [Ritchie] Valens were killed. Elvis got sent to the army...The rebellion part of rock and roll ended, and rock and roll was cleaned up, sanitized, and sounded like crap. So we started listening more and more to the black music. And that meant blues and jazz...I love them both equally.¹⁶

In addition to Janis Joplin, some of Tary Owens's other closest friends included Jim Langdon and Jack Smith. Langdon played trombone in the school band and also performed with local R&B and rock and roll bands.¹⁷ Jack Smith also was passionate about music, and Owens, Joplin, Langdon, and Smith frequented

None of us played anything but we all sang...Janis was just influenced by any female blues singer—Big Mama [Thornton] was one of the ones, but she was probably more influenced by Bessie Smith...Her first singing was at a jazz jam session in Beaumont that we went to where Jim Langdon was playing...It was basically a band of black jazz musicians who played R&B too and on Sundays they got together for jam sessions...And she got up and sang two Bessie Smith songs and got a really good response.²⁰

After graduating from Jefferson High in 1960, Owens started college at Lamar Tech (Lamar Institute of Technology) in Beaumont. Janis Joplin also enrolled at Lamar Tech, but as Tary admits, "None of us were very good students." It was at Lamar

We were starting to listen to jazz, because by 1958,
as far as I was concerned, rock and roll was over with.

12

the many honky tonks and juke joints scattered along the back roads throughout the Texas-Louisiana border region.¹⁸ Owens described their visits to the nearby night clubs:

That's where we all grew up in a place called The Big Oaks Club; another one called LuAnn's; another called Buster's; another called the Shady Grove...Buster's had country music. Luann's and the State Line had black R&B, rock and roll, and the Big Oaks had white bands doing rhythm and blues. And Jim Langdon was in those white big bands; also Johnny Winter—that's when I got reacquainted with Johnny. He was in this band that was called Jerry and the Counts. And the whole thing was being able to sound black. There [would be a singer who] could sing like Bobby Bland or Ray Charles...Lots of horns...and they always opened with jazz, playing jazz. That was a musical format that I haven't found since I left there.¹⁹

By the late 1950s, Owens and his friends had turned increasingly away from rock and roll and were devoting their attention almost entirely to more traditional folk, blues, and R&B:

We were listening to Leadbelly, Odetta; you know the folk revival of the...60s was coming on. And that was when Janis learned that she could sing—by singing Leadbelly and Odetta songs at our parties...

Tech that Owens enrolled in an English course about folklore. His research into folklore, and particularly folk ballads, piqued his interest in exploring and documenting folk music from an academic perspective. By 1962, Owens had decided to move to Austin and enroll at the University of Texas in order to study folk music.²¹

During the early 1960s, Austin was, in many ways, still a typical "college town," enhanced by the population of students from all over Texas, the United States, and the world. Life on the University of Texas campus generally revolved around course work, extracurricular activities, and for some students, a social life centered on sororities and fraternities. However, challenges to these established traditions were already fomenting in Austin when Tary Owens arrived in 1962. It was earlier that summer, while he was still living in Beaumont, that Owens had met John Clay and Bill Beckman, both University of Texas students. They invited Tary to Austin to visit them at their apartment complex near campus, known affectionately as "the Ghetto." Owens recalled some of the people he met there and the music he heard:

That weekend I heard Powell [St. John] and Lannie [Wiggins] play and was very impressed. Lannie had a Martin 017 and a banjo. He played both very well, finger picking and flat picking on the guitar. On banjo he could frail "old timey" style as well as three finger "Scruggs" style picking. He seemed to know all of Woody Guthrie's songs, as well as traditional ones like "Railroad Bill." Also, jug band

tunes like the Memphis Jug Band's "Stealin'" and Leadbelly's "Goin' Up That Mississippi River." I had never heard anyone play traditional music so well. Lannie had a huge influence on me and I vowed to learn to play like him...John and Powell were the first hipster songwriters [in Austin] who wrote traditional style.²²

Later in the summer, Owens left the Beaumont-Port Arthur area for good and moved to Austin to join his new friends at the Ghetto, a few blocks from the university. While he arrived with few college credits, his interest in folklore had grown substantially because of the English courses he had taken at Lamar Tech:

I first got interested in folk music before I came to Austin...I was taking an English course from Dr. Frank Abernathy at Lamar Tech in Beaumont...he had been an officer in the Folklore Society and...was a folklore nut. I ended up taking my freshman English from him. We talked about folk music—collecting folk music, finding it and the people that were doing the old songs.²³

The Ghetto soon became a hotbed of musical activity for Owens and his friends. As University of Texas art major, Powell St. John, a long-time Ghetto resident and harmonica player recalls:

By this time (the summer of 1962), I was heavily involved in the folk music revival that was our generation's version of goldfish swallowing and raccoon coats. Janis Joplin was a frequent visitor to the Ghetto, and she and Lannie Wiggins, a hot guitar and banjo picker...and I had worked up a set of material and were having great fun picking and singing and drinking beer every night in the back yard. Tary and Langdon were jazz fans. Langdon was an accomplished trombone player and...Tary was on the scene and now he was playing guitar...I guess, getting into the music that was really hip at the time.²⁴

Owens, and some other Ghetto residents took part regularly in the Thursday night "folksings" at the university's Student Union building. These were open to anyone who wanted to sing and play or just listen. Author Barry Shank, who discusses the development of 1960s Austin music in his book, *Dissonant Identities*, suggests that the students who participated in these weekly folksings were looking for ways to differentiate themselves "from the student body represented by fraternities,

sororities, and football players." The Ghetto crowd, including Owens, Joplin, and the others "latched onto the singing of traditional folk songs as a way of actively demonstrating their difference—their 'beatnik' or 'proto-hippie' status."²⁵ Owens remembered these gatherings with his friends and described the folksings as the forerunner of the folk music scene in Austin:

All sorts of people would come to the folksing... We started the organization for traditional music—that's what we called it; we didn't use the word folk. We started putting on concerts in the Union, not the ballroom, the Union Theater, at the north end of the building; there was a movie theater and auditorium. It's still there...Michael Nesmith, from San Antonio (later a member of the pop group, The Monkees)...well he had a trio, a folk trio that imitated the Kingston Trio. He brought his trio up to Austin to play at the folksing. I think they were expecting to bowl everybody over; we were not Kingston Trio fans at all. As far as we were concerned, that was old history. They were not well received.²⁶

Soon, Owens and others from the folksings, most specifically the Ghetto crowd, found out about another gathering of musicians and singers every Wednesday night at Kenneth Threadgill's bar on North Lamar Boulevard in Austin. Owens and his friends heard that Threadgill could sing like Jimmie Rodgers and had a jukebox filled with records by Rodgers and Hank Williams.²⁷

By the time Owens and his friends discovered Threadgill's, it was a well-established destination for a diverse group of music patrons. In some ways, Kenneth Threadgill's personal history is similar to that of Owens. Threadgill was born on September 12, 1909, in Peniel, Texas, northeast of Dallas. His family eventually moved to Beaumont, however, and as a young man, Threadgill worked at the Tivoli Theater where Jimmie Rodgers, the man later dubbed the "Father of Country Music," performed. The young Threadgill, who had practiced imitating Rodgers's distinctive singing and yodeling style, was able to meet his idol backstage and impressed him with his own yodeling skills.

In 1933, Threadgill moved to Austin and began working at an old service station located at 6416 North Lamar Boulevard. In December of that same year, he bought the place and converted it into a tavern with a restaurant, gas station, and an area in which he and other performers could sing and play. Taking advantage of the recent repeal of Prohibition, Threadgill applied for and received the first beer license in Austin. He and his wife, Mildred, ran the venue for the next four decades, closing only for a brief time during World War II. Although



Kenneth Threadgill and the Hootenanny Hoots, 1971. Courtesy Burton Wilson.

the club could seat only about forty-five customers, the place was usually packed on weekends when Threadgill and his band, the Hootenanny Hoots, played. Wednesday nights became the designated time “for university students and local residents to congregate for beer, country music, yodeling, and the ‘Alabama Jubilee,’ the song that would usually get Threadgill to dance his patented shuffle.” Those Wednesday night gatherings attracted a diverse group made up of “goat ropers, university Greeks, hippies, and average Joes,” who mixed together to enjoy the music and camaraderie.²⁸

Other students from the University of Texas had discovered Threadgill’s around 1959 and had become regular performers at the Wednesday night gatherings. Among these older students was Bill Malone, whose dissertation on the history of country music would evolve into the groundbreaking book, *Country Music U.S.A.*, which is still considered by many historians to be the most comprehensive scholarly study of country music. Others included Stan Alexander, an English graduate student who studied traditional folk songs and ballads, Willie Benson, a psychology major and bluegrass guitarist, and Ed Mellon, who played mandolin in the style of Bill Monroe, the so-called

“Father” of bluegrass. Malone, Alexander, Benson, and Mellon had been playing weekly at Threadgill’s for years before Owens and his friends first visited the establishment.²⁹

Meanwhile, back at the Ghetto, Powell St. John on harmonica, Lannie Wiggins on guitar and banjo, and Janis Joplin on auto-harp and vocals, had started performing together as the Waller Creek Boys. Along with Owens and others, they began going to Threadgill’s to take part in the Wednesday night music gatherings. As Owens recalled, “Kenneth [Threadgill] not only welcomed all of us and treated us like his children, [but] encouraged us to play.”³⁰ Owens agreed that these Wednesday night performances attracted a diverse group of patrons. “The Threadgill’s music scene was like a coming together of the rednecks and, they weren’t hippies yet, the pre-hippie hipsters, I guess. All three places were our scene—Threadgill’s, the Ghetto, and the folksing.”³¹

Though not yet a student in 1962, Tary Owens often hung out on campus at the “Chuck Wagon” and attended the folksings in the Student Union, where he befriended a variety of students, including Gilbert Shelton, Tony Bell, Lieuen Adkins, and Bill Helmer, who were on the staff of *The Texas Ranger*, the campus

humor magazine. Owens also met his first wife, Madeleine Peppel (now Villatoro) at the Chuck Wagon before he enrolled as a student. Madeleine recounted those college days:

My mother had wanted me to be in a sorority. I was very shy and [that was] not my thing at all...I had gotten out of the sorority and there was a whole group of people that were meeting in the Chuck Wagon...that's where I first met Tary...And that's where there were a lot of young people who were counter-culture...they were outsiders in a way... [Tary] was writing some poetry. I don't know that he was actually writing songs. He was already familiar, I guess, because of Janis's interest in Appalachian music, folk music, and ballads...that's the kind of old ballads [that] Tary would sing...I got pregnant very soon after we got to know each other [in 1963]. Our son [Willie] was born in April of 1964...once we were married and he was taking the courses...we were spending all of our money on records. He was accumulating all the music—the blues. He was really getting into that; buying a lot of the blues music.³²

Owens formally enrolled at the University of Texas in 1963. He knew that he loved Madeleine and believed that he should get married and go back to school in order to support his new family:

[I decided] I'll go back to school and get a real job and quit this beatnik life. I never quit the beatnik life, but I did get a job at the Austin State Hospital as an attendant...that's what they called the people who took care of the mentally ill...I worked on the 11 to 7 shift at night...I worked there for three years while I enrolled, got myself back into UT. I went to summer school one summer to get my grades up... and once I got in, I went straight through for the next three years. [I] worked at the state hospital and participated in the Threadgill's band every Wednesday night and participated in the growing underground scene that grew out of the Ghetto.³³

Drugs became an important part of the counter-culture movement in Austin and elsewhere throughout America during the 1960s. Because many of them were using illegal drugs, Owens and his friends knew that the Ghetto was under police surveillance and that they all faced the possibility of being arrested. Owens commented on the widespread use of drugs at the Ghetto:

We smoked pot, but it was hard to get. You had to go over to the east side and buy it from black jazz

musicians. Even best friends at the Ghetto would not tell each other that they smoked pot. Everyone was that paranoid about it. They were doing it privately, but we did start peyote there. Peyote, at the time, was legal. You could get peyote buttons at the Hudson's Cactus Farm in Leander for a nickel a bud...My first trip to Austin I took peyote. That became part of everyone's experience...And it was a very spiritual experience; it was very intense. [In Beaumont] well, we smoked grass; I had my first grass—I got it from Janis. She got it in Mexico, on a trip to Mexico. There were a lot of drugs around [Beaumont], but we weren't part of the drug scene there, except for smoking pot...Not very much pot at all. The drugs started in Austin.³⁴

Owens moved out of the Ghetto in 1963 and into a house on 32nd Street, right across from Burton Wilson, a well-known Austin photographer. When Madeleine Peppel first met Owens, he was living there, but after the marriage, they moved to a new location:

We lived by the campus; it was 22nd and Pearl Street...an old stucco, two-story building that had apartments...it cost like \$50 a month. And down the hall was Tommy Hall...And next door was Gilbert Shelton, Tony Bell, and they were...doing the *Ranger* humor magazine. And, Gilbert had a piano there, and I can remember that Maria Muldar came, at one time, and played there. They had a party, and she played.³⁵

Once Owens enrolled at the University of Texas, he registered for classes in folklore taught within the English department by Drs. Américo Paredes and Roger Abrahams. The University already had a strong tradition of folklore scholarship established by such celebrated faculty members as J. Frank Dobie and John Henry Faulk. The fact that Paredes had recorded Mexican-American folk music during the 1950s, and Abrahams had a 1961 recording on the Prestige label, impressed Owens and inspired him to follow in their footsteps.³⁷

The first folklore class Owens took was an introductory course taught by Paredes. The students' first assignment was to find a selection of folklore, bring it to class for discussion, and then write a paper about it. Owens used material he had found earlier during his class with Dr. Frank Abernathy at Lamar Tech:

That was the first folklore...I had collected. I'd listened to an East Texas man singing, "Black-Jack David"...which is one of the oldest ballads going back to England and France. It used to be the "Raggle,

Taggery Gypsies, Oh,” and “Gypsy Davey” and lots of different variances...the East Texas version of it was “Black-Jack David.” [This song] is one of the Childe [ballads] and very well documented...very popular in England and Ireland.³⁸

Paredes was quite taken with the song, and he was impressed by Owens’s writing and his keen interest in the whole process of folklore. Owens found Paredes to be a superb teacher and mentor, as well as someone with his own fascinating story, who had been a folklore “subject” before he became a scholar and educator.³⁹

Born in Brownsville, Texas on September 3, 1915, Américo Paredes experienced first-hand the border tensions and violence that followed the 1910 Mexican Revolution, as well as the ethnic bias and discrimination aimed at Mexican Americans. He attended public schools, worked a variety of jobs to help support his family, and during summer vacations often took ranch jobs and “listened to corridos, folk tales, and oral traditions recounted by border ‘Mexicanos’ around the campfire.” All of these were influences he would eventually incorporate into his own poetry and prose. Along the way he also learned to play guitar and sing. After graduation from high school in 1934, Paredes enrolled at Brownsville Junior College, worked for the *Brownsville Herald* as a staff writer, and submitted his poetry to *La Prensa*, a San Antonio newspaper. His first book of poetry, *Cantos de Adolescencia*, was published in 1936. Paredes continued writing for the *Herald*, and he worked for Pan American Airways prior to his enlistment as a U. S. Army infantryman in 1944.⁴⁰

During the 1940s, Paredes met Texas folklorist and author William A. Owens, who was traveling throughout the state collecting regional folk songs as part of his job with the Extension Division of the University of Texas. Owens recorded Paredes singing some of the songs of the Texas-Mexico border region. The songs and stories Owens gathered on this trip eventually became his University of Iowa doctoral dissertation, published in 1950 as *Texas Folksongs*.⁴¹

This meeting with William Owens sparked Paredes’s interest in learning more about the ballads and folklore of the Mexican border. After his discharge from the service and several years working overseas for the Red Cross, Paredes enrolled at the University of Texas intent on fulfilling his dream of becoming an English professor. He completed his undergraduate degree in one year, his M.A. in English and folklore within two years, and, by 1956, had received his doctorate. After one year of teaching at Texas Western College in El Paso, Paredes returned to Austin and accepted a tenure-track professorship at the University of Texas, teaching folklore and creative writing. His doctoral dissertation on the legendary Tejano figure, Gregorio Cortez, was published in 1958 under the title of *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and its Hero*. The book was an immediate

success and brought Paredes widespread recognition. *Folktales of Mexico*, published in 1970, and his 1976 work, *A Texas Mexican Cancionero: Folksongs of the Lower Border*, soon solidified his reputation as a first-rate folklorist of the American Southwest.⁴²

By the time Tary Owens enrolled at the university, Paredes was established within the Department of English as the up-and-coming expert on folklore. He had become, as Owens observed, “the spokesman for Mexican culture” on campus. Paredes was involved in “not only defending Mexican culture, but telling it like it is about the border skirmishes and the border conflict–culture conflicts.” He challenged the scholarship of such venerable professors as Walter Prescott Webb and J. Frank Dobie, who told the story of the American Southwest from a decidedly Anglo perspective. As Owens remarked, “Paredes was giving the other side of the story. It says something about all three men–Paredes, Webb, and Dobie–that they were able to disagree in their writing but get along socially...They were able to accommodate each other and all three lived out and finished their careers at UT.”⁴³

Within a short time after Tary Owens began his course work in folklore, Paredes and Abrahams informed him about a grant from the Lomax Foundation that was available to students in folklore studies. The foundation was named for John Lomax, the famous American folklorist and one of the founders of the Texas Folklore Society. Lomax was two years old when his parents moved from Mississippi in 1869 to a farm located on a branch of the Chisholm Trail in Bosque County, Texas. He spent his youth listening to the ballads and folksongs sung by local cowboys and, while still a young man, began to write down the songs he heard. Collecting western ballads and other folksongs continued as his life’s work.

