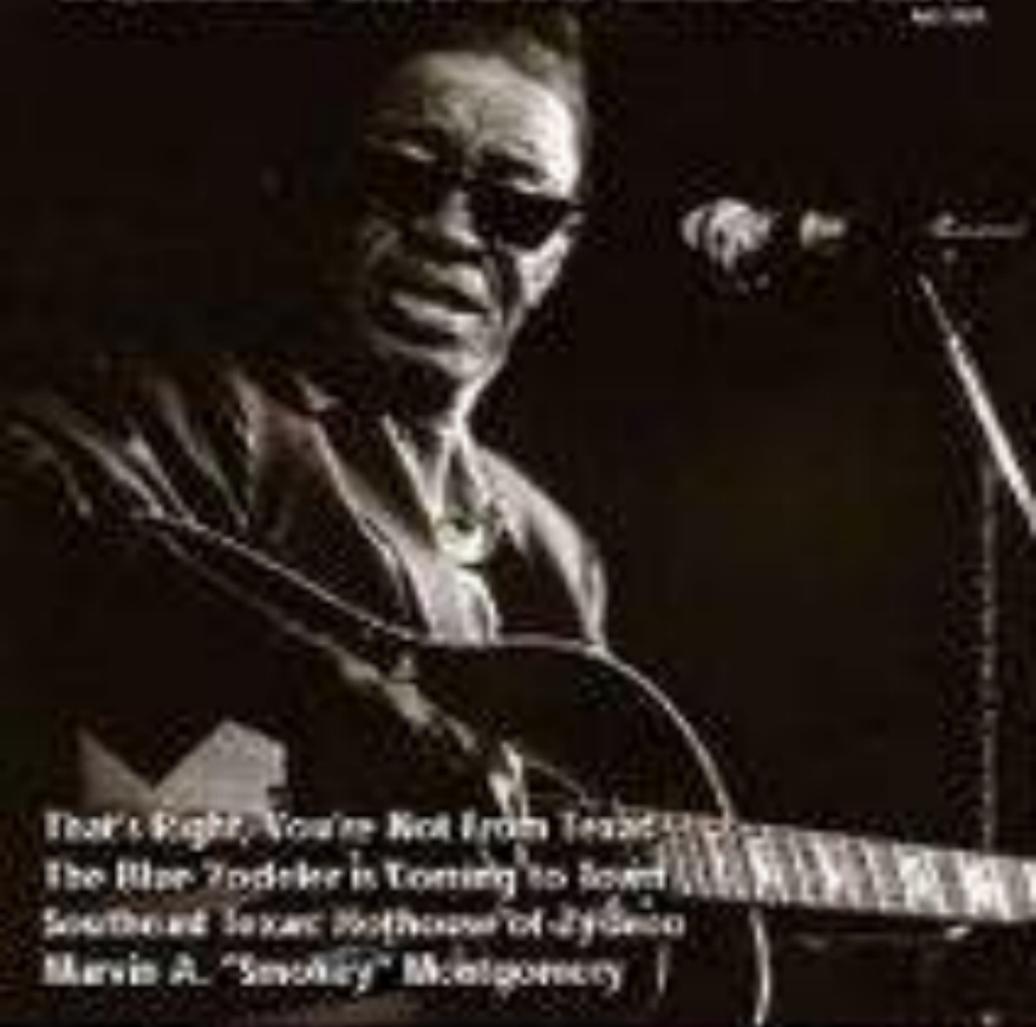


The Journal of

Volume 1 Number 1

TEXAS MUSIC HISTORY

April 2004



That's Right, You're Not from Texas
The Blue Yodeler is Coming to Town
Southeast Texas Hoophouse of Zydeco
Marvin A. "Smokey" Montgomery

Letter from the Director



As the Institute for the History of Texas Music celebrates its second anniversary, we can look back on a very productive first two years. Our graduate and undergraduate courses on the history of Texas music continue to grow in popularity. *The Handbook of Texas Music*, the definitive encyclopedia of Texas music history, which we are publishing jointly

with the Texas State Historical Association and the Texas Music Office, will be available in summer 2002. The online bibliography of books, articles, and other publications relating to the history of Texas music, which we developed in cooperation with the Texas Music Office, has proven to be a very useful tool for researchers.

Our *Texas Music History Unplugged* lecture series has been a tremendous success. Through the program, we have brought such musicians as Tish Hinojosa, Ray Benson, Terri Hendrix, Lloyd Maines, Joel Guzmán, and Willis Alan Ramsey to SWT to perform and explain how Texas music reflects the state's unique history and culture, has been very successful. We're planning another big "Unplugged" concert for the spring semester, with smaller performances throughout the year. We also are working with Rosetta Wills and a number of people in the music and business communities to establish a "Bob Wills Endowed Chair in Texas Music History."

The Institute's community outreach programs continue to grow. In addition to our educational presentations at public schools, community centers, and other venues, we have launched a new program, Swan Songs, in which we work with musicians and health care professionals to organize therapeutic musical performances for patients.