During the 1930s, John Lomax, with his son Alan as his assistant, traveled throughout the South and Southwest making field recordings of local musicians. Their travels included trips into prisons to record the “spirituals” and work songs of the black inmates. While not the first folklorists to use a recording machine, “The Lomaxes employed superior technology, recorded far more widely, and embraced the recording medium with more passion than previous collectors.” The Lomaxes are credited with “discovering” the now-legendary blues singer-songwriter Huddie Ledbetter (better known as Leadbelly) at Angola prison in Louisiana. After his release in 1934, the Lomaxes worked to help promote Leadbelly’s career and preserve his musical legacy. Despite their important contributions to Leadbelly’s professional success, some scholars, including Benjamin Filene, point to the negative consequences of his relationship with the father and son team of folklorists:

[The Lomaxes] realized that if they wanted Lead Belly to achieve mainstream popularity his very

incompatibility with mainstream society was his greatest asset. This realization led the Lomaxes to manipulate not only Lead Belly's image but also his music...[his] commercial strength depended on the perception that his songs were "pure folk." But...audiences would not necessarily appreciate [Leadbelly's] style unadulterated. So...the Lomaxes encouraged him to make his singing more accessible to urban [white] audiences.⁴⁴

The manipulation of Leadbelly's music and appearance also included John Lomax's exercising firm control over the revenues Leadbelly received for concert appearances and recordings, which led to tensions between the two men. Despite these problems, Filene describes John and Alan Lomax as "the most spectacularly successful and innovative folk song-collecting team of the twentieth century."⁴⁵ Their lifelong dedication to preserving the wide variety of American folk music is reflected in archived Lomax collections,

Some of the prisoners that [the Lomaxes] recorded didn't get out. One in particular was there thirty years later and I recorded him. He was seventy some years old...just a minor criminal, minor burglary, but for some reason they just kept him in prison, and I don't know why, because he wasn't a violent man...And...[Dave] Tippen is on those first [Lomax] recordings, and he's one of the major people that I recorded thirty years later.⁴⁸

Owens recorded a variety of traditional worksongs and spirituals sung by the inmates at the Huntsville prison units, including oral narratives called "toasts," a format that Owens's mentor Roger Abrahams knew well. Abrahams's doctoral dissertation, from the University of Pennsylvania, was published as *Deep Down in the Jungle: Black American Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia*. It contained a collection and commentary

Using Texas prisons as one base for research, Owens made a trip to Huntsville, Texas, in August 1965, and recorded the songs and story telling of a variety of prison inmates.

housed at numerous institutions, including the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas and the Archive of Folksong at the Library of Congress.⁴⁶

Once Owens expressed his interest in the Lomax grant, Abrahams and Paredes assisted him in the application process. The foundation's goal in awarding these grants was to fund the gathering of field recordings similar to those done by John and Alan Lomax during the 1930s. Although the grants were usually given to graduate students, and Owens was still an undergraduate, he discovered that the University had no graduate students pursuing a major in folklore studies. The foundation ultimately awarded Owens a stipend of \$500 to pursue his topic, "The Folk Music of Central Texas." He purchased a \$150 professional quality microphone and spent the remainder on a reel-to-reel tape recorder. As Owens continued course work toward a degree in English and anthropology, he also traveled around the state to record the folk musicians he found.⁴⁷

Over the next several years, Owens recorded some of the same musicians the Lomaxes had documented during the 1930s. Using Texas prisons as one base for research, Owens made a trip to Huntsville, Texas, in August 1965, and recorded the songs and story telling of a variety of prison inmates. At the Wynne Farm unit, Owens interviewed and recorded black inmate Dave Tippen, a prisoner the Lomaxes had visited three decades earlier:

on these African-American folk tales. As Abrahams explained:

The toast is a narrative poem that is recited often in a theatrical manner...Toasts are often long, lasting anywhere from two to ten minutes. They conform to a general but by no means binding framing pattern. This consists of some sort of picturesque or exciting introduction, action alternating with dialogue (because the action is usually a struggle between two people or animals), and a twist ending of some sort, either a quip, an ironic comment, or a brag...Toasts are not sung, and it is perhaps the lack of reliance on the structure of a tune that allows their freedom of form.⁴⁹

Owens recorded many such toasts during his sessions with Texas prisoners, including one poem, "Signifying Monkey," which Abrahams analyzed in his book.

While at the Texas prison units, Owens also recorded the songs of Mexican-American inmates, including some instrumental tunes and others with Spanish lyrics. In addition, he recorded such Anglo-American folk songs as "Froggie Went a Courtin'" and "Comin' Round the Mountain." In some cases the inmates sang *acapella*, although they also had guitars, a variety

of rhythm instruments, and even snare drums and accordions. During the two days Owens spent at the Texas prison units, he recorded approximately one hundred songs, along with other material, the bulk of which documented the music of the black inmates.⁵⁰

In his quest to document regional folk music, Owens visited many other locations, as well. In August 1965, he attended the annual fiddle contest in Burnet, Texas, and recorded numerous musicians in what was then the third year of the event. Contestants included eighty-six year old M.T. Mitchell from Akemy, Texas, champion fiddler Benny Thompson from Dallas, who won the competition in 1965, and eleven year old Eddie Davis from Grand Prairie. Louis Franklin and his twelve-year-old son Larry were also competitors. Owens commented on that recording session:

Burnet, Texas, was hosting the world's champion old-time fiddling contest. I recorded that whole event. The players are now all legends. The Franklin Family were a family of fiddlers and they were all champions at one time or another. Louis Franklin was the current champion then in '63 or '64 when I recorded him...and the twelve year old son had entered the contest and he is now the number one fiddle player in Nashville.⁵¹

Another musician that Owens recorded was Bill Neely, whom Owens had met at Threadgills. Neely was a country blues guitarist who moved to Austin in 1949, became friends with Kenneth Threadgill, and began playing at the bar regularly. Neely and Threadgill shared a mutual admiration for Jimmie Rodgers, and often performed his material. Owens recorded Neely with Powell St. John on backup harmonica and John Moyer playing bass. Owens described Neely as one of Austin's first singer-songwriters and the first to write about drug addiction. While Neely did not drink, smoke, or do drugs, he wrote songs about the hard life he had seen growing up during the Depression. Also included in his repertoire were cowboy ballads, popular tunes of the day, and standard blues numbers by such black performers as Blind Lemon Jefferson, from Couchman, Texas. Owens admired Neely's authenticity and his guitar-playing skills. "Bill was one of my guitar teachers, one of my mentors. And I played with him for years in the Threadgill band."⁵²

Although the field research accomplished with the Lomax grant included a variety of Texas musical genres, Owens focused mainly on black blues artists. To some degree, Owens followed in the recording footsteps of the Lomaxes, but he also discovered some important "new" talent. Teodar Jackson (pronounced Teole), a black blues fiddler from the St. John's district in Austin, was one such performer, as were fiddlers Tommy Wright

from Luling, and Oscar Nelson from Cameron, accompanied on guitar by his brother Newton. As Owens recalls :

[These players] were...key to the fact that blues was probably first played in Texas on fiddle and the first musicians, the first black musicians, that played for dances and things were fiddlers. Lightnin' Hopkins's...father was a fiddle player. The fiddle tradition was dying off. The last three people that I know of that played, black people that played the fiddle, except for Gatemouth Brown who's always played it, were Tommy Wright, who I recorded, and Teodar, and the Nelson Brothers.⁵³

Another influential black musician that Owens documented was guitarist and singer Mance Lipscomb, born in Navasota, Texas, in 1895. Lipscomb, whose father played fiddle, received a guitar from his mother when he was only eleven. He soon began accompanying his father at dances and Saturday night socials. While Lipscomb had contact with a variety of other well-known musicians, he did not record his own music until the 1960s, when he was "discovered" by two white researchers, Chris Strachwitz and Mack McCormick, who recorded Lipscomb for San Francisco-based Arhoolie Records.⁵⁴ Owens also included Lipscomb as part of his field study, recording him in Navasota in August 1963 and at several other sessions in 1965, sometimes pairing Lipscomb with other musicians, including Teodar Jackson on fiddle.⁵⁵

Two other Texas musicians whom Owens recorded in the 1960s were "barrelhouse" piano players Robert Shaw and Roosevelt T. Williams, also known as the "Grey Ghost." The barrelhouse piano style, also known as "boogie woogie," is named for the venues in which the sound developed. It was in the lumber camps and sawmills of East Texas at the beginning of the twentieth century that owners built makeshift bars, or "barrel houses," in order to serve the thirsty lumberjacks. Since these bars were made from long planks placed on top of beer and whiskey barrels, the taverns became known as "barrelhouses." Typically, a barrelhouse included a dance floor and a piano placed on a raised platform. "Because the barrelhouses were crowded and noisy, piano players had to develop a hard-driving, rocking rhythm that was loud enough to be heard throughout the tavern. The music they created was an up-tempo, rollicking piano style called 'barrelhouse,' 'fast Texas blues,' or 'boogie woogie,' which was rooted in the basic twelve-bar blues progression, but also included the livelier syncopated flourishes of ragtime and a strong, repeating bass line that helped make it highly danceable."⁵⁶

Both Robert Shaw and Roosevelt Williams were self-taught piano players, who played in a variety of bars throughout Texas, eventually making Austin their home. Mack McCormick



Mance Lipscomb, 1967. Courtesy Burton Wilson.

produced one of Shaw's albums, *Texas Barrelhouse Piano*, in 1963 on the Almanac Book and Recording Company label.⁵⁷ The Grey Ghost had made no commercial records, but he had been included in the field recordings completed by William A. Owens in the 1940s.⁵⁸

Other music in Tary Owens's field work included the Freddie King band and jazz recordings completed in October 1965 at the Austin venue, Charlie's Playhouse. Owens also traveled to San Antonio in March 1966 to record Blues Wallace, billed as a one man band. At the Andrus Studios in Houston, Owens recorded several of his musician-songwriter friends from Austin performing original material, including Bob Brown, Ed Guinn, Powell St. John, Wali Stopher, Minor Wilson, and Gary White. While most of the recordings were completed in Texas, Owens did travel to New Orleans to interview and document the music of dobro player Babe Stovall, someone Owens first heard about while recording in Texas prisons. One other notable recording in the field collection is an interview Owens conducted in Houston during the summer of 1965 with his maternal grandfather, John Holly Kelly. The interview concerned Kelly's recollections of his

days as a band drummer on a Mississippi riverboat during the early 1900s.⁵⁹

In addition to making many field recordings, Owens also produced concerts at the Student Union when he first enrolled at the University of Texas. This was part of his larger effort to network with a wide range of musicians and to stay involved in the local music scene. As his former wife, Madeleine Villatoro, recalled:

[Tary] was always out to the clubs and...I was a stay at home, you have to stay home when you have a child, anyway. But I think he was always cultivating his music—finding the people and knowing what was going on in the music scene. Tary was bringing musicians to come and play in Austin at that time too. He actually organized a blues [festival]; he got the musicians he'd found in East Austin to play at the campus.⁶⁰

The first show included musicians Mance Lipscomb, Robert Shaw, and Teodar Jackson. Lipscomb and Shaw were well-

known performers, but this was Jackson's first time to play before a white audience.⁶¹

In addition to organizing concerts, working toward his degree, and pursuing field work for the grant, Owens took a job during his junior and senior years running the recently launched University Folklore and Oral History Archives. Years later, Owens remembered what an impression it made on him to be given such an important position:

[The University of Texas] sent me up to the University of Indiana to study their folklore archives, how to run a folklore archive...[and the University of Texas] they hired me to be the archivist...[This was] really an honor because I was an undergraduate and here I had...an office in Parnam Hall and a secretary and a phone. And I was in charge of the folklore archives for twenty hours a week while I was finishing my degree.⁶²

With an assistant to help him, Owens set about cataloging a variety of folklore materials, including collections from Américo

they had visited for a few weeks during the previous summer, lived in the area called Haight-Ashbury, a focal point for the burgeoning hippie "counter-culture" movement.⁶⁴

Leaders of the counter-culture movement had already declared 1967 to be the "Summer of Love" in San Francisco. Indeed thousands of people from all over the world converged on the city during that summer for music festivals, speeches, anti-war rallies, poetry readings, and "human be-ins." The events that took place in San Francisco that summer would epitomize the spirit of the counter-culture movement and serve as one of the emblematic high points of the 1960s. Ironically, Tary Owens, who had spent most of his life in the rather socially-conservative South and Midwest, suddenly found himself at the epicenter of a cultural revolution that would forever change America and the world.⁶⁵

Another pair of friends that the Owenses knew from Austin were now living just north of San Francisco in the coastal town of Gualala. Since this couple also had a small child, Madeleine and Willie stayed with them through the summer, while Tary remained in San Francisco with Minor Wilson and his wife and tried to find paying jobs for the Southern Flyers. By summer's

In addition to organizing concerts, working toward his degree, and pursuing field work for the grant, Owens took a job during his junior and senior years running the recently launched University Folklore and Oral History Archives.

Paredes. While Owens did manage to catalog part of his own field recordings before he graduated in 1967, he discovered several years later that some of his material was not archived properly, particularly the oral interviews. Fortunately, he had made backup copies that he retained as part of his personal collection.⁶³

After completing his undergraduate coursework in English and anthropology, Owens chose not to enroll in graduate school. He enjoyed the folklore work but wanted to see what he could do with his own musical career. He had organized a five-member band called the Southern Flyers, which included singer Angela Strehli, two guitarists, a drummer, and Owens singing and playing bass. When he suggested that the band make a move to California to pursue "fame and fortune," three of the members, including Strehli, agreed. In the summer of 1967, Tary and Madeleine Owens, along with their young son Willie, headed west in a new car pulling a small trailer packed with everything they owned. Although they had no idea where they would stay, they did have a few friends from Austin already living in the San Francisco area. Minor Wilson and his wife Mary Ann had a flat on Beaver Street and, of course, Janis Joplin, whom

end, Madeleine and Willie moved into the Wilson's flat on Beaver Street in San Francisco where Tary had been staying. There were several other people living there by then, including former Austinite and Ghetto resident Powell St. John. Eventually the Wilsons moved out, and the Owenses took over the lease. Ultimately the house became home to many of their friends and a sort of "way station" for the comings and goings of many young people who migrated to San Francisco.⁶⁶

Owens had almost no luck finding paying gigs for the Southern Flyers, so the band soon dissolved. Some of the members returned to Texas, but the Owenses would remain in San Francisco for nearly eight years, while Tary continued to pursue a music career. He organized another group, the Pure Funk Rock Band, which included Peter Auschlin on drums and guitarists Jamie Howell and Stan Portyes.⁶⁷ Owens also hung out with a growing number of Texas musicians who had relocated to the San Francisco area, including Boz Scaggs, Doug Sahm, and Mother Earth, featuring Tracy Nelson.⁶⁸

The dynamic music scene in and around San Francisco during the late 1960s owed much to the creative vision and

talent of producer and promoter, Chet Helms, whom Tary Owens knew from Austin. Helms was born in Santa Maria, California, in 1942, but, when he was nine years old, moved to Texas with his mother and two brothers following the death of their father. Helms attended the University of Texas, where he befriended Owens, Janis Joplin, and the other Ghetto regulars, but dropped out in 1962 and moved back to California, settling in San Francisco. Drawing on the local music scene, Helms put together informal jam sessions, from which the band Big Brother and the Holding Company evolved. In 1963, Helms made a brief trip back to Austin and persuaded Joplin to come out to San Francisco. He promised her that he would help promote her musical career, later making her the lead singer for Big Brother and the Holding Company.⁶⁹

Chet Helms also owned the Avalon Ballroom, located in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. The Avalon hosted several of the most popular “psychedelic” rock bands of the 1960s, including the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Country Joe & the Fish, and Big Brother and the Holding Company. Fortunately, for Tary and Madeleine Owens, who had almost no money, Helms helped them get into many musical events for free.⁷⁰

The communal living situation at the house on Beaver Street

care of Willie. Tary did the cooking for Madeleine during this time and generally helped out during her recovery. Madeleine came to realize, however, that their life style and marriage were not working out:

That was kind of like the turning point for me, as far as the whole drug scene. I think I realized that this was over for me. [If Tary] had other girlfriends, he never let me in on that. He never mistreated me; it was just the free love time...And I think, by that time, the alcohol was an issue, but I never knew that it was. And as far as the drug thing—we never thought of it as being addicted...the heroin I knew to stay away from, but I think Tary, because he was around so many people, he just succumbed to it. And I think that was really the thing that caused our marriage to break up.⁷²

At that time Madeleine was not aware of how serious her husband’s addictions to alcohol and drugs had become. Tary himself was in denial. By 1969, Madeleine had fallen in love with another man, which she believes was in some respects a

21

Tary Owens became increasingly involved with drugs. Hanging around with Janis Joplin and her friends, he started snorting heroin and eventually injecting.

eventually came to an end in 1969 when a fire and explosion put all the residents out on the street. Madeleine recounted the experience and the subsequent move to another residence:

I remember someone knocking on the door and saying “Wake up, the house is on fire,” and we all just piled out and went across the street...the firemen came and we heard an explosion and the whole back side of the house blew off...of course we didn’t have a place to live anymore...Tary wasn’t there either that night. He was over in Berkeley. I don’t know if he was playing music or seeing music, but he wasn’t there. Or he may have gone to Texas for all I know...I remember we got moved to this other place [on 23rd Street] and of course he didn’t know.⁷¹

Shortly after the move to 23rd Street, Madeleine became physically rundown and was eventually diagnosed with pneumonia. The doctor suggested at least three months of bed rest, which she accomplished with the help of a friend who took

way to get out of a situation she did not know how to control. Ultimately, Madeleine obtained a divorce from Tary in absentia, because he had temporarily gone to Texas and could not be located to be served divorce papers.⁷³

Back in California following the divorce, Tary Owens became increasingly involved with drugs. Hanging around with Janis Joplin and her friends, he started snorting heroin and eventually injecting it. Ironically, Joplin, a heroin user herself, tried to discourage Owens from using the drug, but he was already on his way to an addiction he could not control. Owens remembered that the last time he saw Joplin alive in the summer of 1970 was at a party at her house in San Francisco:

Kris Kristofferson was there. It was right before our high school reunion in Port Arthur, and Janis offered to pay my way to go with her. But I was strung out, afraid to go. I knew Janis could buy her way out of any trouble down there, but I couldn’t. I don’t think I ever saw her again after that, though we did talk on the phone many more times.⁷⁴

Owens could not remember exactly where he was on October 4, 1970, the day Joplin died from a heroin overdose, but even her tragic death could not convince him to quit drugs. “I was so into my downward thing that I didn’t feel a lot of pain about it. By that time, I was feeling so hopeless that there was no jolt that could stop me.”⁷⁵

Not long after Joplin’s death, Owens came back to Austin for a while, bunking with friends. In 1971, he made a trip to Navasota in East Texas to visit his friend, bluesman Mance Lipscomb. In need of money and high on drugs, Owens stole a guitar given to Lipscomb by the Gibson Company. The theft

didn’t think he had the right to live longer than Hank Williams...a few years later he put out what I think is his best album, for Tomato Records; it was a double, “The Late Great Townes Van Zandt.” [That] was 15 years before he died.⁷⁸

Owens was closer friends with Guy Clark during those Houston days, in part because Clark and Owens’s friend, Minor Wilson, owned a local guitar repair shop during the 1970s. Although born in West Texas, Guy Clark had based himself in Houston for a while and played regularly at a club called Jesters,

Owens could not remember exactly where he was on October 4, 1970, the day Joplin died from a heroin overdose, but even her tragic death could not convince him to quit drugs.

landed Owens in jail for seven weeks in the East Texas town of Anderson, where he was forced to kick the heroin habit “cold turkey.” Owens remembers that as a terrible time, filled with hallucinations and seizures. Despite the difficulties of kicking heroin, Owens did emerge from jail clean and sober, at least for a brief time. He quickly left for Houston to look for work and to try and get back into the music scene.⁷⁶

Owens found a job as music editor and distribution manager for *The Space City News*, a small alternative newspaper in Houston. Hanging out in various live music venues around Houston, Owens became friends with several Texas musicians who frequented these clubs. He was also hired to play at one particular place, the Old Quarter, a folk club on Congress Avenue:

Townes [Van Zandt], it was kind of his home away from home. It was run by Rex Bell...and...just about any weekend night you would hear Guy Clark or Townes or any of the people that are now...followers of Townes and Guy. And I played there pretty regularly, as well. We had some times going up on the roof of the place. There were a lot of drugs then.⁷⁷

Owens met Townes Van Zandt for the first time in Austin in the early 1960s. By the early 1970s, Van Zandt was living in Houston part-time while not on tour. Owens remembered that Van Zandt had just come back to town and promptly overdosed on heroin. Owens saw him for the first time in Houston when he went to visit Van Zandt in the hospital:

[The doctors] had knocked out his front tooth to get a breathing tube down him...he did everything he could to die before he was twenty-nine. He

located on Westheimer Boulevard. Owens recalled the Houston music scene at the time:

[Jesters] that’s where I played my first gig in Houston, opening for John Denver when he was first getting started. He’d just left the Chad Mitchell Trio and was just going out on his own. He’d just changed his name from Dusseldorf to Denver...there was that whole folk scene in Texas—Michael Murphy, Segle Fry—they had a band called the Dallas Jug Band. It was one of the first folk groups in Texas...there was the Cellar in Fort Worth...it was a place to play for all of us. My first paid gig [had been] at the Cellar in San Antonio in 1962.⁷⁹

By the fall of 1972, Tary Owens was back in Austin. One of the jobs he took during this time was staging rock and roll concerts to publicize George McGovern’s presidential campaign. Although he admits that drug use has hindered his ability to recall the details of that period, Owens believes that he met future president Bill Clinton, who worked on McGovern’s campaign in Texas, and that Clinton possibly hired Owens to produce some concerts.⁸⁰

Over the next several years, Owens moved around the country. He lived again in California for a while, both in San Francisco and in Lake Tahoe, where he worked as a bartender for the Hyatt Hotel. He organized a band there, called the TK Owens Blues Band, but he mainly made his living from bartending:

My first bartending job was at Lake Tahoe. My girlfriend in San Francisco was a blues guitarist herself, named Debbie Olcesi, a Sicilian name. She

had a band named Ascension, all women...she and I were engaged to get married...and she had an uncle that was the beverage manager for the Hyatt Hotel system...She came to Texas with me when I came back in 1976, but she didn't stay. I had a serious drug problem that got in the way of everything.⁸¹

Owens moved to Denton, Texas, where he lived for about three years from 1976 until 1979, working at Timatao's, a Mexican restaurant owned by his brothers Ben and Tim Owens. Tary organized a band called Living Proof, which provided some income, and he also played at a several clubs in Fort Worth, including the Bluebird Lounge, owned by Texas blues artist, Robert Ealey. Owens would occasionally sit in with a Fort Worth band, the Juke Jumpers, headed by Sumter Bruton, guitarist Stephen Bruton's older brother.⁸²

By 1979, Owens decided to leave Texas, believing that he needed a change of environment in one of his attempts to go straight and kick his drug habit. His friend from Port Arthur, Jim Langdon, lived in New Orleans and worked as a journalist with the *Times-Picayune*. Langdon remembered the phone conversation with Owens about relocating to New Orleans:

[I told Tary] if you're looking for a change of environment in order to stay straight, this is the last place on earth you should come...Tary already had a drug history—a significant one. All those friends in San Francisco...[Tary] was absolutely... on the bottom of their list, because he had stolen things from people...I had no personal experience with any of that, but I had heard from friends that I trusted and believed that indeed he had done all of these things. I found it hard to believe, but I knew they weren't lying about it...[I decided that] I'd give him a chance.⁸³

Langdon's roommate also agreed to let Owens come live with them in New Orleans. "So he came and moved in. We had a room for him and didn't require any rent initially," Langdon recalled. Before too long, Owens got in touch with Dr. Bill Malone, formerly a fellow musician at Threadgill's in Austin and now a professor at Tulane University in New Orleans. Langdon recounted that time:

[Malone] was putting on some kind of program at Tulane, doing some kind of folk talk and singing and hired Tary to play with him. So I thought that was terrific that he had already found a connection there and was actually going to pick up a few bucks. So it made me think it was going to go alright. Then one

night, I think it was the night after the concert, he didn't come home. And we didn't see him for two or three days... [Tary] fell off the wagon big time.⁸⁴

A very angry Langdon demanded that Owens move out after they caught him trying to steal the roommate's wallet. "I guess that's the closest I ever came to killing anybody in my life," Langdon recalled, and added that, "I didn't have any contact with Tary for years after that incident." Owens lived in New Orleans for another year, supporting himself by playing in a band called the Radiators. Judy Ryan, a girlfriend from his Denton days, came to live with Owens in New Orleans during part of that year, but by 1980 Owens had made the decision to return to Texas.⁸⁵

The nearly twenty years of drug and alcohol abuse had taken their toll on Owens's health, both physical and mental, and clearly on his personal relationships. Owens could no longer deny that his substance abuse was out of control. Years later, he reflected on that period in his life. "There was a long time that I didn't care if I lived or died. I think I would have even welcomed death. It meant the end, the end of pain. But something finally came to me—that I didn't want to die like that. I didn't want to drown in a dumpster."⁸⁶ Following a long period of deep soul-searching and a realization of just how far down he had come, Owens decided to seek professional help to get clean and sober once and for all.

By the time Tary Owens returned to Texas in the early 1980s, he had decided that he needed to seek professional help in order to end his addiction to alcohol and drugs. Owens began treatment for addiction at the state hospital in Wichita Falls before returning to Austin in 1982, where he continued to recover. For Owens, part of his effort to stay clean and sober would involve working as a drug and alcohol counselor himself after he earned his Licensed Chemical Dependency Counselor degree at Austin Community College. Although Austin already had several Alcoholics Anonymous groups, it had no Narcotics Anonymous organizations, so Owens helped form the first such group.⁸⁷

Over the next several years, Owens also pursued certification as an HIV counselor. He was a founding member of the A.I.D.S. Committee for the National Association of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors, and he chaired the A.I.D.S. Task Force for the Texas Association of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors from 1989-1991. As chairman of the Texas task force, Owens worked to develop a standard HIV curriculum for chemical dependency counselors in the state. He traveled throughout Texas and the nation giving presentations at professional conferences and for health related organizations, including the Center for Disease Control, the Betty Ford Center, the Texas Department of Health, and the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse. In 1988, Owens took a position as Outreach Supervisor



Roosevelt T. Williams, 'The Grey Ghost,' and his dog Mike. Courtesy Clay Shorkey and the Texas Music Museum.

for C.A.R.E., a community-based agency that provides HIV and drug and alcohol prevention, education, and counseling to high-risk populations within Travis County. As a recovering alcoholic and drug abuser himself, Owens could speak from personal experience, as he worked with addicts at public and private treatment centers, jails, and other agencies.⁸⁸

The various counseling jobs Owens took provided a steady income and helped reinforce his own commitment to staying sober. His brother Tim reflected on what Tary's recovery meant to the Owens Family and to Tary's friends:

[After] Tary got into the right program...[he] never really got back into the despair of being a junkie... When he got his one year pin, he came to Houston and gave it to my Dad. And...that's when my Dad stopped drinking. If Tary can do it, Dad said he'd do it, too...[and Tary] went back and apologized

to everybody. He re-established contact through the 12-step program. He wasn't ever able to make financial restitution. Most of the cost was on himself. He hurt himself more than he hurt anyone else. Do what you can. Not everyone is going to forgive you, but in most cases people did forgive Tary.⁸⁹

Owens knew that drinking and drugs had hindered his success in the music business. However, as he began the long road to recovery in 1983, he was focused on staying drug and alcohol-free and paid little attention to musical matters. I "started my life again and I didn't think about the music or the recordings I'd made." That would change in 1986, when Owens wandered into the Barker Texas History Center, now known as the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas-Austin. It was there that he toured an exhibit titled, "From Lemon to Lightnin': Texas Blues," which featured several of the

recordings Owens had made in the 1960s, including those of barrelhouse piano player Roosevelt T. Williams, also known as the Grey Ghost.⁹⁰

Born in Bastrop, Texas, on December 7, 1903, Roosevelt Williams spent his youth in Taylor, which was a major cotton and rail shipping center during the early 1900s. As a young man, Williams attended school and worked in the cotton fields by day. At night, he was drawn to the music he heard coming from the local juke joints, which, at the time, he was too young to enter. Williams absorbed a variety of musical influences and spent many hours at the home of a friend who owned a piano, “picking out melodies he’d heard, teaching himself everything he’d ever need to know. The cross-pollination of African-American, Mexican, Anglo, German, Czech, and French traditions found throughout the Lone Star State contributed to the unique musical style which the Grey Ghost would later call his own.”⁹¹

From the 1920s to the 1940s, Williams lived a nomadic lifestyle, riding freight trains around Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. He followed the cotton harvests, entertaining black migrant workers and performing at house parties, medicine shows, carnivals, juke joints, and barrelhouses. Because his playing style reflected the influence of jazz greats such as Charlie Dillard, Earl “Fatha” Hines, and Count Basie, some people referred to Williams as the “Thelonius Monk of blues players.” It was his habit of appearing, as if from nowhere, to perform and then disappearing just as suddenly that earned Williams the nickname “Grey Ghost.” By the late 1940s, Williams had settled in Austin, taking a job as a bus driver for the Austin Independent School District, which he held until his retirement in 1965. During those years, he continued to play at local clubs, such as Fat Green’s and the legendary Victory Grill, a “showplace for blues players” in East Austin.⁹²

Owens had first heard about the Grey Ghost and several other Austin-area musicians during the mid-1960s from barrelhouse piano player, Robert Shaw, whom Owens met through the Texas Union Folk Series concerts at the University of Texas. When Owens’s friends Mack McCormick and Chris Strachwitz launched Arhoolie Records in 1960, Shaw’s recordings were some of the first that the fledgling label released. Owens recalled how Shaw would later provide valuable assistance in his field research:

Mr. Shaw was really gracious to me, and he was my first source of musicians to go to...He gave me several names of piano players and guitar players and other musicians...[He] gave me an introduction into that whole community...He also led me to Lavada Durst, [who] recorded gospel songs and had written one big gospel music hit in the 50s called, “Let’s Talk About Jesus,” that was a million seller

in the gospel field. And [Shaw] gave me...names of other musicians...like Boot Walden, Baby Dotson who were piano players who’d passed on. And he said, now...there’s Grey Ghost [and] he gave me Ghost’s address...Grey Ghost was a real exciting find for me, because he had a huge repertoire.⁹³

Owens was thrilled to find Grey Ghost featured in the 1986 music exhibit, along with some of the other musicians with whom he had recorded twenty years earlier. As Owens said:

There was another folklorist in between the Lomaxes and me...[In the 1940s, William A. Owens] recorded this itinerant piano player, the Grey Ghost, and then I recorded him again in 1965... at this exhibit they had one whole display of the Grey Ghost...[but] they thought he was dead...I knew he was alive...I had seen him in Austin on the street. And so I decided I wanted to find him and let him see this exhibit...[see] that his music was being preserved, and that he was considered important.⁹⁴

Finding Grey Ghost turned out to be the easy part. He lived right next door to where he had stayed in the 1960s when Owens first met him, a home on East 11th Street near Interstate-35. However, Williams had no interest in going to the exhibit at the Barker Center. According to Owens, Grey Ghost, then in his eighties, said, “I’m sick and I’m tired and you know my life—that’s all over and in the past. I don’t want to talk about it.”⁹⁵

Knowing that the exhibit would not be at the Barker Center indefinitely, Owens refused to give up on Williams. As Owens later recalled, “after going day after day after day, I finally...and mostly I think to get rid of me, [Williams] agreed to go with me.” According to Owens the visit to the exhibit turned out to be gratifying for Grey Ghost after all:

We went across [the highway] to the Barker History Center and saw [the exhibit] and he was just astounded...He kind of vaguely remembered recording and vaguely remembered me...but he never thought anything of it...I wanted him to hear his own music; it was real exciting. And it was real exciting for everybody there for him to be rediscovered...the Texas Music Museum folks wanted him to play in a concert right away.⁹⁶

Heartened by the enthusiasm and recognition of his music that the exhibit generated, Williams agreed to allow Owens to book several concerts for him. Owens recounted the events:

25

He was eighty-four years old at the time, and he did two or three concerts, and it looked like he was going to have another career going again...He started playing, and I was his manager and traveled with him. We went to New Orleans to the jazz festival, the Chicago Blues Festival... out to San Francisco, played all over. He wouldn't get on an airplane...[So] anywhere we could go either in the car or by train, we traveled [there].⁹⁷

For Owens, this venture back into the music business included fulfilling his long-held dream of owning a record company. In 1987, Owens partnered with his son, Willie Owens, and an old friend, Julie Howell, to found Catfish Records, which would specialize in Texas and Southern music. Owens resurrected the field recordings he had made of Williams back in the 1960s and produced Catfish Record's first release, *The Grey Ghost*. The album spanned Grey Ghost's career from the 1920s to the 1980s and included a variety of styles, ranging from barrelhouse piano and minstrel music to pop and jazz, all of which reflected

Bowser and T.D. Bell, both native Texas bluesmen who had met while working in the West Texas oilfields during the late 1940s. With Bowser on piano and Bell on guitar, the two began playing together at nightclubs in West Texas and New Mexico. By the 1950s, they had moved to Austin, renewed their musical partnership, and frequently performed with the Grey Ghost, playing at such local venues as the Club Petit, Charlie's Playhouse, and the Victory Grill, owned by Johnny Holmes.⁹⁹

Holmes, a musician, booking agent, and band manager, "opened the Victory Grill on 'Victory over Japan' Day in 1945 as a restaurant and bar for black soldiers returning from the war. In the segregated South of the 1940s, these servicemen could not walk into just any place to have a beer." The East Austin club soon became a well-known venue for Texas blues, rhythm and blues, and jazz performers, as well as national touring acts, including Ike and Tina Turner, James Brown, Billie Holiday, B.B. King, Chuck Berry, and a young Janis Joplin. Located at 1104 East 11th Street, the club was on the "Chitlin' Circuit," a network of African-American clubs throughout the South in which black musicians could perform without fear of racial

On October 16, 1998, the Victory Grill was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

Williams's wide-ranging talent and eclectic musical sensibilities. Although Williams had been playing piano since he was a teenager and performing for most of his life, this 1987 Catfish Records release was his first commercial recording.⁹⁸

From his relationship with Williams, Owens soon found additional opportunities to record and manage other musicians from throughout Central Texas. Before long, Owens released more recordings on the Catfish label, including some by Erbie

discrimination. During the Victory Grill's heyday of the 1950s and 1960s, music fans representing all races packed into the club. As one East Austin resident observed, "The street was so crowded you could barely walk. It was like New Orleans."¹⁰⁰

By the 1970s, Holmes closed the nightclub portion of the Victory Grill because of declining attendance and the general deterioration of the East Austin neighborhood. Two main factors contributed to this decline. Many affluent blacks moved to the suburbs as integration promoted more social mobility. Desegregation also opened the doors to black performers at formerly all-white venues and the need for a "Chitlin' Circuit" ceased to exist. As Owens began to work with many of the blues musicians who had performed at the Victory Grill, he wanted to bring attention not only to their music, but also to the importance of the club in Texas music history. In the summer of 1987 and coinciding with the state holiday, "Juneteenth" (which honors the June 19, 1865 emancipation of slaves in Texas), Owens staged the "Texas Blues Reunion" at the Victory Grill. The event brought musicians and fans together for a music-filled weekend. This historic Austin "juke joint" closed for a period of time after a 1988 fire damaged part of the structure. Various fundraisers and restoration efforts over the years finally resulted in its reopening in 1996. On October 16, 1998, the Victory Grill was added to the National Register of Historic Places.¹⁰¹



Robert Shaw, 1971. Courtesy Burton Wilson.



The Victory Grill in Austin, circa 1945. Courtesy Tary Owens and the Texas Music Museum.

Over the next several years, Tary Owens continued his work in addiction counseling, but he also remained involved with music promotion, production, and management. The second release for Catfish Records in 1989, *Texas Piano Professors*, spotlighted the talents of three Austin barrelhouse piano players and long-time friends—Ernie Bowser, Lavada Durst, and Grey Ghost.¹⁰² Lavada Durst, a native of Austin, was born on January 9, 1913. Like many musicians of his generation, he taught himself to play piano, and “became a master at playing 1930s and 1940s ‘barrelhouse’ blues.” Hired by Austin’s KVVU radio in 1948, Durst, aka “Dr. Hepcat,” became the first black disc jockey in Texas. In 1955, he was inducted into “the unofficial Rock Radio Hall of Fame.”¹⁰³ Owens also produced Alfred “Snuff” Johnson, an Austin-based country blues guitarist and long-time friend of the “Piano Professors.”¹⁰⁴ Owens always tried to make sure that the musicians who recorded for him were paid well. Although many black artists had been exploited by the recording industry, Owens had a different ethic:

When I started managing [Grey Ghost] I made sure that he got good money on everything that came out on the market under his name. Got him \$5,000 for that first album, which is \$4,000 above market value at that time. Most musicians were getting paid \$1,000 to do a record...got him \$5,000 for the next record, too...that was Ernie and him [Grey Ghost] and Lavada Durst...each of them got \$5,000 for [*Texas Piano Professors*].¹⁰⁵

Because of his close ties to Janis Joplin and his participation in the evolving Austin music scene of the 1960s, journalists

and film producers frequently sought out Owens for his first-hand perspective on that era. Such was the case when two of his friends, Martha Hertzog and Paul Congo, asked Owens to be a consultant on some documentary films they were producing about the Austin blues scene. Owens eventually became their partner and co-producer on three documentary films. One hour-long film, *A Tribute to Robert Shaw*, was produced in 1986 for the Black Arts Alliance of Austin. Another film documented the 1989 “Texas Blues Reunion” gathering at the Victory Grill, an event that Owens had produced. The third documentary focused on Grey Ghost, although only a rough copy of the video was ever completed.¹⁰⁶

The years Owens had spent addicted to alcohol and drugs certainly took a toll on his professional career and his personal life, resulting in failed marriages and many strained relationships. However, all of this began to change in the mid-1980s, as Owens conquered his addictions and started a successful career in the music business. His life took another positive turn in the early 1990s, when a mutual friend introduced Owens to Maryann Price, a Rhode Island-born singer and musician who moved to Austin in 1988. Price and her friend Chris O’Connell were singing at an Austin farmer’s market one Saturday morning, and Owens happened to be there shopping. According to Price, “he was shopping for bananas, no it was tomatoes. And he got a tomato alright—it was me!” The two had first crossed paths in California in the late 1960s while both were living in San Francisco. Price sang with a popular West Coast band, Dan Hicks and His Hot Licks. She recalled her time in California:

I didn’t go out there until 1969. I was too late for everything. I sang at the “Summer of Love” reunion

with Dan Hicks and Naomi [Eisenberg]...when I got there, the Haight was all boarded up; I mean all the little coffee shops and the head shops were all like these Texas towns. It looked like downtown Shamrock. Nothing happening. Clapboard all over the windows and the stores. And I thought, I didn't come out here for this. But then the 1970s really needed help musically. And I'm glad I was there to give it a little infusion from Las Vegas.¹⁰⁷

While living in San Francisco, Owens had seen Price perform. When the couple was introduced, he knew who she was, but Price did not remember Owens:

[Tary] had heard recordings that we were making, because there was a pretty big splash with the Hot Licks. We were on the cover of the *Rolling Stone*... twice or three times...a lot of people really loved that band and still do...Tary knew of me from that. Now I of him, I didn't know the name, but when he would tell me the bands that he played in...I recognized the names of the bands.¹⁰⁸