Our first compilation CD, *Travelin' Texas*, which includes songs from Asleep at the Wheel, Tish Hinojosa, Joe Ely, Marcia Ball, and 14 other Texas artists, has been such a successful fundraiser for the Institute, that we've put together a second CD. *Travelin' Texas, Volume 2* will include Delbert McClinton, George Strait and the Ace in the Hole Band, Eliza Gilkyson, Billy Joe Shaver, Sara Hickman, Ray Wiley Hubbard, and a va-

riety of other great Texas musicians. Proceeds from the CD have been vital in helping fund our ongoing educational projects. We are very grateful to the musicians and to everyone else who has supported us during the past two years.

The Institute continues to add important new collections to the Texas Music Archives at SWT, including the Mike Crowley Collection and the Roger Polson and Cash Edwards Collection. We also are working closely with the Texas Heritage Music Foundation, the Center for American History, the Texas Music Museum, the New Braunfels Museum of Art and Music, the Museum of American Music History-Texas, the Mexico-North consortium, and other organizations to help preserve the musical history of the region and to educate the public about the important role music has played in the development of our society.

At the request of several prominent people in the Texas music industry, we are considering the possibility of establishing a music industry degree at SWT. This program would allow students interested in working in any aspect of the music industry to earn a college degree with specialized training in museum work, musical performance, sound recording technology, business, marketing, promotions, journalism, or a variety of other sub-fields within the music profession.

With this second issue of *The Journal of Texas Music History*, we continue to provide interesting and engaging information for those interested in the history behind Texas music. As the first academic journal to focus on the entire spectrum of Texas music history, the *Journal* already has earned national praise for its high academic standards and its innovative format.

I am deeply indebted to Kathryn Ledbetter, Gregg Andrews, Jenni Finlay, Ann Marie Ellis, Gene Bourgeois, Gerald Hill, T.Cay Rowe, Diana Harrell, César Limón, Lucky Tomblin, and everyone else who has contributed to the success of the *Journal* and the Institute. We believe the work we're doing is very important, and we invite you to contact us for more information or to become involved in this unique and exciting educational and preservational program.

Sincerely,

Gary Hartman, Ph.D.
 Director, Institute for the History of Texas Music
 Southwest Texas State University



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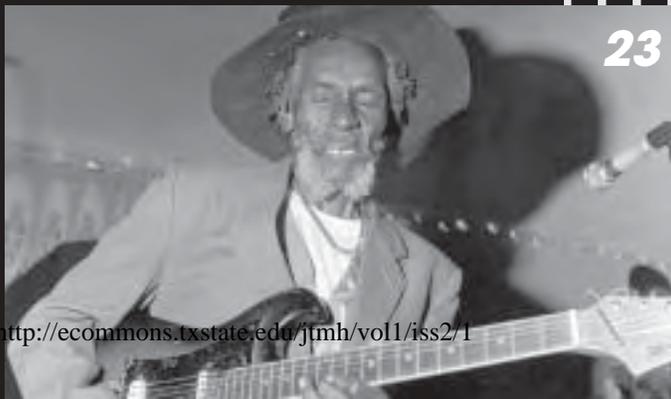
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MUSIC HISTORY

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

In order to continue this success, we need your help. Your contribution will help fund continued publication of *The Journal of Texas Music History*, along with all the other important educational and preservation projects we have underway.

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

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That's Right, You're Not From Texas:

Exploring Some Outside Influences on Texas Music

Karl Hagstrom Miller



Courtesy of: *Talking Machine World*, July, 1928, p.46.

Before he began his successful recording career in 1927, Jimmie Rodgers held down gigs at resorts near Lauderdale Springs, Mississippi, and Asheville, North Carolina. His groups performed a wide variety of tunes at the resorts, including many of the songs emanating from New York's Tin Pan Alley. They played "I'll See You in My Dreams," "Doo Wacka Doo," "Who's Sorry Now?," and other hits of the day. Group member Claude Grant recalled, "We would play just about everything, square dancing music and other dance numbers. When we played for dinner it would be popular music, some country music also." One of the tunes Rodgers played was "How Come You Do Me Like You Do?," written in 1924 by the popular vaudeville team of Gene Austin and Roy Bergere.¹

Gene Austin had traveled a long way before he scored on the New York vaudeville scene. Born in 1900 in Gainesville, Texas, the white singer had much of his early musical training listening to local black performers around Yellow Pine, Louisiana. He left his working-class home at the age of fifteen, when he ran away with a traveling circus troupe. After serving in World War I, Austin put together a vaudeville act and toured through the Midwest and Northeast, before settling in New York City. There he met recording executive Nat Shilkret and waxed several wildly popular songs for Victor during the 1920s and early 1930s. His smooth, understated tenor expressed a casual sophistication on hits such as "How Come You Do Me Like You Do" and his

1927 breakout recording, "My Blue Heaven." Austin eventually sold more than 86 million records for Victor and paved the way for later soft-spoken crooners.²

Yet Austin never lost sight of his roots in Texas and Louisiana. Even after he became the hit of society parties in the city, he still pulled on his rural southern identity. The same year he penned "How Come You Do Me," Austin displayed his southern chops, ghost singing on the debut recordings of hillbilly artist George Reneau from Knoxville, Tennessee.³ Later, Austin dubbed himself "the Voice of the Southland," touted how he had absorbed the blues styles of his southern home, and organized tent-show tours of the South during the Depression. His New York recording success