Having mutual interests, talents, and friends, Owens and Price soon began their relationship, which was tested early on. Price recalled that "Tary and I were just getting together in 1993, maybe 1994 at the latest. And so we took a trip in the car, which is the ultimate test—four cylinders, and Tary, and me, and the car." They drove up the East Coast through the Carolinas, Virginia, and Maryland, where Price spent many summers as a young girl. They were heading to Maine where Price's mother lived, but they stopped in New York City so Owens could visit his friend, Myra Friedman. Friedman was the author of *Buried Alive: The Intimate Biography of Janis Joplin*, for which Owens had contributed background information. After several days in Maine, Owens and Price drove to Montréal, Canada, and then south through Michigan to Grand Tower, Illinois, where Owens spent his early years. Price remembered the trip:

We both showed each other where we were brought up...It was a very nice way to get started with the relationship. I saw all of Grand Tower from the house that he lived in...the guy that [now] lived there...had found a marble in the backyard that had been one of Tary's rare marbles...And he gave this marble to Tary...so Tary was thrilled by that. And then we camped out near there. Very romantic...had a great time.¹⁰⁹

As they crossed back into Texas, Owens decided to stop in Crockett, where they roamed into an antique store and learned

that it had once been the Jolly Joy Club, a popular blues venue. Owens asked the lady running the store if there were any musicians still around the Crockett area. According to Owens she said, "Well, there's Frank Robinson, and there's Reverend Cooper, but he...plays Christian music now, and then there's Ervin Charles...and [Curtis] Guitar Colter." Delighted to still be "discovering" veteran Texas blues players as late as the 1990s, Owens decided to try and meet some of these local musicians.¹¹⁰ For Price, conducting field studies, stopping to research the local music scene, and searching out musicians was a totally new experience. She remembered that first trip to Crockett:

So we pulled in and I said, oh look, a junk store...So we walked in, and I know Tary was dragging his feet a little behind me. There was a black woman sitting at the cashier desk there. And he kind of brightened up when he saw that black people ran it. And while I was over looking [around]...he's up at the front talking with the black woman...I could hear him talking, "Ma'am do you know of any musicians that play locally, here at Crockett, that you might tell us about?"...And she started rattling off these names...This was a treasure trove. We had walked into this place...that had turned out [to be] this jewelry box full of goodies.¹¹¹

Before they left Crockett that day, Owens and Price went over to Frank Robinson's house, introduced themselves, and sat down for a visit with the musician and his wife. As it turned out, Robinson was the nephew of famed Texas guitarist, Lightnin' Hopkins. On subsequent trips to Crockett, Owens persuaded Robinson, Colter, and Charles to come to Austin for a recording session, which resulted in the 1997 album, *Deep East Texas Blues*. Price remembered that Robinson and the other musicians who recorded the album were very suspicious at first:

They came down here, but they couldn't believe that they were finally going to be on a record. This was like heaven to them. Best thing that ever happened to them. Tary Owens—one of the white guys that they thought might cheat them. [They recorded] here in Austin at the old Lone Star Studios where Tary was a partner at the time, and man this was a real studio with glass...Jim Watts engineered it; I was there...[and] I played brushes on several of the tunes with Frank.¹¹³

Sometime after Owens and Price began their relationship, they purchased a house in East Austin located on the banks of the Colorado River. The large brick house had plenty of room for the musical instruments, recording equipment, assorted memorabilia, and archival materials that the two of them

had accumulated during their lengthy careers. A large porch stretched across the entire back length of the house where they could sit and look out at the river. Part of the appeal of this location for Owens was how much the place reminded him of his boyhood days growing up in Illinois along the banks of the Mississippi River. The couple married on May 17, 1997, at a ceremony held in their backyard, with friends and family there for the festivities. The Reverend Slim Richey, also a musician, officiated at the wedding.¹¹⁴

Their East Austin home became a gathering place for an annual party of Owens's old friends from the Ghetto days of the 1960s, along with music colleagues and other Austin friends the couple had met over the years. With Price's assistance, Owens continued his work helping drug addicts. "We were both involved in recovery," Owens said, "helping other musicians get over drugs and alcohol; and I became the guy to look up if somebody was a musician and had a problem. Maryann and I were the people who could help them get help."¹¹⁵ During this time Owens and Price opened their home to many musicians and artists seeking "a place of sanctuary and peace."¹¹⁶

Owens and Price continued to pursue their separate musical careers, but they also sometimes performed together as Mary

of Long John Hunter, Phillip Walker, Lonnie Brooks, and Ervin Charles. Another 1999 release, a self-produced sampler album, *Catfish, Carp & Diamonds: 35 Years of Texas Blues*, contained a selection of some of the best of Owens's 1960s field recordings.¹²⁰ Owens once compared those field recordings to the carp, a fish not generally appreciated by Americans, but highly prized in other parts of the world. "Much of the music I've recorded is like that," he said. "It's not going to make the Top 40. But it's music that is real and true, and speaks to the human heart."¹²¹ Yet another historical compilation album, *Ruff Stuff: The Roots of Texas Blues Guitar*, featured, among other artists, the music of Owens's guitar mentors Mance Lipscomb and Bill Neely.

Jonathan Foose, a production partner of Owens, assisted on some of these releases, as well as on the recordings of such diverse musicians as San Antonio violin virtuoso, Sebastian Campesi, and bluesman, Long John Hunter. Foose commented on Owens's work as a record producer. "Tary's talent, his spark—he could find people, dig them out of the woodwork. He would try anything in the studio." Foose observed that Owens brought together the very best musicians for studio work, combining instrumentation in very inventive ways.¹²³ Through all of the recordings Owens produced, he not only documented the

29

Their East Austin home became a gathering place for an annual party of Owens's old friends from the Ghetto days of the 1960s.

and Tary. Price's vocal techniques blend "western swing, jazz, studio pop and boogie-woogie" exhibiting the wide range of her talent. Following her stint with Dan Hicks out in California, Price moved to England in 1973 and sang with the Kinks for one year.¹¹⁷ Moving back to the United States, she toured for some time as a vocalist with Ray Benson's western swing band, Asleep at the Wheel. After settling in Austin, Price performed at local venues and other music events around the country. She also gave private voice lessons in her home. Although Owens's musical style and background differed from Price's, the two drew on each other's strengths. "We've both been inducted into the Texas Music Hall of Fame," said Owens. "We're the only couple, and we were nominated completely separately. It wasn't anything we did together that got us into the Hall of Fame...totally separate careers, but now we're [performing] together."¹¹⁸

Throughout the 1990s, Owens continued recording and managing the careers of many of the blues musicians he had met through his connections with Grey Ghost, as well as from his own ongoing search for "forgotten" roots musicians. Over the years Owens "produced about thirty to forty CDs of all kinds of blues and Texas music in general."¹¹⁹ One such record was the critically-acclaimed 1999 release, *Lone Star Shootout*, showcasing the talents

music of these artists but also helped revive their performing careers by getting them booked at concerts and festivals across North America and Europe.¹²⁴

Part of managing the careers of these musicians involved helping them gain wider public recognition for their artistry. To that end, Owens booked them into music clubs in Austin and throughout the country. In addition to the various blues festivals in Texas, such as the East Texas Blues Festival held every summer in Navasota, Owens booked concerts for some of these Texas artists at Carnegie Hall in New York City and at a variety of European festivals. Owens recalled the international tours:

The first year over there was...1992, I guess. I took T.D. and Erbie over there as a duo. And then came back the next year with them and their big band. And then subsequent trips with Frank Robinson and Guitar Curtis. [And] Snuff [Johnson] went over there. [Grey Ghost never went and]...neither did Lavada Durst. [Grey Ghost]...wouldn't fly. They would have loved him over there...The last time I went to Europe...was in 1999...I went over with Blues Boy Hubbard and the Jets and...with Spot Barnett and

Doug Sahm...I took [Sahm] to Europe on the last trip...He died later that year [in November].¹²⁵

Tim Owens remembered his brother's traveling around the United States and to Europe and remarked that, "Tary got a lot out of it and those old guys got a ton out of it. It was the highlight of their whole lives to go to Europe to play for blues festivals or Carnegie Hall. And then as those people's health failed, Tary was kind of the care giver, [particularly] for the Ghost."¹²⁶

The relationship Tary Owens had with the Grey Ghost was more than simply as a professional music manager and producer. From 1986, when Owens reintroduced himself to Williams at the old musician's home on East 11th Street, until Grey Ghost's death on July 19, 1996, their relationship grew increasingly close. Owens said, "I took care of him like he was my grandfather for the rest of his life."¹²⁷ He helped launch the Grey Ghost on a whole new career by arranging concert performances, traveling with him around the country to music festivals, producing his records, and helping manage his finances. Price commented on her husband's relationship with Grey Ghost:

Tary started to create booking dates, music jobs for him. Asked him if he wanted to play at Antone's happy hour, or the Continental Club—he got a gig [there] every single Monday night for years...He celebrated his last birthday at the Continental...Tary...made sure that the owner of the Continental understood who this man was and what a treasure he is; [the club owner] hired him...[for every] single week until [Grey Ghost] went into the nursing home.¹²⁸

During the filming of the Grey Ghost documentary, Owens drove the musician all around Central Texas to the locales that were part of the pianist's life—Bastrop, Taylor, Waco, Smithville, and Luling—a few of the places Grey Ghost had lived and performed. In many of the small towns around Austin, people still remembered hearing him play at nearby clubs or community centers. According to Owens, some locals remarked, "That Grey Ghost, he was a live wire in this town!"¹²⁹ Although some of the people Owens interviewed had been too young to go into the clubs, they had eagerly listened from outside, just to hear the Grey Ghost perform.¹³⁰

As he came to know the full story of the Grey Ghost's life, Owens discovered that Williams had always made part, if not most of his money, at jobs other than music. That fact became abundantly clear about a year and a half before Grey Ghost died. As the old man's health began to fail, Owens took control of medical care. In the spring of 1995, Williams became seriously ill with uremic poisoning, so Owens took him to the emergency room at Austin's Seton Hospital. Owens remembered the event:

I was getting him checked in, and I started hearing a bellowing voice, "Mr. Owens back here... Where's Mr. Owens?"...I was out front doing the paperwork. I came back. "Mr. Owens, they've taken my pants and everything. You need to take this for me." And he handed me all these wads of rolled up \$20s and \$100s...it amounted to \$14,000 in his pockets. And he wanted me to take that...and go to his house and there's more there...altogether it was \$68,000...I know he'd made good money with me, but he didn't make that kind of money...He ended up making Maryann his banker.¹³¹

As it turned out, Williams had worked at many jobs during his lifetime and lived in part off of his retirement from the Austin ISD. However, he also had made a lot of money from gambling and running gambling shacks. Owens and Price would use the Grey Ghost's earnings to help care for him during his final years. When Williams could no longer live on his own, the couple chose a nursing home, Heritage Park, located on Martin Luther King, Jr., Boulevard in East Austin, where Grey Ghost lived for the remainder of his life. Owens and Price had selected this particular nursing home, in part, because it had a grand piano. Ever the entertainer, Grey Ghost sat down and played at the piano only two days before he died.¹³² Williams had left instructions to be cremated and his ashes to be scattered by Owens in an undisclosed location.¹³³

By the late 1990s, Owens was facing serious health issues of his own. He had been diagnosed with a combination of ailments, including diabetes, hepatitis C, and Parkinson's disease. Even as early as his 1994 cross-country trip with Price, Owens was showing symptoms of diabetes and was placed on an oral medication. Price remembered how Owens struggled with his illness on that trip:

Tary had depression at that time because of the diabetes...I had no idea, and neither did he, that diabetes can really strongly affect the mood... maybe there's a connection with the serotonin or something, but there's a real problem with that... during the trip we were falling in love with each other and I was on cloud nine. I'd finally met this man...he was a great balance for me and a great intellect...and we had a wonderful time. One day when we took a ferry...it was a beautiful day and he was crying...[the doctors] only had him on the pills...the pills weren't cutting it, obviously. But we made the best of it...I loved him a lot and told him I would help him in any way that I could.¹³⁴



31

Tary Owens, circa 1990. Courtesy Tary Owens and the Texas Music Museum.

Because of the combination of serious ailments that had developed, Owens's treatment became quite expensive. By 1999, his medical expenses had placed a severe strain on the family finances. In order to help defray these costs, "an all-star lineup of leading Austin and Texas musicians" played a benefit concert, "Texas Music for Tary," at Antone's nightclub in December of that year. The fundraiser provided "the Austin music community and fans and friends of Texas music the chance to recognize and assist a key figure in the promotion and preservation of Texas music and its proud heritage."¹³⁵ Longtime friends and musicians, including Lucinda Williams, Jimmie Vaughan, Joe Ely, Marcia Ball, Lou Ann Barton, W.C. Clark, Paul Ray, and Toni Price came out to raise money for Owens's medical and living expenses.¹³⁶

Hospitalized in 2000, Tary Owens came close to death. While in the hospital, Owens called Brad Buchholz, a staff writer for the *Austin American-Statesman*. According to Buchholz:

I remember [Tary] calling me from the hospital, in 2000 or 2001, thinking he was dying. It was the most amazing experience. He told me he finally scattered Grey Ghost's ashes—not because he wanted to, but because he was afraid he might die and leave the job undone. He'd kept the ashes in his home so many years.¹³⁷

Despite his numerous ailments, Owens persevered. Relying on a combination of Western medicine and Eastern herbal remedies, Owens slowly regained his strength and saw himself on the way to recovery in 2001. "The hepatitis C is gone. I still have it, but I've been taking Chinese herbs from a Chinese doctor... My liver functions are normal. My diabetes is under control. Parkinson's disease is gone. Nothing short of miraculous."¹³⁸

Once Owens regained his health, he wanted to get back to recording and performing and, as he stated, "I want to do the things that I either didn't get a chance to do or finish."¹³⁹ Always ready to give support to the Texas music industry, Owens served on the board of the Texas Music Office, headed by Casey Monahan, a long-time friend of Owens. Based in the Governor's Office, the Texas Music Office provides information about the state's growing music industry and helps promote Texas music throughout the world.¹⁴⁰ In 2001, Owens completed a project important to the preservation of Texas music history:

I took all those recordings, those tape recordings from the '60s that were all getting pretty old... We digitized it all, transferred it all onto...DAT, which is digital audio tape...another digital format...I've got them on both, so it's all preserved for another fifteen to twenty years until a new format [becomes available].¹⁴¹

During 2002, Owens recorded at least three CDs for other musicians, including one for an artist named Mary Lisa.¹⁴² In spring 2002, Owens also released the first recording of his own music with his band, the Texas Redemptors. The aptly titled release, *Milagros (Miracles)*, celebrated Owens's near miraculous recovery. Joe Nick Patoski, a music writer and longtime friend of Owens, wrote the album's liner notes and described the music. "Part slow belly rubbing romance, part field holler and blues lament, part church revival, and a whole lot of hootenanny and house party, this is what the Texas Redemptors are made of, never mind the technical details." Nine of the fourteen tracks on the CD are songs written by Owens, several in collaboration with his recording partner, Jonathan Foose. The CD also includes, "Mista Charlie," by legendary Texas bluesman, Lightnin' Hopkins, as well as Hoagy Carmichael's tune "Old Rockin' Chair." In addition to Maryann Price on vocals, a variety of other prominent Austin musicians contributed to the album, including W.C. Clark, Orange Jefferson, Pepi Plowman, Angela Strehli, Nick Connolly, Kaz Kazanoff, Slim Richey, Francie Meaux Jeux, Sarah Brown, and Ed Vizard.¹⁴³

The 1990s Grey Ghost documentary, which existed only as a rough copy and needed professional editing, was one of the unfinished items on Owens's to-do list. He wanted to bring closure to his work on that video in order to provide a permanent historical and academic documentary of the Grey Ghost's life. Also in need of organization were the vast personal archival materials Owens had accumulated throughout his musical career, including record albums, audio-tapes, CDs, photographs, posters, personal papers, and other memorabilia. Putting his personal archives in order would be of considerable help, should Owens follow the suggestion of many of his friends and write his memoirs. In addition, Owens wanted to remain active as a performer. "I also want to continue my music playing. I think playing music is one of the things that helped me keep going...health-wise."¹⁴⁴

In June 2002, Owens performed at the Navasota Blues Festival, an annual event founded in May 1996 to honor local blues great, Mance Lipscomb, and to raise money for a college scholarship for a graduating senior at Navasota High School.¹⁴⁵ Although he was scheduled to play the festival again in 2003, he would not return. In November 2002 Owens was diagnosed with cancer, an invasive carcinoma located at the base of his tongue. Beginning radiation treatment with doctors in Austin, Owens remained optimistic that he would beat the disease. Tim Owens related the family's thoughts about the diagnosis:

We have a friend of ours who's our age...who has cancer...and survived. So we just thought...that Tary would survive it...he said he'd beaten everything else, so we just kind of assumed he's gonna have luck

against [cancer]. But after he started losing weight and not being able to swallow or drink, it just got to be more than he or Maryann could take care of. He needed more care and we finally convinced him to come here [Houston] to at least see what M.D. Anderson could do. And even when he first came, we had...hoped that they could get the stomach tube in him and get him built up and go back to Austin.¹⁴⁶

By the time Owens first arrived at Houston's M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in the summer of 2003, his condition had seriously deteriorated. On Sunday, August 24th, a message went out to family and friends that the outlook was grim. The cancer had spread to Owens's lungs. Now he had pneumonia along with difficulty breathing, and he was heavily medicated as a result of the persistent pain.¹⁴⁷

News of Owens's condition prompted friends and music colleagues in Austin and around the country to send cards and letters and to call the hospital and express their concern. On August 25th, Austin disc jockey Larry Monroe dedicated his KUT *Blue Monday* radio program in honor of Owens, a man who had done so much to preserve the music and history of Texas blues artists.¹⁴⁸ Although doctors were able to stabilize Owens quickly and begin treatment for the pneumonia and chemotherapy to slow the spread of his tumors, Owens's chances for recovery were not good. He remained in the palliative care section of the hospital for several weeks before finally being transferred to a hospice care facility in Houston, where family and friends came to visit during his final days. He died on September 21, 2003, two months short of his sixty-first birthday.

In keeping with Tary's wishes, no formal funeral was conducted and his remains were cremated. The Owens Family held a memorial gathering, "A Celebration of Tary Owens's Life," on the afternoon of October 11, 2003, "down by the riverside," at Owens's East Austin home. A recording of Roosevelt Williams performing the song, "You Ain't Nobody Till Somebody Loves You," served as a fitting prelude to the service, conducted by Tary's brothers, Tim and Bruce Owens, a Presbyterian minister. During the ceremony, friends and colleagues of Tary's were given an opportunity to share their remembrances of him, and his niece, Megan Owens, sang "Amazing Grace" and "Will the Circle be Unbroken," with help from the congregation. On behalf of the Center for Texas Music History at Texas State University-San Marcos, Dr. Gary Hartman presented Maryann Price a plaque honoring Tary Owens for his important role in shaping Texas music history. A recording of Tary singing, "Ragged But Right," was played as a requiem for the service.¹⁴⁹

Tary Owens's legacy in Texas music includes his collection of field recordings, which are preserved within the University of Texas Folklore Center Archives, ca. 1928-1981, located in

the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History. The archives include the collected recordings and papers of other such Texas folklorists as John Lomax, William A. Owens, John Henry Faulk, and Américo Paredes, Owens's teacher and mentor. The field recordings Owens compiled from 1964-1966 form the foundation of the archival and recording work he focused on for the rest of his life.¹⁵⁰ After his own recovery from addictions and absence from the music business, Owens dedicated himself with a passion to resurrecting the "roots music" he loved. By recording and promoting, in any way he could, the musicians who played that music, Owens's efforts put money in their pockets and gained those musicians long-overdue recognition for their artistry.