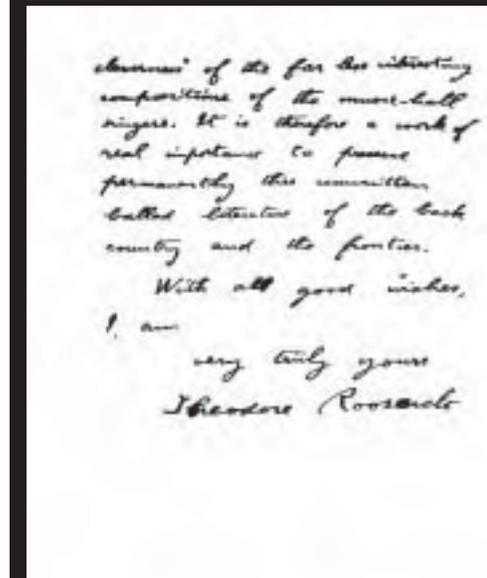
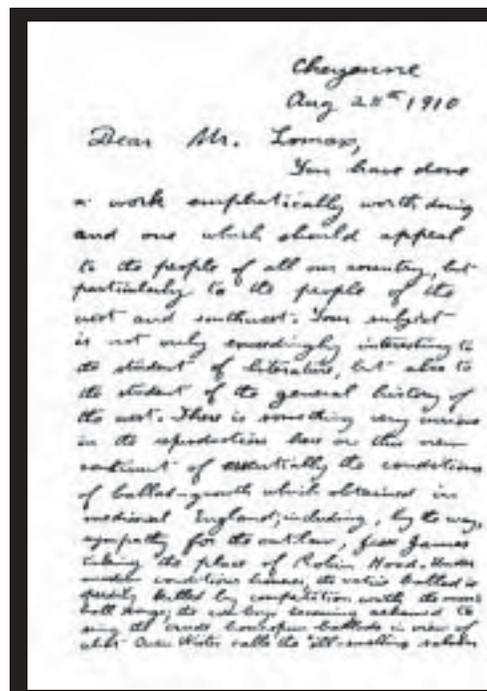
made him a known commodity throughout the nation, including his Texas home.

The experiences of Rodgers and Austin suggest some intriguing questions. Where does "Texas Music" begin and what are the outer limits of its scope? Is the term useful if it is stretched to take in Austin's hits from the New York vaudeville stage or Rodgers's North Carolina supper club music? Can we fully understand the intricate story of music in Texas without pulling these sounds and styles into the mix? This issue of *The Journal of Texas Music History* features three essays examining music or musicians that rooted themselves in Texas by design rather than by birth. To paraphrase Lyle Lovett: "That's right! They're not from Texas." Jimmie Rodgers was a native of Mississippi but in his later years adopted Texas as his home. As Joe W. Specht's research indicates, Texas adopted Rodgers as well. Fans anticipated his appearances throughout the state and flocked to catch a glimpse of the famous "blue yodeler." John Dempsey celebrates Marvin "Smokey" Montgomery's long career with Texas swing kings, the Light Crust Doughboys. Montgomery came to Texas almost as an accident, carried by a Jacksonville tent show from his Iowa home. In later years, Montgomery would find Texas to be a launching pad for travels far and wide. Finally, Roger Wood expertly chronicles the development of zydeco music by border-hopping migrants from Louisiana in the oil and industrial towns of East Texas.

Together, these essays remind us that Texas and Texas music both exist in constant, sometimes contested, relationship to the world outside their borders. That's right: many of the influences shaping the sound, the symbolism, and the economy of Texas music are not from Texas. This essay briefly examines a few of these influences and attempts to integrate them into the story of Texas music. It is not conclusive or complete. Rather, it offers glimpses of a series of cultural encounters that shaped the sound of music in Texas. It is hoped that they might point to other similar ways in which Texas culture is defined by and against the wider world. For the sake of brevity, this essay focuses on three types of influences: people, media, and ideas about modernity and the market. First, people migrated to Texas, moved away, or simply passed through en route to somewhere else. The music that they carried with them combined with that of other sojourners to create the ever-changing sound of music in Texas. Second, national mass media such as sheet music, phonograph records, and radio have long brought national and international sounds and styles to the people of Texas. From their dawn, these industries targeted Texas as an important market for their wares, injecting the state with the vital sounds of commercial popular music, Broadway tunes, minstrel ditties, and modern orchestras. Finally, many of those who have been interested in defining Texas music have done so with one eye fixed outside the state. Folklorists, commercial record companies,

and traveling musicians seized on the myths and music of Texas in the early twentieth century. Some found in the Lone Star State a culture that stood in bold relief from the music of the rest of the nation, particularly the songs and styles of the urban northeast. This perceived difference between Texas culture and the popular culture of the nation was essential to how music in Texas was promoted, categorized, and talked about by people both inside and outside the state.