In evaluating the impact Owens had on helping to preserve Texas music history, Rob Patterson, an Austin music writer, "points to Owens's recordings of [Mance] Lipscomb, now archived at UT's [Briscoe Center for American History], as some of the best versions of the great Delta blues guitarist he has ever heard." Casey Monahan, Director of the Texas Music Office, commented on Tary Owens's legacy in Texas music, citing his recordings and promotion of the Grey Ghost as some of Owens's most important work. Monahan concluded:


Tary's life was about rebirth. He gave many artists second chances. He had a keen ear for music indigenous to our state. He had the will to not just enjoy it, but create the means for other people to enjoy it. And he emerged from his own lost years with such an incredible desire to document and release Texas blues and other roots music.¹⁵¹ ★

33

Notes

1. Brad Buchholz, "Producer Championed Austin Blues," *Austin American-Statesman*, 22 September 2001, sec. B, p. 1; See also Alan Govenar, *Texas Blues* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 486-540, for more on the Austin blues scene and many of the artists with whom Tary Owens worked.
2. Tary Owens, interview with author, Austin, Texas, 13 September 2002.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Joe W. Specht, "I Forgot to Remember to Forget: Elvis Presley in Texas-1955," *The Journal of Texas Music History* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 8-9, 12.
6. "Beaumont, Texas," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/BB/hdb2.html> [accessed 2/16/2007].
7. Gary Hartman, *The History of Texas Music*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 209-212.
8. Tary Owens, interview with author, 13 September 2002.
9. Ibid.
10. Rick Koster, *Texas Music*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 81.
11. Tary Owens, interview with author, 13 September 2002.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Richard B. Hughes, "Janis Lyn Joplin," *The Handbook of Texas Music*, Roy Barkley, ed., (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 168.
15. Tary Owens, interview with author, 13 September 2002.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Jack Smith, interview with author, Leander, Texas, 30 April 2004.
19. Tary Owens, interview with author, 13 September 2002.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. "Ghetto History – Tary Owens," p. 3-4, <http://www.texasghetto.com/GhettoHistory.htm> [accessed 2/14/2006].
23. Tary Owens, interview with author, Austin, Texas, 2 August 2003.
24. Ibid.
25. Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock 'N' Roll Scene in Austin*, Texas (Lebanon, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 40.
26. Tary Owens, interview with author, Austin, Texas, 26 September 2002.
27. Ibid.
28. Alan Lee Haworth, "Kenneth Threadgill," *The Handbook of Texas Music*, Barkley, ed., 326.
29. Shank, *Dissonant Identities*, 39-40.
30. Tary Owens, interview with author, 26 September 2002.
31. Ibid.
32. Madeleine Villatoro, interview with author, Austin, Texas, 24 November 2003.
33. Tary Owens, interview with author, 26 September 2002.
34. Ibid.
35. Villatoro, interview with author, 24 November 2003.
36. Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 October 2002.
37. Tary Owens, interview with author, 26 September 2002.
38. Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 October 2002.
39. Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 August 2003.
40. Matt Meier, "Américo Paredes," <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/benson/paredes/biography.html> [accessed 3/22/2007]
41. William A. Owens, *Texas Folk Songs* (Dallas: University Press in Dallas, 1950); "William A. Owens," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/OO/fow11_print.html [accessed 3/21/2007].
42. Meier, "Américo Paredes," 2; Américo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and its Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958), Américo Paredes, *Folktales of Mexico* (Chicago: M. M. Cole, 1966), and Américo Paredes, *A Texas Mexican Cancionero: Folksongs of the Lower Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).
43. Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 August, 2003.
44. Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & Roots Music* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 55 and 65; See also Hartman, *History of Texas Music*, 70-71, for a brief discussion of Leadbelly and the Lomaxes.
45. Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 49 and 62.
46. "John Lomax and Alan Lomax," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/LL/flo7.html> [accessed 3/21/2007].
47. Tary Owens, interview with author, Austin, Texas, 30 July 2002.
48. Ibid.
49. Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970) 97-98.
50. Tary Owens, archived field recordings listings, part of personal achieves at Owens's home.
51. Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 October 2002.
52. Tary Owens, interview with author, Austin, Texas, 16 January 2003.
53. Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 October 2002.
54. John Minton, "Mance Lipscomb," *The Handbook of Texas Music*, Barkley, ed., 185-186.
55. Tary Owens, field recording list, Owens's home.
56. Hartman, *History of Texas Music*, 73.
57. Teresa Paloma Acosta, "Robert Shaw," *The Handbook of Texas Music*, Barkley, ed., 287-288..
58. Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.
59. Tary Owens, archived field recordings list, Owens's home.
60. Villatoro, interview with author, 24 November, 2003.
61. Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 October, 2002.
62. Tary Owens, interview with author, 26 September and 30 July 2002.
63. Ibid., 26 September 2002.
64. Villatoro, interview with author, 24 November 2003.
65. Kathleen Johnson, "The Cold War Museum—Summer of Love and Woodstock," <http://www.coldwar.org/articles/60s/summeroflove.html> [accessed 4/18/2007].
66. Villatoro, interview with author, 24 November 2003.
67. Burton Wilson, with Jack Ortman, *The Austin Music Scene: Through the Lens of Burton Wilson, 1965-1994* (Austin: Eakin Press, 2001), 23.
68. Rob Patterson, e-mail to Tary Owens, 21 June 2002.
69. Robert Altman, "Chet Helms Bio," http://www.altmanphoto.com/chet_helms/photo_credit_helms_bio.html [accessed 7/15/2007]
70. Aidin Vaziri and Jim Herron Zamora, "Chet Helms—Legendary S.F. Rock Music Producer," <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article?file=c/a/2005/06/26HELMS.TMP&type=printable> [accessed 7/15/2007].
71. Villatoro, interview with author, 24 November 2003.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. Brad Buchholz, "Tary's Tale," *Austin American-Statesman*, 26 March 2000, <http://www.maryannprice.com/tale.html> [accessed 5/20/2006].
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid.
77. Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 October 2002.
78. Ibid; For more on Townes Van Zandt's life and career, see Robert Earl Hardy, *A Deeper Blue: The Life and Music of Townes Van Zandt* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2008).
79. Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 October 2002.
80. Buchholz, "Tary's Tale," 26 March 2000.
81. Tary Owens, interview with author, 16 January 2003.
82. Ibid.
83. Jim Langdon, interview with author, Houston, Texas, 12 December 2003.
84. Ibid.
85. Ibid.
86. Buchholz, "Tary's Tale," 26 March 2000.
87. Tary Owens, interview with author, 16 January 2003.
88. Tary Owens, personal archives from Owens's home, resume.
89. Tim Owens, interview with author, 13 December 2003.
90. Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002..
91. "Grey Ghost," <http://sixfingeredman.net/old/writing/bje.html> [accessed 8/18/2007].
92. Dave Hooper, "End of the Line: The Passing of Grey Ghost," http://www.austinchronicle.com/issues/vol_15/issue_47/music.greyghost.html [accessed 4/9/2007].
93. Tary Owens, interview with author, Austin, Texas, 13 March 2003.
94. Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.
95. Ibid.
96. Ibid.
97. Ibid.

98. Tary Owens, personal archives from Owens's home, resume.
99. Cheryl L. Simon, "Erbie Bowser," *The Handbook of Texas* Online, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/BB/fboan.html> [accessed 8/27/2007].
100. "Victory Grill," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victory_Grill [accessed 8/27/2007]; For more on the "Chitlin' Circuit" in Texas, see Allen O. Olsen, "The Post-World War II 'Chitlin' Circuit' in San Antonio and the Long-Term Effects of Intercultural Congeniality," *Journal of Texas Music History*, Volume 7, 2007, 22-33.
101. "Victory Grill," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victory_Grill
102. Tary Owens, interview with author, 16 January 2003.
103. James Head, "Albert Lavada Durst," *The Handbook of Texas Music*, Barkley, ed., 87-88.
104. Tary Owens, interview with author, 13 March 2003.
105. Tary Owens, interview with author, 16 January 2003.
106. Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002 and Tary Owens, personal archives, resume.
107. Maryann Price, interview with author, Austin, Texas, 10 December 2003.
108. Ibid.
109. Ibid.
110. Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.
111. Price, interview with author, 10 December 2003.
112. Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.
113. Price, interview with author, 10 December 2003.
114. Maryann Price, e-mail to author, 12 September 2007.
115. Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.
116. Brad Buchholz, "Producer Championed Austin Blues," sec. B, p. 5.
117. Mason Neely, "Maryann Price: She's Outside Austin City Limits," *The Metro West Daily*, 18 July 2007. <http://www.metrowestdailynews.com/archive/x603953044> [accessed 9/17/2007].
118. Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.
119. Ibid.
120. Buchholz, "Producer Championed, Austin Blues," sec. B, pp. 1 and 5.
121. Steve McVicker, "Lost Legends," *Houston Press*, 13 January 2000. https://hou.secure.newtimes.com/issues/2000-01-13/news/feature2_print.html, [accessed 2/15/2006].
122. "Texas Music For Tary," <http://www.texasghetto.com/tmt/TMTbiog.html> [accessed 2/14/2006].
123. Jonathan Foose, telephone interview with author, Austin, Texas, 10 October 2007.
124. Rob Patterson, e-mail to Tary Owens, 21 June 2002.
125. Tary Owens, interview with author, 16 January 2003.
126. Tim Owens, interview with author, 13 December 2003.
127. Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.
128. Price, interview with author, 10 December 2003.
129. Tary Owens, interview with author, 11 March 2003.
130. Tary Owens, interview with author, Austin, Texas, 5 April 2003.
131. Tary Owens, interview with author, 11 March 2003.
132. Price, interview with author, 10 December 2003.
133. Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.
134. Price, interview with author, 10 December 2003.
135. "Texas Music For Tary," 2.
136. Patterson, e-mail, 21 June 2002.
137. Brad Buchholz, "Tary Owens – Oral History," e-mail to author, 19 January 2006.
138. Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.
139. Ibid.
140. *Texas Music Office*, "History and Purpose," <http://www.governor.state.tx.us/divisions/music/about/history.html>, [accessed 9/18/2007].
141. Ibid.
142. Ibid.
143. Joe Nick Patoski, liner notes for *Milagros* audio CD, by the Texas Redemptors, Catfish Jazz, 2002.
144. Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.
145. *The Examiner*, "7th Annual Navasota Blues Festival," 29 June 2002, Supplement, p. 2 and 6.
146. Tim Owens, interview with author, 13 December 2003.
147. Saira Morgan, e-mail to Gary Hartman, 24 August 2003.
148. "Blue Monday," KUT Radio, tape recording, author's personal collection.
149. The Owens Family, "A Celebration of Tary Owens' Life: In Memoriam, Nov. 6, 1942-Sept. 21, 2003," 11 October 2003. This program is from the memorial service and is part of the author's personal collection.
150. "A Guide to the UT Folklore Center Archives, ca. 1928-1981," <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/utcah/00385/cah-00385.html>, [accessed 10/14/2007].
151. Steve McVicker, "Tary Owens, 60, Texas Bluesman," *Houston Chronicle*, September 2003, <http://www.maryannprice.com/houston.html> [accessed 8/28/2007]. Rob Patterson and Casey Monahan were interviewed by Steve McVicker for this article written after the death of Tary Owens.



Specht: Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes

***“Don't Let the Stars Get in
Slim Willet's Idiosyncratic Chart-Topper Lives On!”***

Joe W. Specht

Slim Willet decked out in his 'Stars' outfit. Courtesy Joe W. Specht.

In the fall of 1952, and well on into 1953, the nation's radio airwaves and jukeboxes were filled with the sound of "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes." The song, penned by Abilene disc jockey Slim Willet, was all the rage with four different versions in Billboard's Country & Western Top 10. On Billboard's Pop chart, Perry Como took the song to Number 1, selling over one million copies.

Willet, born Winston Lee Moore on December 1, 1919, in Victor, Texas, (western Erath County), began his radio career in the late 1940s at Abilene's Hardin-Simmons University. While working as student manager of KHSU, the school radio station, Moore adopted the pseudonym "Slim," because he was anything but slender. He took Willet from the Willets, characters in his favorite comic strip *Out Our Way*. After graduating from Hardin-Simmons in 1949, Slim went to work for Abilene radio station KRBC. He also wrote songs, and in 1950, he recorded one of his signature tunes, "I'm a Tool Pusher from Snyder," for Dallas-based Star Talent Records. However, "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes" is the song that would earn Willet fame and fortune.²

In January 1953, at the height of "Stars" mania, Stuart Chilton was a journalism instructor at Abilene High School, while also freelancing for the *Houston Chronicle*. When a student reminded the teacher that KRBC radio disc jockey Slim Willet had composed "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes," Chilton thought, "Man, this would make a good story for the Sunday magazine supplement in the *Houston Chronicle*."³ His editor at the *Chronicle* agreed, so Chilton scheduled an interview with Willet at the KRBC studio, then headquartered on the top floor of the Windsor Hotel in downtown Abilene.

According to Willet, the inspiration for his opus came from a letter he received sometime in September 1951 from a young G.I. stationed in Korea. The soldier asked the deejay to spin a platter for his girlfriend who lived in the area and listened to KRBC. "Play her a song, tell her to wait for me," pleaded the young soldier, "and tell her not to let the stars get in her eyes."⁴ The phrase stuck with Slim, and he soon began working on a song. Willet's wife, Jimmie Moore, remembers her husband sitting on their bed strumming his guitar, piddling with the lyrics – *Don't let the stars get in your eyes, don't let the moon break your heart, love blooms at night, in daylight it dies* – while the

Your Eyes":

reflection of "the stars and moon would shine through [an open window] and splash on our bed."⁵ The finished version of the tune included a breathless Kerouacian run-on sentence with a note sustained for a few extra beats at the end of each verse before the whole thing hurtled forward again— *Don't let the stars get in your eyes, oh, keep your heart for me, for someday I'll return, and you know you're the only one I'll ever love.*

Willet eventually got around to recording the song, now appropriately titled "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes," in the spring of 1952.⁶ At the conclusion of the *Big State Jamboree*, a musical variety show hosted by Willet every Saturday evening,

By the time he recorded "Stars," Willet had a working arrangement with 4 Star Records. 4 Star, located in Pasadena, California, operated an independent custom service, and, for a nominal fee, the company pressed records in its OP (Other People) series for an individual or group to sell at personal appearances. As part of the business agreement, 4 Star acquired the publishing rights to the song(s), and the company could choose to re-release the recording under its own banner, if interest or sales warranted.⁹ But 4 Star's owner, Bill McCall, had a reputation as a no-nonsense businessman who regularly withheld royalty payments. According to fellow country music

The original version (of "Stars") was so wretchedly sloppy and off-key that no one could see the potential.

38 Slim and some local musicians (including members of Shorty Underwood's band, the Brush Cutters) moved recording equipment into Abilene's Fair Park Auditorium and got down to business. Buck White tinkled the ivories in his inimitable honky-tonk piano style, while Smokey Donaldson supplied the lead flattop guitar picking, and Shorty Underwood took the fiddle breaks. James Wood handled steel guitar duties, with both Mack Fletcher and Jean Stansbury on rhythm guitar, and Georgia Underwood played bass.⁷ The rollicking, freeform results were, in Slim's words, "an off meter song [in which] the band could play as long as they want between phrases, and the singer can begin singing whenever he feels like it."⁸

singer Webb Pierce, who recorded for 4 Star before finding success on Decca Records, "[McCall] thought it was a sin to pay anybody."¹⁰ This would eventually turn out to be a problem for Willet, as well.

Don Pierce, McCall's second-in-command, describes the first time he heard "Stars." "I was at a little studio in downtown Los Angeles making some masters for custom manufacturing when a tape came in from Slim Willet. When I heard that song I about jumped out of my skin."¹¹ Bill McCall was not impressed, however, and he told Slim in no uncertain terms that the song was "off beat, off meter, off everything."¹² Music historian and journalist Colin Escott concurs that, "The original version [of "Stars"] was so wretchedly sloppy and off-key that no one could see the potential."¹³ Of course, this did not dissuade McCall from taking his share of the publishing rights, once the song became successful.