Take, for example, one of the early defining documents of Texas music, John Lomax's *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*. The value of the collection, some commentators suggested, rested in its contents' difference from the music emanating from the urban northeast. When the Harvard-trained Texas folklorist published *Cowboy Songs* in 1910, Theodore Roosevelt heartily endorsed the project. The book opened with an enthusiastic letter from the ex-President to the ballad hunter. "You have done a work emphatically worth doing and one which should appeal to the people of all our country," Roosevelt wrote. Justifying the value of the project, the former Rough Rider immediately turned to visions of a European past. "There is something very curious in the reproduction here on this new continent of essentially the conditions of ballad-growth which obtained in medieval England," he enthused. Roosevelt found that the "crude home-spun ballads" that cropped up in "the back country and the frontier" offered spiritual nourishment that the "ill-smelling," clever



“music hall songs” heard in most of the nation could not provide. Lomax, he believed, had uncovered evidence of the past living in the present. Cowboys on the shrinking frontier, isolated from the ubiquitous, self-conscious music of the modern market place, had preserved the ancient art of ballad making.⁴

Lomax shared Roosevelt’s interpretation. Lomax identified the cowboy by his isolation and the authenticity of his culture by the absence of modern, commercial music. “Frankly,” he told an academic audience in 1913, “my own interest in American ballads is largely because they are human documents that reveal the mode of thinking, the character of life, and the point of view, of the vigorous, red-blooded, restless Americans—These folk-songs originate and are yet current, as I have said, wherever people live isolated lives, — isolated lives under conditions more or less primitive[.]”⁵

Cowboy Songs tapped into a number of private and public longings shared by many northeastern white intellectuals in the early twentieth century. Many were interested in identifying an authentic national culture that existed outside of the morally

The informants whose handwritten transcripts Lomax used to forge parts of *Cowboy Songs* often had a more complicated story to tell about their musical lives. They heartily fought social isolation, attempting to remain connected to the larger cultural currents of the nation while riding the desolate plains. One Texan wrote to Lomax in 1910, “[A]bout the first thing I recollect [sic] at about 5 years of age was sitting in the saddle and riding around the cows (and sorts of other livestock)[.] And our music outside of a Jews harp or a violin for an old time dance was all vocal[,] and we picked up all the comic and sentimental songs we could hear and learn and would some times attempt to rhyme songs ourselves.”⁸ The comic and sentimental songs popularly available through sheet music and touring shows constituted a hearty portion of the music sung by cattle drivers. *Cowboys*, it appears, thirsted for such material and got it any way they could. In fact, after the publication of *Cowboy Songs*, Lomax received numerous requests from drivers asking for copies of the book.⁹ When they received copies of Lomax’s collection in the mail, cattle drivers may have

Lomax wrote to an informant in 1911: “I am after the untutored and unedited expressions of the original plainsmen. I am frank to confess that what you send me savors of the conventional popular song.”

compromised world of the market. The market had almost done its job too well, some argued, by creating a society of affluent citizens, comfortable creatures who were nonetheless increasingly succumbing to moral and physical weakness. As journalist Henry Childs Merwin complained in 1897, many Americans had become “civilized too much.” He suggested those sick with civilization turn to those who had not yet caught the disease: “Consult the teamster, the farmer, the wood-chopper, the shepherd, or the drover,” Merwin counseled. “From his loins, and not from those of the dilettante, will spring the man of the future.”⁶ *Cowboy Songs* answered the call, offering many readers evidence of lives lived outside of twentieth-century modernity.

Cowboy Songs was not designed to be an accurate depiction of the complex lives of contemporary cattle drivers. Lomax often struggled with his informants to separate folk songs from the parts of their repertoire that betrayed the image of an isolated frontier culture. “But are you really in earnest in claiming that the songs you send me are real range songs, untouched by any emendation of yours?” Lomax wrote to an informant in 1911: “I am after the untutored and unedited expressions of the original plainsmen. I am frank to confess that what you send me savors of the conventional popular song. Won’t you tell me just what you have written yourself and what you have picked up on the plains?”⁷ Lomax found his cowboy informants useful to the extent that they could represent, not their own experiences and expressions, but the folklorists’ vision of an authentic isolated culture.

been surprised to read that their experiences resembled “mediaeval England” more than the time and place in which they lived.

Many residents of Texas and other frontier states had imbibed the nation’s “conventional popular song” for some time. Like some of Lomax’s informants, they integrated the sounds and styles heard into their musical lives. These national influences on music in Texas were aided by concerted efforts by national theater and phonograph industries to build networks of performance spaces, product distribution, and retail stores.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Texas had become an important market for national vaudeville and minstrel companies. Blackface minstrel troupes had been one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the country since the mid-nineteenth century. The largest companies combined derogatory caricatures of black culture by white performers with increasingly elaborate stage design and dramatic spectacle. The wild popularity of the major troupes attracted songwriters and publishers, who fought to get their latest products featured in the show. Minstrel troupes thus became one of the predominant circulators of commercial song throughout the nation. They brought the latest sentimental ballads, novelty numbers, and Tin Pan Alley compositions even to many relatively remote sections of the country. Texas was an important part of their territory, especially in the winter months when northern travel was difficult. Dan Quinlan, the manager of the successful A. G. Field’s Minstrels wrote to *Billboard* in 1900 from Palestine, Texas:

"The prospects in Texas look very encouraging to me, if the weather keeps good. I have been coming down here for seventeen years, and have never seen so much money in circulation in this state. Every nigger has his fist full of twenty-dollar bills, so if the weather keeps up at all good, we ought to play to an immense business the next four weeks."¹⁰ Field's Minstrels were not alone in their exploitation of rural Texas markets. The Harrison Brothers, a nationally touring minstrel company comprised of African-American singers and dancers, traveled through Texas in late 1900. The Harrison Brothers performed sixteen one-night engagements between November 28 and December 15. Their itinerary, typical of many contemporary touring companies, included both significant cities and smaller towns in east Texas: West, Waco, Calvert, Bryan, Navasota, Houston, Beaumont and La Grange.¹¹ Companies such as Field's and the Harrison Brothers brought the sounds of the urban stage to small town Texas. They shaped the sounds of Texas music and brought residents of West and Waco into cultural conversation with the rest of the nation.

In the first years of the century, Texas also found its place on the map of an expanding phonograph industry eager to rope in new consumers of the talking machine. Initial images of Texas in the industry press associated the state with the rural isolation featured by Lomax and his peers. However, instead of identifying isolation as an antidote to civilization, the talking machine world found rural isolation evidence of a hungry, untapped market for their wares. In 1906, writer Howard Taylor Middleton published "The Country in Autumn" in *Talking Machine World*, the premiere journal of the industry. The article played upon the cultural isolation identified with rural Americans. "The rural districts are fraught with promise to the talking machine dealer, and the more isolated the district the greater the promise," Middleton argued.

Wherever the enjoyments of the great metropolis are heard only through the medium of the newspaper, where not even an echo of city life penetrates, there will be found a happy hunting ground for the talking machine salesman.

The talking machine could make the "country village...throb with the quick pulse of the city" by bringing the "pleasure of the theatre, the concert and the minstrel show" to isolated consumers, the author insisted.¹²

The previous year, Middleton vividly illustrated how the introduction of the talking machine to the cattle range might create excitement among isolated consumers. His short story, "The Prima Donna and the Cowboy," served as an object lesson in selling the talking machine to western working-class consumers skeptical of the industry's intentions. The story begins as Ike, a white cowhand prone to cursing and hurling racial

slurs, settles down with his friend, the Kid, to listen to a new talking machine sent from his boss, who has traveled to a roping contest in New York City. The first record they hear depicts a Wild West show. It culminates in a cavalry bugle cry and the wails of Indian warriors in retreat. After a moment of silence, the Kid comments,

I've heard a lot about them talkin' machines, but reckoned they was a fake put up to sell like that blamed patent medicine that slick critter from the East pawned off on us down to Denver last winter, but (here he took a huge chew of tobacco to recuperate his sense of speech) when they kin git a whole tribe of Injuns, a full brass band, a regiment of cowboys an' the Lord knows what else in one of them black dinner plates, an' shoot it out at you through a funnel, an' make your hair stand up an' bring the sweat out on you in a minute more'n a whole blamed round up of mad steers would in a month, it's a tolerably hot article, ain't it, Ike?

"Them's my sentiments, Kid," Ike responds. The mood of the story changes quickly when the pair listens to the next record. The initial awe of hearing the talking machine is replaced by a strong cultural connection to the industry's home in the Northeast. "Home Sweet Home" echoes from the horn, and Ike is transported back to an eastern middle-class life. "His cowboy life fell away, and once more he was home from college on his first vacation home in the little New Hampshire village, and strolling up to the rustic cottage where dwelt Grace Brandon, the little New England maid who had promised to become Mrs. James in the far-distant, rosy future when his college days were o'er and he had made a fortune." Ike travels back east, marries Grace, and brings her back to live with him on the range.¹³

The story thus begins by asserting the common image of cowboys' cultural distance from the urban Northeast. Yet it concludes by drawing the cattle range into an intimate relationship with northern capital and culture, easing the cultural difference associated with the two regions and suggesting that the frontier West offered a fruitful market for the talking machine. It thus helped to draw consumers on the Texas range into a cognitive map charting the phonograph industry's expansion.

This map of the talking machine's reach increasingly included Texas as industry executives and scouts surveyed the prospects for sales in the state. *Talking Machine World* featured discussions of the railroad and trade routes through the state for the benefit of outside jobbers, warning that the great distances between cities would require extra travel time. By 1905, the industry had invested considerable capital in Texas, integrated the state within national distribution networks, and established regional

sales territories. Talking machine companies covered the state so thoroughly that industry pundits expressed fear of imminent market saturation—this many years before the recording of Texas music.¹⁴ In the following decade, postwar prosperity and the oil boom again sent phonograph companies scurrying to build their customer base in Texas. The state's place in the national economy, its burgeoning fuel and agricultural base, thus affected the ways in which the phonograph industry imagined its role in the state.¹⁵ In 1923, Lester Burchfield, a Victor wholesaler from Dallas, explained:

The rural districts are the heaviest buyers of Victrolas, and the easier money conditions, the good crop outlook and good prices for the products of the farm have given the farmers and stock raisers confidence so that they are not backward in making purchases. Wool is now selling in Texas at nearly double the price received last year. This is being reflected in heavy sales of talking machines in southwest Texas, where wool is grown chiefly.¹⁶

As the talking machine and radio industries attempted to bring these rural Texans into the media consumer fold, they often portrayed their efforts as a clash of separate cultures. Traveling salesmen reverted to standard stereotypes to describe the Texans they encountered. The recollections of Fada radio salesman Lou Stutz are illustrative. Stutz wrote of a 1923 sales trip to Texas, “where men are men and used to the wide and wild open spaces.” While visiting Beaumont, Stutz received a wire from his headquarters claiming that there was a potential customer in Brownson. This began a search that the eastern salesman described as a series of encounters with stereotypical Texans: slow-drawled