Despite such misgivings, Willet went ahead and paid \$85 to have three-hundred copies pressed in the OP series for release on his own Slim Willet label.¹⁴ He also hired a salesman to help promote the record in Texas. Initially they plugged the flipside, "Hadacol Corners," but listeners soon discovered "Stars." When McCall realized the song he had panned was "getting terrific requests" in the Lone Star State, he exercised his option and re-released it on 4 Star in June 1952.¹⁵ *Billboard's* review of the disc proved oddly lukewarm— "Nothing special or exciting here."¹⁶

Nevertheless, sensing a potential hit in the making, the major record companies came calling. Bill McCall positioned himself in the thick of the action as both 4 Star Records executive and the song's publisher. In a most unique move, he bought three-hundred copies of Gisele MacKenzie's version of "Stars" on Capitol Records and sent them out to disk jockeys whom 4 Star regularly serviced.¹⁷ Willet was doing his part to plug the



The original release of 'Stars' on the Slim Willet label. Courtesy Joe W. Specht.

record, too. Ray Campi, a future rockabilly singer from Austin, met Slim in Odessa during the summer of 1952. "[Willet] had the records in his car [and] he opened up the boot of it and showed me all those 78s of 'Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes' on 4 Star...then just a few weeks later...everybody had...covered it."¹⁸

Record producers and A&R men were acutely aware of a country song's potential to become a "crossover" hit when recorded by a pop performer.¹⁹ Patti Page's 1950 version of "The Tennessee Waltz," which was written by Grand Ole Opry members Pee Wee King and Redd Stewart, eventually sold over six million copies.²⁰ Mitch Miller, who worked with Page at Mercury Records, is often credited with being the first major label executive to regularly plumb the hillbilly catalog. In the early 1950s, he scored big at Columbia Records by assigning Hank Williams compositions to Tony Bennett, Rosemary Clooney, Jo Stafford, and Frankie Lane.²¹ The Kapp brothers (Jack and Dave) at Decca Records had achieved similar success a decade earlier with Bing Crosby.²² The Kapp-Crosby partnership took particular interest in songs written by Texans. Two of Bing's all-time biggest sellers were Bob Wills's "New San Antonio Rose" in 1941 and Al Dexter's "Pistol Packin' Mama" in 1943.²³ During the same period, Crosby also recorded Floyd Tillman's "It Makes No Difference Now" and Ernest Tubb's "Walking the Floor Over You." Bing gave Cindy Walker, at the time a fledgling wordsmith, one of her first big breaks when he agreed to record her song "Lone Star Trail."²⁴

The 1940s and 1950s was an era in which record companies



Peggy Hayama's Japanese version of 'Stars.'
Courtesy Joe W. Specht.

of the gate, followed by Lola Amache (Mercury), Eileen Barton (Coral), Perry Como (RCA Victor), the Henry Jerome Orchestra with Jolly Joe Grimm (MGM), Robert "Bobby" Maxwell and the Windy City Orchestra (Mercury), Tony Phillips (Crest), and Loren Becker with Enoch Light Orchestra & Chorus (Prom).²⁸ In England, both Dame Gracie Fields, celebrated singer and actress, and Dennis Lotis, backed by the Ted Heath Orchestra, waxed "Stars" for UK Decca.²⁹ Perhaps even more remarkable,

"Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes" would prove to be one of the most widely-covered crossover hits of the period.

were convinced that the song, not the recording or the performer, was most important. As a result, it was not unusual for several different versions of the same tune to be available to the buying public at the same time.²⁵ "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes" would prove to be one of the most widely-covered crossover hits of the period. In the field of country music, Capitol Records entered the fray with Skeets McDonald serving up a 1952 rendition very similar to Slim's original. Columbia Records quickly followed with a version by Ray Price, and then Decca Records issued Red Foley's more pop-oriented take on the tune. These three recordings, along with Willet's, settled into *Billboard's* Country & Western Top-10.²⁶ Other versions simultaneously in release included Johnnie and Jack on RCA Victor and Corky Carpenter and the Texas Playboys on Tops.²⁷

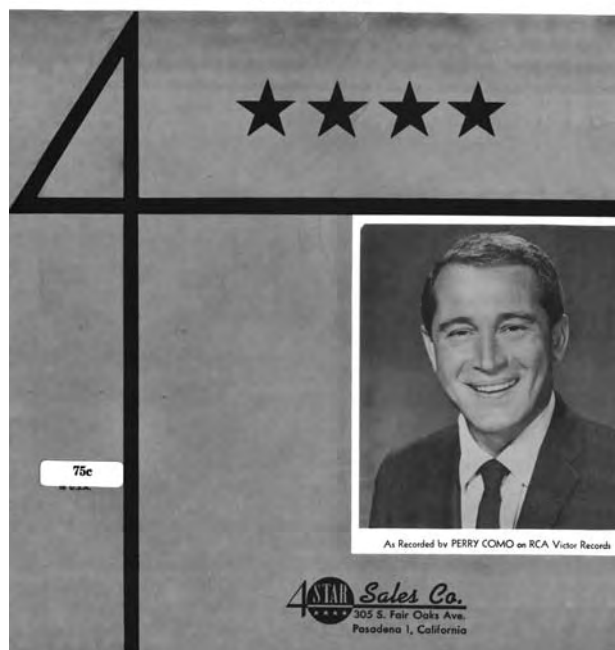
On the pop side, Gisele MacKenzie (Capitol) was first out

Peggy Hayama, who became known as one of Japan's premier jazz vocalists, recorded the song in Japanese for issue by King Records in Japan.³⁰

There were at least fourteen competing versions of "Stars" getting some play, but it was Perry Como's mammoth-selling 1952 chart-topper that insured the song's immortality, something that Slim readily acknowledged. "The break I got on 'Stars' was when Perry Como recorded the song. That's when it took off like a rocket. Without Como's record, it probably would not have hit the big time."³¹ Yet, Perry was a reluctant participant at first. He later told Don Pierce, "They [RCA Victor producers] played it for me, and I didn't think much of it, and I didn't think I could sing it."³² Como's record sales were in a bit of a slump, however, and with juke box operators, deejays, and record dealers urging him to step-up the rhythm, he agreed to

Don't Let The Stars Get In Your Eyes

By SLIM WILLET



Sheet music for Perry Como's version of 'Stars.'
Courtesy Joe W. Specht.

record one take of "Stars" with Hugo Winterhalter's Orchestra and vocal backing by The Ramblers.³³

Initial reviews were mixed. George T. Simon, writing in *Metronome*, complained that Como's recording "lacks the fire of the competing versions...Perry still can't seem to get excited about anything."³⁴ The reviewer in *Down Beat* proved to be more prophetic, stating that "Perry delivers a lively coverage

would have been if he could have read his own obituary as posted by Reuters News Service. In noting that Como had sold more than 50 million records during his career, Reuters singled out three songs for mention, and, yes, "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes" was one of them.³⁸

Slim Willet continued to record in Abilene and release his records on 4 Star or through the OP series on the Slim Willet label, but the follow-up hit remained elusive.³⁹ The royalty checks on "Stars" were not rolling in as expected either, further validation of Bill McCall's exploitative reputation. As Faron Young, a future member of the Country Music Hall of Fame, put it, "Bill McCall screwed everybody in this town [Nashville] once, or tried to."⁴⁰

Young also commented on Slim's plight. "Slim Willet...was owed over \$100,000 in 1953 and received only \$1,500. If you got in McCall's office past his ten secretaries, he was such a smoothie he could talk you out of killing him. God knows, enough of us tried! But Slim just walked in there, reached over McCall's desk, grabbed him by the neck, and like to beat the shit out of him. He left with a check for \$60,000 in his pocket."⁴¹ An exaggeration perhaps, but Bill Mack, the famed "Midnight Cowboy" and late night disc jockey, offers a similar account about Willet heading out to California to confront McCall over the royalties due him. "Really it was a scene similar to the one... in the film, *The Godfather*. Utilizing a weapon he had brought from Texas, Slim made McCall 'an offer he couldn't refuse.'"⁴² Even more apocryphal and perfectly scripted for a Max Sennett slapstick comedy is the tale of a passel of Willet's "oil rigger buddies" dangling McCall out of a hotel window until he agreed to pay up.⁴³

Within the Moore family, Slim's older brother, Omar, told a slightly different story. "Winston arrived at Bill McCall's office wearing cowboy boots. To make his point, he jumped up on

A rumor began circulating that Slim was not the composer of "Stars."

of a sparkling country song. His version could well assure the song of attaining hit status."³⁵ As *Time* magazine subsequently confirmed, "The jukebox operators ate it up; so did individual record buyers...and Como was out of his slump."³⁶

Despite its enormous success, Como never took to the song. As Perry admitted to the Associated Press in a 1988 interview, he considered "Stars" just one of the "awful novelty songs" his concert audiences expected him to perform. "Me and Sinatra and all the rest of the singers used to talk about all the crap we had to sing...I still do ['Stars'] onstage once in a while...but I say 'yech' afterwards."³⁷ One wonders what Como's reaction

McCall's desk, and he stomped his feet so hard he shattered the glass on top of the desk."⁴⁴ Suffice it to say, Slim Willet's visit left an indelible impression on Bill McCall – not to mention his desk – and the royalty checks commenced to flow without interruption. In 1958, Willet could boast that "Stars" had earned him "more than \$230,000," which, if accurate, is the equivalent of \$1,600,000 in today's currency.⁴⁵

Somewhere along the way, a rumor began circulating that Slim was not the composer of "Stars." According to the story, he supposedly bought it from "some guy from around Novice" in Coleman County, Texas.⁴⁶ Dean Beard, a Willet session man

and short-lived member of the Champs (of "Tequila" fame) who led his own band the Crew Cats, is a likely source of the rumor, which finally surfaced in print in 1993 in the *Coleman Chronicle & DV*. Here columnist Roxy Gordon matter-of-factly stated, "I'm told it's common knowledge among the people of that era [1950s] that Slim Willett [sic] didn't write the song at all."⁴⁸

When Gordon repeated the allegation fifteen months later in another column in the Coleman newspaper, Bob Lapham, arts editor of the *Abilene Reporter-News*, attempted to confirm the veracity of the claim by contacting both Gordon and Rick Sikes, himself a musician and native of Coleman County who had passed along Beard's story to Gordon.⁴⁹ Neither Gordon nor Sikes could personally corroborate the rumor, and, with Dean Beard and the "guy from around Novice" both dead, Roxy Gordon ruefully suggested to Lapham, "Just leave things as they are."⁵⁰

The charge was certainly news to Slim's widow, Jimmie Moore, as well as to longtime Willett associates such as Vaughn O'Shields, who remarked that, "I was with [Slim] from the beginning until he died, and he got everything he deserved from that song."⁵¹ James Wood, the steel guitarist on the "Stars" recording, is further convinced that his boss was the composer, "because I helped him change some of the words."⁵² Bill Mack, like Willett a member of the Country Music Disc Jockey Hall of Fame, weighed in, too. "There's no doubt in my mind," Mack told Lapham, that Slim wrote the song.⁵³

The rumor of Willett's misappropriation of "Stars" has even turned up on the Internet, albeit with no mention of the "guy from around Novice." Before it was corrected, the undocumented entry for "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes" in *Wikipedia*, "the free encyclopedia," attributed the authorship of the song to Nashville Songwriter Hall of Fame member Rex Griffin. "It ['Stars'] was written by Rex Griffin stolen by Slim Willett."⁵⁴ For Texas music historian Kevin Coffey, "this is a new one on me...I don't believe it for a minute." Coffey has researched and written extensively about Rex Griffin, who died in 1959, and Coffey had ample opportunity to spend time with Rex's brother Buddy Griffin, who was more than familiar with his older brother's career. In response to the charge in *Wikipedia*, Coffey observes, "I never heard the story of Rex writing 'Stars.' Buddy never made any sort of claim like that, nor did any other Dallas musician around at the time [early 1950s when Griffin was living there] who I spoke to."⁵⁵

Bill Mack also commented on "the unusual meter" that gives "Stars" such a unique bounce.⁵⁶ There is certainly no overlooking the frenetic rhythm – what Bill McCall labeled as "off beat, off meter, off everything." *Time* magazine, in a vignette on Perry Como, was quick to point to the song's "frantic Latin beat."⁵⁷ While an anonymous music critic of the day condescendingly opined, "[Willett] made his effect chiefly

by ignoring any consistency of rhythmic pattern, as commonly practiced by the guitar-playing troubadours of the southern mountains."⁵⁸ As noted earlier, even Perry Como expressed doubt before recording the song. "I complained...I told them the meter's wrong. I don't understand it."⁵⁹

However, the unusual "Latin" beat is undoubtedly one of the reasons for the song's popularity. Perhaps as importantly, it offers additional proof of Willett's authorship of "Stars." He had already experimented with the slippery rhythmic pattern a year earlier on "Let Me Know," and when "Stars" broke out on the country and pop charts, Slim explained how he latched on to the peculiar cadence.⁶⁰ After moving to Clyde, Texas, in 1935 and attending Clyde High School, Willett worked at a variety of odd jobs, and even rode the rails. In 1937, he enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) which assigned him to a camp in Arizona.⁶¹ There were several Mexican Americans also staying in the camp, and each evening the men got together to sing and play the guitar. The Latin rhythms Slim heard around the campfire made a lasting impression on the young Texan. As he told *Cowboy Songs* magazine years later, "They sang every night. I listened. Since then, I have never been able to get my music completely away from their tempo and style."⁶²

In South Texas, Beto Villa, often called the "father" of Orquesta Tejana, quickly reciprocated by recording an instrumental dance version of "Stars" on Discos Ideal with the lyrical title "Que No Te Engañen Las Estrellas" ("So the Stars Don't Fool You").⁶³ Hispanic performers on the other side of the Rio Grande also took a liking to the beat. Latin American superstars Pedro Vargas (Mexico), Bobby Capó (Puerto Rico), and Billo's Caracas Boys (Venezuela) each recorded the Willett



Beto Villa's Spanish-language version of 'Stars.'
Courtesy Joe W. Specht.



LP cover highlighting "Stars." Courtesy Joe W. Specht

composition as "No Hay Que Dejarse Ilusionar," which literally translates as "Don't Let Yourself Be Fooled."⁶⁴

With all the various versions of "Stars" in circulation, *Billboard* magazine ranked it as the nation's "top tune" for three weeks running in January 1953.⁶⁵ The song boasted further international appeal, too, with sheet music published in French, Spanish, and Japanese.⁶⁶ The QRS Music Company even issued a piano roll as played by J. Lawrence "Piano Roll" Cook.⁶⁷ Cast members of *Your Hit Parade* sang "Stars" on the ever popular radio-television show for nineteen straight weeks.⁶⁸ Although neither recorded the song, both Bing Crosby and Dean Martin crooned the tune on their own network radio programs.⁶⁹ In response to requests he received for "Stars" at his dances, Bob Wills served up a version, with Louise Rowe handling the vocal chores, on his afternoon radio broadcast on KXLA in Pasadena, California.⁷⁰ Tennessee Ernie Ford also recorded "Stars" in 1954 for RadiOzark, a transcription service which supplied prerecorded shows to subscribing radio stations.⁷¹

Not surprisingly, Perry Como showcased his Number 1 seller on *The Perry Como Show*, which aired thrice weekly on CBS Television.⁷² According to Moore family lore, Como's producer planned to book Slim Willet for an appearance on the show. Slim's older sister, Marie Moore Cass, remembers the contract called for her brother to receive \$1,000. Before the deal could be finalized, however, Como nixed the idea because "he wanted everyone to think *he* wrote the song." The show's producer encouraged Slim to keep the \$1,000, but Willet returned the check and contract along with a barbed personal note referring to Perry's pedigree as a former coiffeur. "You tell the barber to keep his \$1,000. He needs it worse than I do."⁷³

Further indication of the widespread popularity of "Stars" is

the number of answer songs and novelty tunes it inspired. After all, this was the heyday of the answer record. Webb Pierce, for example, scored a hit with "Back Street Affair," and Kitty Wells answered with "Paying for That Back Street Affair." The same thing happened with "Stars." The Bailey Brothers & the Happy Valley Boys waxed the mournful mountain duet "I Told the Stars About You" on their own Wheeling, West Virginia, based Canary label.⁷⁴ Goldie Hill did even better on Decca with her confessional "I Let the Stars Get in My Eyes," which reached *Billboard's* Country & Western Top-10 in January 1953.⁷⁵

On the whimsical side, 4 Star released "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes #2," a fast-talking nonsensical imitation co-written and recorded by Cactus Pryor, an Austin disc jockey, humorist, and newspaper columnist.⁷⁶ Former Spike Jones sidekick Red Ingle, recording for Mercury, served up "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes" with a moonshine liquor theme.⁷⁷ Homer and Jethro, perennial parodists of musical hits, jumped on the bandwagon with "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyeballs" for RCA Victor.⁷⁸ Not to be outdone, "Borscht Belt" comedian and klezmer musician, Mickey Katz, offered a Yiddish twist to the tune with "Don't Let the Schmaltz Get in Your Eyes," on Capitol Records.⁷⁹

Just how far had the song infiltrated the American consciousness? In a bit of over-the-top black humor, a "Stars" related Christine Jorgensen question-and-answer joke soon began making the rounds. In 1953, Jorgensen created a media frenzy after being among the first to undergo sex reassignment surgery (male to female). The question posed in the joke was "What's Christine Jorgensen's theme song?" The answer, as one might guess, was "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes."⁸⁰

"Stars" earned a BMI (Broadcast Music Incorporated) award in 1953 as one of the most popular tunes of the year.⁸¹ RCA Victor also presented Perry Como with his sixth gold record, while *Billboard* noted that "'Stars' has been the fastest of all Como gold platter disks to make the grade, hitting the 1,000,000 figure in less than 10 weeks after release."⁸² In 1955, 4 Star Sales Company, the song's publisher, announced that the original manuscript had been donated to the permanent collection of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.⁸³

Slim Willet basked in the limelight and rightly so. He made appearances on the *Big D Jamboree* (KRLD) and *Saturday Night Shindig* (WFAA) in Dallas, the *Louisiana Hayride* (KWKH) in Shreveport, the *Town Hall Party* (KFI) in Compton, California, even performing once on the *Grand Ole Opry* (WSM) in Nashville.⁸⁴ He also completed a successful screen test for Paramount Pictures.⁸⁵

On the business side, Willet branched out into song publishing, and for a brief period, Slim Willet Songs supported a Sunset Boulevard address in Hollywood.⁸⁶ He built a recording studio in his backyard and began releasing his own records, as well as

those of other Abilene-area singers, first on Edmoral and then on the Winston label.⁸⁷ The Slim Willet Advertising Agency handled local promotional activities and outside bookings for Slim Whitman, Carl Smith, Johnny Horton, and a young up-and-coming Elvis Presley, all who graced the stage at Fair Park Auditorium.⁸⁸ Slim dabbled in several other enterprises, too, including Slim Willet Ice Cream and the Slim Willet Texaco Service, and he purchased a home in a newer, upscale neighborhood on Leggett Drive in Abilene.⁸⁹

In addition to hosting the *Big State Jamboree* on Saturday night, Willet was a pioneer in live television with a Wednesday evening music variety show on KRBC-TV, which aired for three years.⁹⁰ He also continued with his radio disc jockey duties on KRBC. In 1957, Willet joined the staff of newly licensed KNIT.⁹¹ Seven years later, he assumed the general manager duties at KCAD, one of the few all-country music radio stations in the state.⁹²

Slim Willet died on July 1, 1966, (at the age of 46) of an apparent heart attack, but the glow of "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes" has never really dimmed.⁹³ The assortment of renditions that have been recorded over the years is indeed a tribute to its idiosyncratic allure. In addition to numerous renderings by country music performers, "Stars" found a home in the repertoire of a polka band, classical orchestra, jazz combo, Dutch actor-singer, lesbian chanteuse, rockabilly revivalist, Tejano trailblazer, Irish show band, and two members of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, to mention only a few.⁹⁴

Among others who have recorded "Stars," country guitar stylists have been particularly attracted to the melody with Josh Graves, Grady Martin, Arthur "Guitar Boogie" Smith, and Pete Wade each recording albums which include an instrumental version of the tune.⁹⁵ Since Gracie Fields and Dennis Lotis issued their renditions in 1953, the United Kingdom has remained a hotbed of "Stars" activity, with recordings by Simprini (1960), the Fabulous Beats (1962), Jimmy Justice (1964), Brendon O'Brien & the Dixies (1967), Matchbox (1981), Foster & Allen (1994), Okeh Wranglers (1996), Los Pistoleros (2000), Paul Ansell's Number Nine (2003), and Mason Grant & the Dynamos (2003).⁹⁶

What makes a song a hit? What makes it a classic? Perhaps it is the words or the melody, or, in the parlance of Dick Clark's *American Bandstand*, "It's got a good beat and you can dance to it." There is certainly no ready explanation for the continuing popularity of "Stars." Yet, fifty-seven years after Willet gathered his musicians at Fair Park Auditorium to record, the song still retains an indescribable appeal. Jimmie Dale Gilmore, who released a version in 2005, concludes, "'Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes,' by Slim Willett [sic], has been recorded dozens, perhaps hundreds of times. It defies classification."⁹⁷ ★



Slim Willet on KNIT radio, circa 1959. Courtesy Joe W. Specht.