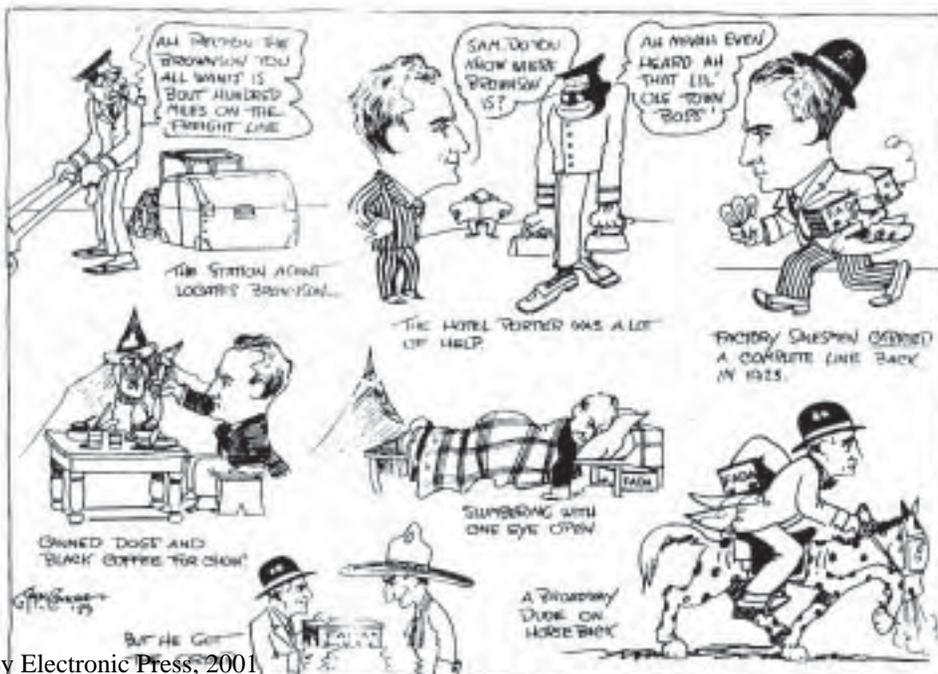
railroad workers, an ingratiating, minstrel-inspired black porter, and a series of rough-hewn white cow pokes (see accompanying illustration). Stutz highlighted the difference between the characters he encountered and his own modern, urban life. “Picture me, a Broadway dude, never aboard a horse in all my life,” he wrote. “At that time derby hats were the vogue. My apparel included a Chesterfield overcoat, tight fitting with a velvet collar—and I straddling this raw-boned Napoleon!” After his long quest, however, the cultural difference between Texas and the east coast melted away as his client “went into hysterics over the set—which created a sensation in that section of the country.”¹⁷

These stories give several important clues to the relationship between the development of the mass media in Texas and the images of the state in the eyes of these industries and the nation. The expansion of the talking machine world into Texas was accompanied by images of Texas and its people as somehow isolated and different from the people of the Northeast. The industry pulled on the same visions of Texas isolation and difference that characterized scholarly works such as *Cowboy Songs*. Industry pundits such as Middleton and Stutz may not have invested Texas isolation with the same moral primitivism Lomax found on the open range. Yet they did contribute to the idea of rural Texans as dramatically, if unwillingly, outside modern American culture. Such images would have long-lasting effects on the sounds and styles the nation's music industry sought from Texas musicians and promoted as characteristic of the state.

The talking machine changed the ways Texans heard music. Texans discovered music to which they had not previously had access. These new sounds fundamentally changed the way in which Texans made music and imagined their own connections to the world outside the state. In 1924, a Dallas phonograph salesman noted,

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courtesy of: Talking Machine World, September, 1929, p. 9



People with radio-receiving sets now listen in and perhaps hear a few strains of a song or an instrumental number a thousand miles away. It may be a catchy song or music number and the listener gets just enough of it to whet his appetite, as it were. Next day he goes down to his music store and buys a record of that number because he wants to hear the rest of it.¹⁸

Even before record companies began recording Texas vernacular music in the 1920s, many Texans listened to and enjoyed a variety of music on the phonograph. Mexican-American singing star Lydia Mendoza, for example, had some of her earliest musical experiences listening to her father's collections of opera recordings. Mendoza recalled, "My father liked the theater and music very much, and during those times when he owned a phonograph, our home was always full of music from records as well as what we would play ourselves. For

music from beyond the Texas border. They often showed little desire to segregate the music that they made from that which was popular in other parts of the nation or the world. In this they were not unique. Texans had been willing and enthusiastic consumers of a wide variety of music for quite some time, often belying images of their cultural isolation or antagonism to commercial popular culture. Some Texas artists even went as far as leaving their homes for the bright lights of the Northeast.

In 1910, the year folklorist John Lomax published *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, a young, white Texas singer picked up stakes and moved fifteen hundred miles to New York City. Vernon Dalhart, born Marion Try Slaughter in 1883, grew up in a rancher's family in and around Jefferson, Texas. As a young child, Dalhart had learned to ride horses and tend cattle on his uncle's 500-acre ranch. In his teens he held a summer job as a cow hand, the cowboy songs loved by Lomax echoing through the youngster's head. These were not the only tunes occupying Dalhart, however. When his family moved to nearby Dallas following the death of his father, the teen went to work

Artists such as Mendoza and Ledbetter actively broke down some of the borders between musical genres as they integrated the songs and styles they heard into their performances. 11

instance, when I was young I listened a lot to Caruso, Enrico Caruso. My father was a fanatical aficionado of his. At one time, he had the entire collection of Caruso's recordings."¹⁹ Texas blues legend "Leadbelly" born Huddie Ledbetter, also may have learned some of his vast repertoire of songs from phonograph records. While performing with Blind Lemon Jefferson in Dallas around 1915, the black guitarist drew on the songs and styles available through records, including Tin Pan Alley, Broadway show tunes, and the like.²⁰ The singer did recall learning several songs from mass-produced sheet music.²¹ By the 1920s, early country records and radio were also at his disposal. John Lomax noted Ledbetter's love of this material. "Prime examples," he wrote, "are the yodeling blues and ballads of Jimmy Rogers [sic] of recent fame, whose ardent admirer Lead Belly still remains. His favorite song, we hate to say, is 'Silver Haired Daddy,' a favorite with yodelers and only too familiar to everyone who has a radio."²² Lomax also noted the singer's love of several jazz tunes. Ledbetter pulled on all these sources as he convinced audiences at caf  s and house parties to push back the carpet.

Artists such as Mendoza and Ledbetter actively broke down some of the borders between musical genres as they integrated the songs and styles they heard into their performances. Their stories demonstrate that Texas artists developed their music and their livelihoods in constant cultural contact and interaction with

as a salesman for a local piano store. His interest in music continued to blossom as he studied at the Dallas Conservatory of Music. By 1910, the husband and father of two was prepared to dive into the national music scene as a performer. He moved to New York City, the capitol of the nation's theater, phonograph, and music publishing industries. He took the name of two Texas towns near Jefferson to create his stage name.²³

Paying the bills by again selling pianos, Dalhart scoured the city in search of singing opportunities. He hired himself out as a soloist to local churches and funeral homes. In 1912, he landed a minor role in Puccini's *Girl of the Golden West*. The following year he scored the lead in Gilbert and Sullivan's *H. M. S. Pinafore*, singing from the stage of the famed Hippodrome before joining the production on the road. He received positive press for his singing of light opera. Like many other New York stage sensations, Dalhart's talent soon was tapped by the talking machine business. In 1915, Edison announced in its catalog that Vernon Dalhart would make records for the company. Edison followed with the black dialect number "Can't Yo' Heah Me Callin', Caroline," several foxtrots, and light opera selections such as "On Yonder Rock Reclining" from Auber's *Fra Diavolo*. Dalhart became a strong and versatile seller for Edison. The company sent him on "tone-testing" tours to demonstrate their products and helped set up guest spots with oratorio societies

and performances in music halls. The tenor could do it all. A few years after he left his Texas home, he had found success in the popular music business.²⁴

Dalhart's journey to New York suggests an important counter-narrative to a well-known tale: northern scholars descending into the South to discover traditional folk music. As John Lomax ventured from Harvard to the cattle range, some of the very musicians who sang the songs he sought were traveling in the opposite direction. They were not in search of American tradition but access to the modern American media. Back home, performing in local theaters, bars, or medicine shows did not gain the attention of the recording or publishing worlds. New York was different. If one wanted to make much money making music, it was the place to be. Southern migrants found varying degrees of success in the big city by shaping their art to fit into the genres and styles popular in New York at the time. Like

recorded." Another Edison publication from 1918 found Dalhart responding to questions about how he learned to perform such convincing "negro dialect":

'Learn it?' he said. 'I never had to learn it. When you are born and brought up in the South your only trouble is to talk any other way. All through my childhood that was almost the only talk I ever heard because you know the sure 'nough Southerner talks almost like a Negro, even when he's white. I've broken myself of the habit, more or less, in ordinary conversation, but it still comes pretty easy.'²⁵

Edison's praise of Dalhart's "negro dialect" was part of a larger trend which identified the South and southern performers with an anti-industrial ideal.

Blackface involved not a mere dismissal or attack upon blackness but an opportunity to publicly imbibe it and all it represented.

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Dalhart and Gene Austin, they sang light opera, and performed on vaudeville, Broadway, and cabaret stages.

Ledbetter, Mendoza, and Dalhart enjoyed the wide variety of music they encountered through national touring shows and phonograph records. Yet the music for which they eventually became known showed relatively little sign of these influences. Part of the reasons for these ellipses may be the pressures they experienced from folklorists, recording companies, or audiences from outside of their local Texas communities. Each found that these powerful audiences—and guardians of the media gates—were not interested in hearing Texas artists perform all of the music they had come to love. Rather, they encouraged Texas artists to perform songs and styles that stood in stark contrast to the nation's repertoire of commercial popular song. Exploring how these artists experienced these expectations reveals a great deal about how Texas music and Texas culture operated in relation to the rest of the country.