**Recorded Versions of "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes"
(as of June 24, 2009)**

1952 – Lola Amache – Mercury
1952 – Eileen Barton – Coral
1952 – Corky Carpenter – Tops
1952 – Perry Como – RCA Victor
1952 – Jimmy Fair – Queen City
1952 – Red Foley – Decca
1952 – Henry Jerome Orchestra – MGM
1952 – Johnnie & Jack – RCA Victor
1952 – Gisele MacKenzie – Capitol
1952 – Skeets McDonald – Capitol
1952 – Ray Price – Columbia
1952 – Sagebrush Willie – Recorded in Hollywood
1952 – Slim Willet – Slim Willet OP; 4 Star
1953 – Billo's Caracas Boys (in Spanish) – Billos
1953 – Loren Becker – Prom
1953 – Bobby Capó (in Spanish) – Seeco
1953 – Gracie Fields – UK Decca
1953 – Peggy Hayama (in Japanese) – King [Japan]
1953 – Homer & Jethro (parody) – RCA Victor
1953 – Red Ingle (parody) – Mercury
1953 – Mickey Katz (parody) – Capitol
1953 – Dennis Lotis – UK Decca
1953 – Robert "Bobby" Maxwell – Mercury
1953 – Tony Phillips – Crest
1953 – Cactus Pryor (parody) – 4 Star
1953 – Pedro Vargas (in Spanish) – RCA Victor Mexicana
1953? – Beto Villa (instrumental) – Discos Ideal
1953? – Red Warrick – Black Mountain
1959 – Keely Smith – Dot
1959 – Faron Young – Capitol
196? – [Alberto] Samprini (instrumental) – EMI
196? – Tommie Tolleson (instrumental) – Collector
1960 – Carl Mann – Sun
1961 – Warner Mack – Kapp
1962 – Lavern Baker – Atlantic
1962 – Tommy Edwards – MGM
1962 – Fabulous Beats – Design
1962 – George Jones – United Artists
1962 – Werner Müller (instrumental) – London
1962 – The Parisian Sextet – Challenge
1962 – Leroy Van Dyke – Mercury
1963 – Dean Beard (instrumental) – Winston
1963 – Jimmy Jay – Phillips
1963 – Jimmy Justice – Pye; Blue Cat
1963 – Jack White – Country & Western Hits
1964 – The Browns – RCA Victor
1964 – Canadian Sweethearts – Quality; A&M
1964 – Billy Hayden (instrumental) – Crown

1964 – Shady Oaks Boys (instrumental) – Cumberland
1965 – Pat Boone – Dot
1965 – The New Yorkers (instrumental) – Panorama
1965 – Jerry Sedlar (instrumental) – Kapp
1966 – Chucho Avellanet (in English and Spanish) – UA Latino
1966 – Frank Chacksfield – London
1966 – Mexicali Singers – Warner Brothers
1967 – Grady Martin (instrumental) – Decca
1967 – Brendon O'Brien & the Dixies – Pye
1968 – Little Joe and the Latinaires – Tear Drop
1969 – Al Dean – Stop
1969 – Dave Dudley – Mercury
1969 – Conway Twitty – MGM
1970 – Roy Acuff, Jr. & Sue Thompson – Hickory
1970 – The Music City Sounds featuring Lloyd Green & Pete Wade
(instrumental) – MGM
1971 – Stompin' Tom Connors – Dominion
1971 – Bobby Lee Trammell – Suncot
1972 – Sylvia Mobley – Villa
1973 – Slim Whitman – United Artists
1973 – Johnny Wright – Decca
1975 – Joe Douglas – Monument
1975 – [Arthur] Smith & Son (instrumental) – Monument
1976 – Danny Davis and the Nashville Brass (instrumental)
– RCA Victor
1977 – Bonded Stock featuring Dave Coggins - Solar
1977 – Jerry Lee Lewis – Mercury
1977 – James Pastell – Paula
1977 – Ray Price – ABC Dot
1980 – Boxcar Willie – Main Street
1981 – Matchbox – Magnet
1983 – Sonny James – Dimension
1984 – Hank Wilson [Leon Russell] – Paradise
1987 – André van Duin (in Dutch) – CNR
1988 – Josh Graves (instrumental) – CMH
1988 – k. d. Lang – Sire
1989 – Doug Dillard Band – Flying Fish
1990 – Ray Campi – Real Music
1991 – Rocky Hernández – Sony Discos
1994 – Foster & Allen – Ronco
2000 – Okeh Wranglers – Fury
2000 – Los Pistoleros – Track
2003 – Paul Ansell's Number Nine – Coolsville
2003 – Don Cherry – doncherrysinger.com
2003 – Mason Grant & the Dynamos – Pan
2004 – Laurie Lewis & Tom Rozum – Hightone
2005 – Jimmie Dale Gilmore – Rounder
2006 – Reverse Cowgirl – Side Show
2006 – Studio Group (instrumental) – Crown MP3
2008 – ALFIO [Alfio Bonanno] – One Voice

Notes

- This article is based on a paper originally presented at the annual meeting of the West Texas Historical Association held in Abilene on March 30, 2007. For their assistance, a tip of the hat goes to John Broven, C.C. Caldwell, Bruce Campbell, David Coffey, Kevin Coffey, Scott Downing, Erin Hamilton, Melody Kelly, Jimmie Moore, Vaughn O'Shields, Mike Pierce, John Rumble, Gary Shanafelt, Mary Helen Specht, Jean Stansbury, Ron Underwood, Cassandra Volpe, James Wood, Greg Young, and Terry Young. And a very special thank you to Shelia Moore Barrow, daughter of Slim Willet's older brother Omar Moore, who shared family history and Willet memorabilia, along with her personal memories of growing up in the Moore clan.
- Joe W. Specht, "Willet, Slim," Roy R. Barkley, ed., *The Handbook of Texas Music* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 354.
- Stuart Chilton, "Don't let the Stars get in Your Eyes," *Stephenville Empire-Tribune*, September 28, 1995, A4.
- Stuart Chilton, "Stars In His Eyes," *Houston Chronicle Rotogravure Magazine*, March 8, 1953, 5. For Willet's own similar account of the incident, see Slim Willet, "Shootin' Star," *Cowboy Songs*, No. 25 (March 1953), 10.
- Bob Lapham, "Don't Let the Stories Get in the Way, Or Who Wrote Slim's Greatest Hit?" *Abilene Reporter-News*, December 24, 1995, 2C.
- Although the exact date of the recording is unknown, it may have been in April 1952. Dick Grant, "Slim Willet: Smell That Sweet Perfume," *Rockin' Fifties*, no. 68 (June 1998), 14.
- James Wood and Jean Stansbury verified the names of the musicians who played on "Stars," and each provided additional information on the recording session. See James Wood, e-mail message to author, January 31, 2007, James Wood, interview with author, February 4, 2007, and Jean Stansbury, interview with author, March 29, 2008.
- Jane Sedberry, "Ad-Libbing, Song-Writing Slim Is in the Money Now," *Abilene Reporter-News*, October 1, 1952, Evening Edition, 5B.
- Al Turner, "Four Star 'OP'-Series Record Discography," *American Music Magazine*, no. 86 (December 2000), 4; see also *The 4 Star 'OP' Listing* (Edgware, Middlesex, UK: Hillbilly Researcher, 1996).
- Johnny Whiteside, "Four Star Records," Paul Kingsbury, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Country Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 179.
- Colin Escott, "Inside Starday Records: A Conversation with Don Pierce," *Journal of Country Music*, 17, no. 1 (1994), 33.
- Willet, "Shootin' Star," 10.
- Colin Escott, *Roadkill on the Three-chord Highway: Art and Trash in American Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 49; Escott's negative assessment of Willet's version of "Stars" is most definitely open for debate. If Slim's voice was lacking, he had presence, and the fiery improvised instrumentation provided by Buck White, Smokey Donaldson, and Shorty Underwood has yet to be topped.
- Escott, "Inside Starday Records," 33; John Broven, *Record Makers and Breakers: Voices of the Independent Rock 'n' Roll Pioneers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 283.
- "Disk Pitfalls Reflected in Slim Willet's 'Eyes' Etching," *Billboard*, December 20, 1952, 20.
- "Reviews of This Week's Records: Country & Western," *Billboard*, September 27, 1952, 47.
- "So They Both Get a Break," *Billboard*, November 8, 1952, 34.
- "Rockin' Texas - Ray Campi & Mac Curtis in Conversation with Adam Komorowski, Ray Topping & Bill Millar," *New Kommotion*, no. 23 (1980), 55.
- For succinct comments on the cover records phenomenon of the era and the commercial forces behind it, see Hank Davis and Scott Parker, "Sneak a Peek Beneath the Covers," *Goldmine*, August 1, 2008, 23, 47.
- Joel Whitburn's Top Pop Memories, 1890-1954* (Menomonee Falls, WI: Record Research, 1986), 346; Colin Escott devotes a chapter to Patti Page's career and the impact of "The Tennessee Waltz" in *Roadkill on the Three-Chord Highway*.
- Charlie Gillett, "New York 1950s Overview," Encyclopedia Britannica Online; Joseph Lanza, *Vanilla Pop: Sweet Sounds from Frankie Avalon to ABBA* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2005), 23-25.
- Colin Escott provides an overview of Jack and Dave Kapp's activities at Decca Records in "How to Start a Record Company, 1," a chapter in his *Tattooed on Their Tongues: A Journey Through the Backrooms of American Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996).
- "San Antonio Rose" was Bing's second gold record... 'Pistol Packin' Mama' became [his] seventh gold record," J. Roger Osterholm, *Bing Crosby: A Bio-Bibliography* (West Port, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 118, 124.
- Bill Malone, the dean of country music historians, was among the first to point out Bing Crosby's affinity for recording "many of the country and western favorites of the period." See Bill C. Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, Rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 180. The Texas association is particularly distinctive and is something I will explore further in "Crosby & Western: Bing Crosby's Texas Country Music Connection."
- Other country songs with multiple recorded versions in release at the same time include "Candy Kisses" (1949), "Detour" (1946), "Filipino Baby" (1946), "I Love You Because" (1950), "Release Me" (1954), "Signed Sealed and Delivered" (1948), and "Slipping Around" (1949).
- For *Billboard* chart information, see *Joel Whitburn's Top Country Singles* [5th ed.] (Menomonee Falls, WI: Record Research, 2002).
- The Corky Carpenter recording on Tops is a further indication of how popular "Stars" was; Tops Records issued "soundalike" versions of the hits of the day for the always low price of 39 cents.
- For *Billboard* chart information see *Joel Whitburn's Top Pop Memories*.
- "Fields, Gracie," Colin Larkin, ed. & comp., *The Encyclopedia of Music*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), Vol. 3, 442; "Lotis, Dennis," Larkin, *The Encyclopedia of Music*, Vol. 5, 333-334.
- The flpside, also sung in Japanese, was "Pretend," a Top-10 hit for Nat King Cole in 1953; Peggy Hayama's role in the Japanese "cover version" scene of the 1950s is discussed in Toru Mitsui, "Interactions of Imported and Indigenous Musics in Japan: A Historical Overview of the Music Industry," Alison J. Ewbank and Fouli T. Papageorgiou, *Whose Master's Voice? The Development of Popular Music in Thirteen Cultures* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 167-168.
- Chilton, "Don't let the Stars get in Your Eyes," A4.
- Escott, "Inside Starday Records," 33; session guitarist Billy Mure also agreed "that Como was totally unable to get the 'feel' of ['Stars'], and after just two takes...the somnolent crooner couldn't wait to get to the golf course;" see Broven, *Record Makers and Breakers*, 388.
- George Townsend, Notes, *The Incomparable Como* (Readers Digest UK GINC-6A, 1975); Escott, *Roadkill on the Three-chord Highway*, 48-49.
- George T. Simon, "Popular Record Reviews," *Metronome*, 69, no. 1 (January 1953), 27.
- "Record Reviews," *Down Beat*, 19, no. 26 (December 31, 1952), 10.
- "Blue Chip," *Time*, 61, no. 26 (June 29, 1953), 58.
- "Como Haunted by Songs," *Abilene Reporter-News*, October 6, 1988, 8B.
- "Rites Held for Singer Perry Como," *Houston Chronicle*, May 19, 2001, 10A.
- No doubt realizing his error in ignoring "Stars," Bill McCall decided Willet's next 4 Star release would be "Let Me Know," a song Slim had written and recorded a year earlier with the same off beat rhythm, a song the record company had already issued in the 4 Star X series but had refused to promote; the second time around in an attempt to replicate the success of "Stars," several major record companies also released versions of "Let Me Know," including Capitol (Skeets McDonald), Decca (Dick Todd), Mercury (Richard Haynes), and RCA Victor (Diana Shore).
- Ellis Nassour, *Honky Tonk Angel: The Intimate Story of Patsy Cline* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 117.
- Ellis Amburn, *Dark Star: The Roy Orbison Story* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1990), 58.
- "Bill Mack Remembers Slim Willet," *West Texas Music Central*, Digest Number 22 (January 27, 2002).Border (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).
- Colin Escott, Notes, *That'll Flat Git It, Vol. 26: Rockabilly from the Vault of 4 Star Records* (Bear Family Records BCD 16876, 2008).
- Shelia Moore Barrow (Omar Moore's daughter and Willet's niece), interview with author, November 3, 2006.
- George Dolan, "This Is West Texas," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, November 18, 1958, 1. To compute the change in value of the dollar from 1958 to 2007 (the latest year available), see <http://www.measuringworth.com> (accessed January 29, 2009).
- Roxy Gordon, "Songwriter...," *Coleman Chronicle & DV*, March 21, 1995, 5A.
- For more on Dean Beard, see Joe W. Specht, "Beard, Dean," Barkley ed., *The Handbook of Texas Music*, 16-17.
- Roxy Gordon, "Dean Beard...," *Coleman Chronicle & DV*, December 14, 1993, 5B; Dash Crofts, later of Seals & Crofts, was a member of Beard's band in addition to doing session work for Willet, and he was also privy

to the rumor: "He [Willet] took credit for writing the thing ['Stars'], but I think he stole it;" see Michael B. Smith, "Blowing Through Jasmine in My Mind: The Return of Dash Croft," *BuddyMiles.com*, January 2001, <http://www.gritz.net> (accessed August 16, 2006).

49. Gordon, "Songwriter...", 5A.
50. Lapham, "Don't Let the Stories Get in the Way, Or Who Wrote Slim's Greatest Hit?" 2C.
51. Ibid.; Bob Lapham, "Backing Up Slim Willet," *Abilene Reporter-News*, December 31, 1995, 3B; Vaughn O'Shields again reiterated his firm belief that Willet wrote "Stars." See Vaughn O'Shields, interview with author, January 18, 2007; Jimmie Moore remained adamant, too. See Jimmie Moore, interview with author, December 23, 2008.
52. James Wood, e-mail message to author, January 31, 2007.
53. Bob Lapham, "More on Slim's 'Star,'" *Abilene Reporter-News*, January 14, 1996, 2B.
54. "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes," *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org> (accessed January 27, 2007); even though this entry was later corrected to properly credit Willet, this is just one example as to why *Wikipedia*, a now widely accepted online reference source, must be used with caution.
55. Kevin Coffey, e-mail message to author, January 30, 2007. See also Kevin Coffey's Notes to Rex Griffin, *The Last Letter* (Bear Family Records BCD 15911, 1996).
56. Lapham, "More on Slim's 'Star,'" 2B.
57. "Blue Chip," *Time*, 58.
58. *Paperpast Yearbook*, 1953, <http://www.paperbast.com/html/1953> (accessed August 27, 2006).
59. Townsend, Notes, *The Incomparable Como*.
60. When "Let Me Know" was first released in the 4 Star X series, Willet said Bill McCall "refused to push it" because the song employed the same "off-beat and tricky meter" he would later use on "Stars;" see "They Laughed As He Played; Now Slim's 'Stars' Is No. 1," *Abilene Reporter-News*, January 17, 1953, 1B.
61. After enrolling in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) on January 12, 1937, Willet took his physical examination at CCC Camp SP-41-T in Sweetwater, Texas, and he was then assigned to Company 2881 and stationed at CCC Camp SCS-14-A in San Simon, Arizona; on July 20, 1937, Company 2881 transferred to CCC Camp F-29-A in Globe, Arizona; Willet was honorably discharged on September 1, 1937; see National Archives and Records Administration, St. Louis, MO., National Personnel Records Center, Civilian Personnel Records, "Individual Record - Civilian Conservation Corps, No. CC8.2881379," copy in author's possession.
62. Willet, "Shootin' Star," 10.
63. "Villa, Beto," Ramiro Burr, *The Billboard Guide to Tejano and Regional Mexican Music* (New York: Billboard Books, 1999), 214-215.
64. Recording information for Pedro Vargas, Bobby Capó, and Billo's Caracas Boys is available at *Enciclopedia Discográfica de la Música Cubana*, 1925-1960, <http://library.fiu.edu/latinpop/bibliografia.html> (accessed March 21, 2008); Billo's version of "Stars" remains popular as witnessed by its reissue on compact disc, *3 Epocas Exitosas De La Billo's Caracas Boys* (Discomoda 601497, 1995).
65. "The Billboard Music Popularity Charts HONOR ROLL OF HITS The Nation's Ten Top Tunes ... for Week Ending ... January 17, 24, 31, 1953," *Billboard*, January 24, 1953, 22; January 31, 1953, 22; February 7, 1953, 24.
66. "Funeral Here Sunday For Song Writer Slim Willet," *Abilene Reporter-News*, July 2, 1966, 4A.
67. "Piano Roll" Cook, a friend and contemporary of Eubie Blake, W.C. Handy, and Jelly Roll Morton, arranged and performed thousands of rolls; see *Ragtime, Blues, Hot Piano* <http://www.doctorjazz.co.uk/page11.html> (accessed July 3, 2008).
68. "1952 Hit Parade Winners," <http://www.nfo.net/hits/1952.html> (accessed August 27, 2006).
69. Bing Crosby sang "Stars" on three occasions - January 29, February 5, February 19, 1953 - on *The Bing Crosby Show for General Electric*, which was broadcasted on CBS; see "...And Here's Bing": *Bing Crosby - The Radio Directories*, compiled by Lionel Pairpoint, <http://www.members.aol.com/macwilson/author.html> (accessed August 25, 2006); the February 5 air check has turned up on several LPs and CDs including Bing Crosby - *The Radio Years* (GNP/Crescendo GNP 9051, 1987); Dean Martin sang "Stars" on the December 30, 1952, edition of *The Martin and Lewis Show* on NBC; see John Chintala, *Dean Martin: A Complete Guide to the "Total*

Entertainer" (Exeter, PA: Chi Productions, 1998), 262; the live version is readily available on a variety of budget-priced CDs including Dean Martin, *The Love Songs* (Dejavu Retro R2CD 42-66, 2004).

70. The Bob Wills air checks dating from January 1953 on KXLA are preserved on Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys, *Harmony Park Airshots, January 1953* (Country Routes RFD C21, 1999); in introducing "Stars," Bob jokes with Louise Rowe. "I had a lot of requests last night for... 'Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes.' Was you [Louise] lookin' a little star-eyed up there [on the stage] last night for some reason or other... lots of Marines out there, you know."
71. Tennessee Ernie Ford's RadiOzark transcription of "Stars" is included on *Early Country Days of the Late Tennessee Ernie Ford* (Cowgirlboy LP 5068, 1991?).
72. The American Music Research Center (AMRC) at the University of Colorado, Boulder, is the repository for the Perry Como Collection, which contains the scripts from Como's television program; the AMRC has yet to index the scripts by song title, so there is no way to ascertain how many times Como sang "Stars" on the program; Cassandra Volpe (AMRC archivist), e-mail message to author, January 2, 2007.
73. Marie Moore Cass to Bonnie Moore Singleton (Willet's cousin), January 23, 1996, copy in author's possession; on occasion, it has been reported that Willet performed on the *Como Show* (for example, see Bob Lapham, "Slim Fit," *Abilene Reporter-News*, December 24, 1995, 2C), but his name is not listed in the index, prepared by the American Music Research Center (AMRC), of the guests who appeared on the program; Cassandra Volpe (AMRC archivist), e-mail message to author, December 5, 2006.
74. The Rounder Collective, Notes, *Have You Forgotten? The Bailey Brothers* (Rounder Records 1018, 1974).
75. Barry McCloud, *Definitive Country: The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Country Music and Its Performers* (New York: Perigee, 1995), 383; Goldie Hill's "I Let the Stars Get in My Eyes" is available back-to-back with Skeets McDonald's version of "Stars" on ... *And the Answer Is: Great Country Answer Discs From the '50s and Their Original Versions* (Bear Family Records BCD 15791, 1994).
76. 4 Star Records released Pryor's parody in March 1953 just about the time Willet's "Stars" was slipping off *Billboard's* Country & Western chart(s); Willet received co-writer credit along with Pryor and Barbara Trammel, and this combination - Willet, Pryor, and Trammel - has also received occasional credit for Slim's original; for example, see Bill Friskics-Warren and David Cantwell, *Heartaches by the Number: Country Music's 500 Greatest Singles* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press/Country Music Foundation Press, 2003), 210.
77. "Ingle, Red," Larkin, *The Encyclopedia of Music*. Vol. 4, 473.
78. Barry McCloud, *Definitive Country*, 391-392.
79. Jordan R. Young, "Mickey Katz," *Allmusic*, <http://www.allmusic.com> (accessed January 16, 2007); Yale Strom, *The Book of Klezmer: The History, The Music, The Folklore* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2002), 178-183.
80. Nolan Porterfield, e-mail message to author, February 20, 2007.
81. Grant, "Slim Willet," 11.
82. "Como to Get 6th Gold Disk," *Billboard*, January 17, 1953, 26, 59.
83. "Slim Willet's Hit To Be Displayed in Library of Congress," *Abilene Reporter-News*, November 30, 1955, 3B.
84. Linell Gentry, *A History And Encyclopedia of Country, Western, And Gospel Music* (St. Clair Shores, MI: Scholarly Press, 1972), 340-341.
85. "Slim Willet May Be Hollywood-Bound," *Abilene Reporter-News*, March 22, 1953, 9A; "Composer Slim Willet Signed For Saturday Nite Shindig," *Dallas Morning News*, March 19, 1953, 16.
86. Gentry, *A History And Encyclopedia of Country, Western, And Gospel Music*, 340.
87. Specht, "Willet, Slim," 354.
88. Bob Lapham, "Slim Fit," *Abilene Reporter-News*, December 24, 1995, 1C.
89. *Worley's Abilene City Directory 1955* (Dallas: John F. Worley Directory Co., 1955), 368, 552; Lapham, "Slim Fit," 1C.
90. Specht, "Willet, Slim," 354; Willet's television program debuted on January 27, 1954, on KRBC-TV (Channel 9) in the 8:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. time period; it moved to 9:30 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. slot on October 31, 1956; the last broadcast was on January 23, 1957.
91. "Slim Willet Heard Daily 'Live' on KNIT," *Abilene Reporter-News*, June 16, 1957, 9B.
92. "Slim Willet Gets Top KCAD Post," *Abilene Reporter-News*, May 31, 1964, 1B; although not reported at the time, Willet purchased ownership of 49% of KCAD from H. S. Higginbotham and Jack Hughes and assumed

- \$50,000 of the station's debt; Jimmie Moore, interview by the author, December 23, 2008; two months after Willet's death, Mrs. Moore and Higginbotham sold the station to Del Morton of the All-Tex Network; "KCAD Sold For 'Over \$200,000,'" *Abilene Reporter-News*, September 30, 1966, 1A.
93. In 1961, Willet recorded a sequel to "Stars" entitled "If the Stars Get in Your Eyes" (Winston 1056-45), but the largely recycled lyrics – *if the stars get in your eyes and blind you to the love we knew...please remember stars are in my eyes for you* – failed to capture the magic of the original.
 94. To date, the author has identified ninety-two versions of "Stars," along with four parodies.
 95. Josh Graves & Billy Troy, *Dad the Dobro Man* (CMH Records CMH 6264, 1988) Grady Martin, *A Touch of Country* (Decca DL 4865, 1967), Smith & Son, *Guitars Galore* (Monument KZ 33429, 1975) , *The Music City Sounds Featuring Lloyd Green and Pete Wade* (MGM SE-4672, 1970).
 96. The popularity of "Stars" in the United Kingdom and Commonwealth countries is further confirmed by the sheet music available for sale in 1953. For example, Edwin H. Morris & Co., LTD. issued sheet music by Leslie Howard in England and Colin Anderson and His Royal Prince Edwardians in Australia and New Zealand, even though neither performer actually recorded "Stars."
 97. Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Notes, *Come On Back* (Rounder Records 11661-3193, 2005)



A Deeper Blue: The Life And Music of Townes Van Zandt

by Robert Earl Hardy (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2008). x, 300 pp. (No. 1: North Texas Lives of Musicians Series).

We acclaim our songwriters for their gift to distill our common experience into the words and music of a song. We wonder at the mystery of that creation and the source of that gift, all the more so if the artist lives a troubled life ending in early death. That, in a nutshell, is the legacy of Townes Van Zandt, one of the greatest songwriters Texas has ever produced. In *A Deeper Blue: The Life And Music of Townes Van Zandt*, Robert Earl Hardy, a music writer, guitarist, and transplanted Texan from the Washington, D.C. area, has drawn upon eight years of research to document Van Zandt's personal life and explore the meaning and impact of his songs. Hardy interviewed Van Zandt's family and friends (including wives and girlfriends), schoolmates, agents, club owners, producers, and fellow musicians, most notably Guy and Susanna Clark. Hardy tracked down a wealth of printed material about Townes, as well as a substantial number of Internet sources, and compiled a list of Van Zandt's recorded legacy in original album releases from 1968 through 2004, along with live audio and video recordings directly referenced in the text. Though he presents no formal bibliography, Hardy has provided ample endnotes to document almost every fact and quote.

One voice missing from the interviews is that of Harold Eggers (brother of record producer Kevin Eggers) who served as Van Zandt's road manager in the latter years of his career. As a result, that part of the story becomes more of a recitation of dates and gigs lacking the anecdotes and personal details that characterize most of the rest of the book. That said, Eggers would have echoed many of the stories that emerged over Van Zandt's career, including both the musical triumphs and the daily battles with alcohol. (Full disclosure here: I first met Townes Van Zandt when Harold Eggers brought him to my office at the University of Texas. Much of what I know about Townes comes from Eggers's stories of touring North America and Europe, and from seeing Van Zandt in concerts—both successful and disastrous—in Austin).

A Deeper Blue is first and foremost a study of a gifted singer and songwriter. Hardy examines each of Van Zandt's best-known songs as they emerged during his career, exploring both music and lyrics with a musician's sensibility. Like most of us, Hardy wants to know where these songs came from and how they were written. His discussion of Van Zandt's best-known hit, "Pancho and Lefty," reflects the ambiguity and mystery surrounding his music and his psyche. Townes claimed to have written the song one afternoon in a motel room near Dallas, saying, "all of a sudden it was there, and I was beginning to write it down" (p.

124). Another friend, however, recalled that Van Zandt wrote the song in a hospital the previous year after a near-fatal drug overdose. Whatever its origins, "Pancho and Lefty"—in Hardy's analysis—embodies Van Zandt's own close relationship with his mother and his losing battle with the darker side of his persona, all cast in "a wistful fantasy of bandits and *federales*" (p. 126). We may never know for certain how each of Van Zandt's songs was created, but we learn that they followed no set formula or method. Whether written at a kitchen table, a hospital bed, or in the back of a tour bus, the music and words apparently gestated within Van Zandt until they were ready to emerge. As his creative offspring, the songs bear the unmistakable stamp of his personality—complex, sometimes ambiguous, tinged with melancholy, longing, or even despair, but leavened with humor and profound love. That was what made Van Zandt a great songwriter.

For all of his gifts, and for all that he did "for the sake of the song," Townes Van Zandt's personal life is a story of gradual descent into darkness. Townes was hard on everyone who was close to him, especially his own wives and children. Hardy pulls no punches about this, as he traces Van Zandt's life from its promising beginnings in a prominent Texas family to his bipolar disorder, rebellious behavior, drug abuse, and eventual alcoholism. Townes struggled with serious medical and psychological problems throughout his adult life, and his family and friends bore the brunt of his recurring episodes of self-destruction. It is necessary to chronicle this roller coaster ride through both darkness and light—as Hardy has done with such credibility and human detail—in order to appreciate the complex reality behind such stock phrases as "troubled troubadour" and "tragic genius," which have so often been used to label Townes Van Zandt.

What is perhaps most remarkable is that, with all the burdens Van Zandt imposed upon himself, he was still able to write songs of such depth and beauty. Robert Earl Hardy has performed a labor of love—sometimes tough love—to reveal the life of Townes Van Zandt in all its complexity, and his music in all its truth and beauty. Some say that to know an artist is not necessarily to know his or her art. However, in the case of Townes Van Zandt, his songs are tantamount to an autobiography. *A Deeper Blue* is a must read for anyone who would glimpse the soul of this true Texas original.

John Wheat

Texas Blues: The Rise of a Contemporary Sound

by Alan Govenar. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008. The John and Robin Dickson Series in Texas Music.) Pp. 599. Foreword, acknowledgements, prologue, photos, index. ISBN-13: 978-1-58544-605-6 cloth.

Alan Govenar, folklorist, photographer, and filmmaker, has been documenting African-American music in Texas (primarily blues) with oral histories, photographs, and field recordings for nearly three decades. Indeed, his *Texas Blues: The Rise of a Contemporary Sound*, the second book in the new John and Robin Dickson Series in Texas Music published by Texas A&M University Press, is in many ways a culmination of his previously published work, which includes *Living Texas Blues* (1985), *Meeting the Blues* (1988), *The Early Years of Rhythm and Blues* (1991), *Juneteenth Texas* (coedited with Francis Abernethy and Patrick Mullen, 1996), and *Deep Ellum and Central Track: Where the Black and White Worlds of Dallas Converged* (coauthored with Jay Brakefield, 1998). In 2004 Govenar also co-created with Akin Babatunde the musical, *Blind Lemon Blues*.

Texas Blues is divided into several sections, including region (East Texas and the Rio Grande Valley), topic ("Electrifying the Blues," "The Saxophone in Texas Blues," and "The Move to California," genre (Zydeco), and city (Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Orange, San Antonio and Corpus Christi, and Austin). Virtually all of the chapters begin with a brief introduction, summarizing the significance of the contributions of the musicians' oral histories that follow. (The introductions to the chapters on Dallas and Houston are especially extensive and informative.)

Govenar's impressively long list of interviewees is supplemented with those of Jay Brakefield, Allan Turner, John Minton, and Dick Shurman (among a few

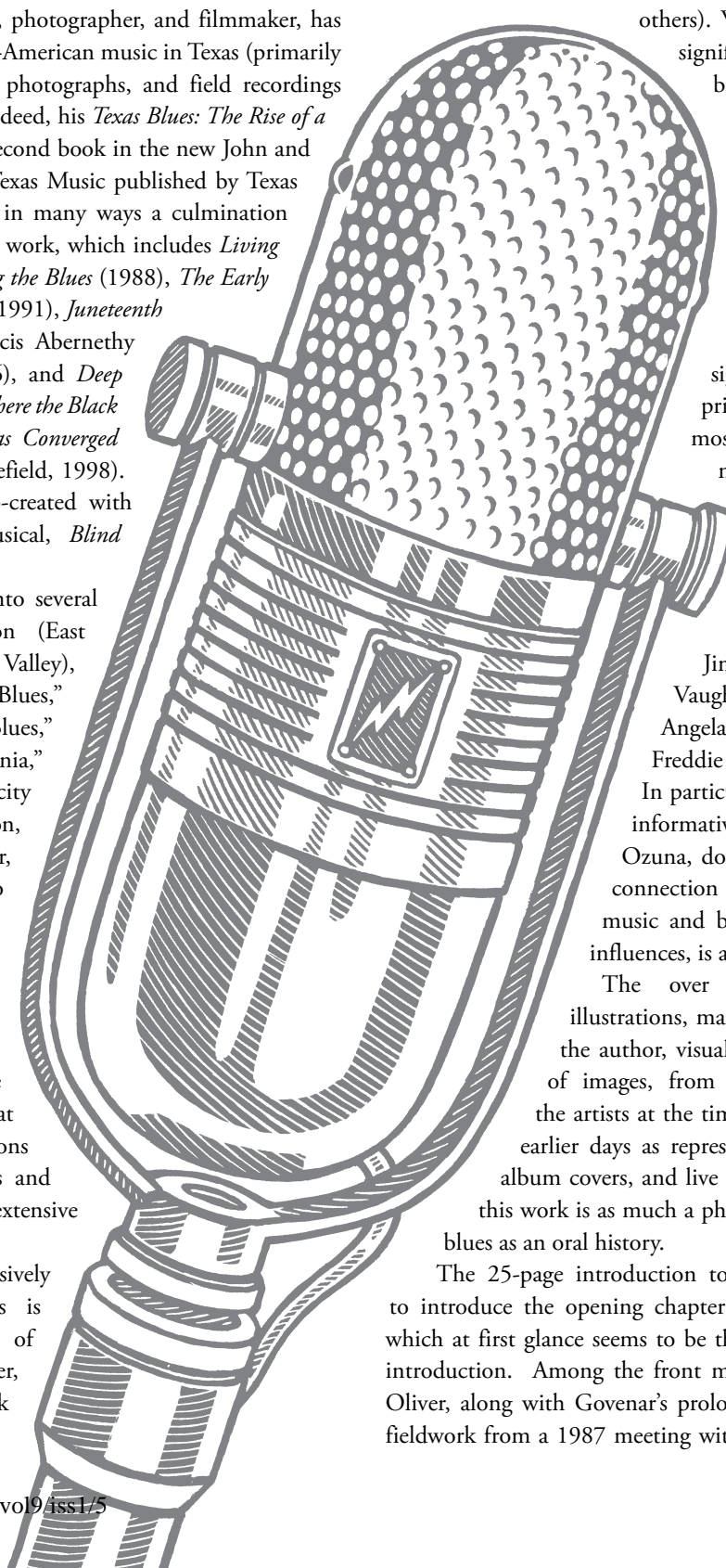
others). Where he wanted to include significant contributors to Texas blues but did not have access to an interview, Govenar added his own brief, biographical summary. Examples of this include Charlie Christian, T-Bone Walker, Bob Dunn, and Leadbelly.

While this book is a significant collection of primary source material about mostly African-American musicians and music making in Texas, it also acknowledges the contributions of such white and Latino artists as Delbert McClinton,

Jimmie and Stevie Ray Vaughan, Doyle Bramhall, Angela Strehli, Sunny Ozuna, and Freddie Fender, just to name a few. In particular, the extensive and very informative interview with Sunny Ozuna, documenting his take on the connection between Texas-Mexican music and black R&B, soul, and pop influences, is a gem.

The over 400 photographs and illustrations, many of which were taken by the author, visually document a wide range of images, from contemporary settings of the artists at the time of the interview to their earlier days as represented in publicity photos, album covers, and live performances. In the end, this work is as much a photographic history of Texas blues as an oral history.

The 25-page introduction to the book fittingly serves to introduce the opening chapter on East Texas musicians, which at first glance seems to be the only chapter missing an introduction. Among the front matter is a forward by Paul Oliver, along with Govenar's prologue, which documents his fieldwork from a 1987 meeting with Quince Cox, a cemetery



caretaker in Wortham, Texas, where Blind Lemon Jefferson is buried, to a 1999 trip to the city of Dakar, Senegal, and back to Texas in 2004 to record and photograph Clyde Langford of Centerville, Texas.

The back matter includes both a selected discography and selected bibliography, in addition to an index. Although one might quibble with an apparent exclusion of the interviewers' names, the index provides a helpful research guide. For example, while the topic was not addressed in detail, if you want to find out what musicians have to say about the Chitlin' Circuit, the index directs you to six isolated pages. What role did country and western music have on the blues? Look up "country and western" in the index, and you will find listed all of the musicians who mentioned this genre.

While *Texas Blues* is a significant compendium of primary source material and could appeal to both the general public and to scholars, the latter might take issue with the author's seemingly haphazard approach to citing secondary source material. I found the footnotes at the bottom of the page to be informative, but I was frustrated when direct quotations appeared in the text and were not cited. One example is on page 16, in which he mentions "Walter Prescott Webb's report

of his meeting with a young singer named Floyd Canada in a Beeville, Texas, pool hall in 1915." Govenar ends the paragraph with a direct quote from Webb but does not provide a footnote citation, nor is Webb listed in the bibliography. Govenar also fails to cite his source(s) for a biographical sketch of Charlie Christian. Unfortunately, there are other similar examples.

Less serious issues one might encounter with this publication are the book's size and some problems with the layout. The cloth-covered book is large, heavy, and cumbersome to hold and carry. A second paperback edition might solve that problem and would also provide an opportunity to reformat a couple of sections, in which one interview begins at the bottom of the page of the previous interview, and another instance in which the ending of one interview runs over into the beginning of another. (See pp. 77-79 and 338-364.)

Despite these limitations, which can easily be corrected in a second edition, *Texas Blues* is a welcome and significant contribution to the history of Texas blues, compiled by arguably one of the state's most authoritative researchers on the subject. Alan Govenar's interviews provide valuable insight into the lives of those Texas blues musicians who are familiar to us. Perhaps more importantly, his work offers a window into the experiences of the many lesser-known musicians who have spent their lives making music and contributing to the state's rich musical fabric.

Kevin Mooney

Our Contributors

Kevin Mooney, Ph.D.,

teaches in the School of Music at Texas State University-San Marcos. He has written several articles for *The Handbook of Texas Music*, *The Journal of Texas Music History*, and other publications.

Joe W. Specht

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

Ruth Sullivan

holds an M.A. in History from Texas State University. In addition to museum work and teaching history for more than three decades, Sullivan has published several articles in *The Handbook of Texas Music*.

John Wheat

is Sound Archivist at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin, where he oversees the Center's extensive collections of music and the spoken word. Wheat has written for *The Handbook of Texas Music*, *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, and other publications. A professional historian, translator, musician, and lecturer, Wheat brings a wide range of experience to his efforts in documenting the development of music and the music industry in Texas and the greater South and Southwest.

Our Contributors

Kevin Mooney, Ph.D.,

teaches in the School of Music at Texas State University-San Marcos. He has written several articles for *The Handbook of Texas Music*, *The Journal of Texas Music History*, and other publications.

Joe W. Specht

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

Ruth Sullivan

holds an M.A. in History from Texas State University. In addition to museum work and teaching history for more than three decades, Sullivan has published several articles in *The Handbook of Texas Music*.

John Wheat

is Sound Archivist at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin, where he oversees the Center's extensive collections of music and the spoken word. Wheat has written for *The Handbook of Texas Music*, *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, and other publications. A professional historian, translator, musician, and lecturer, Wheat brings a wide range of experience to his efforts in documenting the development of music and the music industry in Texas and the greater South and Southwest.