Vernon Dalhart attempted to build a career for himself as light opera singer, yet he received his strongest early accolades for his performance of minstrel material. The singer recorded a number of "negro dialect" numbers that were reportedly too true to their source material to be characterized as novelty or burlesque. A 1917 Edison catalog demanded, "You must realize, even when you have only heard 'Can't Yo' Heah Me Callin', Caroline?' once that this is quite different from the usual 'coon song.' It is a really artistic, old-fashioned darky love song. Vernon Dalhart sings it with tremendous effect. He gets the real darky whine. This is probably the best rendition of its kind ever

Blackface minstrelsy lived its nineteenth-century infancy primarily in northern cities. White working-class performers—many of them immigrants—turned to derogatory visions of southern black culture both as a pastoral antidote to their economic oppression and as a way of asserting their own whiteness. Through the performative ritual of putting on and eventually taking off "blackness," blackface minstrels and their audiences asserted a common whiteness defined by the negation of everything the stage minstrel represented: slavery, primitivism, hedonism, and naivetÉ. At the same time, historian David Roediger contends, the black mask enabled white workers to express longing and desire for that which their whiteness left behind. Blackface involved not a mere dismissal or attack upon blackness but an opportunity to publicly imbibe it and all it represented.²⁶

Central to the minstrel show were images of southern black plantation life and labor, and it was with special fascination and longing that many urban industrial workers may have viewed these depictions of a pre-industrial idyll. The notes of lament and longing for the southern plantation heard in songs such as "Dixie" and "Old Folks at Home" resonated with urban workers whose lives were often marked by the discipline of industrial labor and a palpable distance from the rhythms and beauty of nature. While historians such as Roediger convincingly associate these songs with workers' quest for their own pre-industrial past, it is also important to note the ways in which the South took on much of the weight and substance of these visions. "Carry Me Back to Ole Virginny" requests a move back in time but also a transportation through space. On the minstrel stage the South

became a mythic place out of time, a geographic time capsule which contained natural abundance and fostered the folkways of people not dulled by industrial wage labor. While increasingly a myth as the New South became peppered with textile mills, lumber camps and mining towns, this vision of the South persisted well into the twentieth century and influenced both northern and southern depictions of the region.

By the time Dalhart made his recording debut singing "Can't Yo' Heah Me Callin'," southern artists had achieved a privileged place within minstrelsy. The popularity of northern white performers within the minstrel industry had waned as southern artists—both white and black—claimed the lead in performing caricatures of southern black culture. African-American blackface performers such as Bert Williams and "coon song" composers such as Bob Cole insisted that minstrelsy was better when it offered more authentic depictions of southern black life. Bob Cole typified this trend, titling his 1896 sheet music "Genuine Negro songs by Genuine Negro Minstrels."²⁷ In light of these changing depictions of minstrel authenticity, white southerners also claimed that their southern heritage made them more "genuine" minstrels. Dalhart's supposed intimate exposure to African-American culture in his Texas home thus enabled him to claim a certain authenticity northerners could not match.

Dalhart's early career in New York, therefore, was intimately intertwined with northern visions of its neighbors to the south. Dalhart, like fellow Texas native Gene Austin, built his public image upon a combined command of a variety of popular styles and a continued economic and cultural pressure to represent his southern home to northern ears. He was celebrated for his authentic versions of "negro dialect" numbers, a genre founded upon inauthentic, derogatory images of southern black life. He was not alone. Other Texas musicians faced similar conundrums as their music was shaped by northern expectations of the sounds of the South.

Huddie Ledbetter faced a series of influences in the shaping and presentation of his art to the nation. Many of the songs and styles that he employed in his local Texas performances were not welcome in his performances for and with John Lomax. The ballad hunter noted Ledbetter's interest in popular songs, jazz tunes, and the music of white country artists such as Jimmie Rodgers and Gene Autry. Yet under the watchful eye of Lomax, the singer's vast repertoire was kept in check. As Lomax stated in the published collection *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, "We held [Ledbetter] to the singing of music that first attracted us to him in Louisiana, some of which he had 'composed,' at least partly."²⁸ Lomax repeatedly suggested that editing Ledbetter's performance of non-folk material was a big part of his responsibility. The singer, he claimed, was unable to judge what songs were of interest to the scholar. When Lomax refused to allow him to sing songs such as "Silver Haired Daddy of Mine," "he could never understand why we did not care for

them," Lomax recalled.²⁹ The singer willingly catered to the collector's desires. In 1940, a few years after the two had a falling out regarding the rights to the songs published in *Negro Folk Songs*, Ledbetter appealed to Lomax's son Alan to help him get back in the elder ballad hunter's good graces. He argued that he had not let his interest in popular music alter his singing of traditional material. "If your Papa come I d like for Him to Here me sing," Ledbetter wrote. "If He say I have Change any whitch I Don't think I have and never will But to be [sure] to get his ideas about it I would feel good over what ever he says about it."³⁰ Ledbetter may have tried to please the ballad hunter for economic reasons. "[H]e confessedly cares for me only because I am 'the money man,'" Lomax explained.³¹

Ledbetter also faced stereotypes during his 1935 trip to New York with Lomax. Press reports depicted the singer as a representation of some of white America's worst fears. A headline in the *New York Herald Tribune* declared, "Lomax Arrives with Leadbelly, Negro Minstrel: Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here to Do a Few Tunes Between Homicides." The article sensationalized Ledbetter as a dangerous, murderous black man: "a powerful, knife-toting Negro, who has killed one man and seriously wounded another, but whose husky tenor and feathery, string-plucking fingers ineluctably charm the ears of those who listen."³² Such images pulled on dual white traditions of depicting African-American men. Minstrelsy proffered images of a lighthearted, singing black people in the South. At the same time, depictions of black people as irrational, violence-prone primitives played a large role within American culture, having shaped pro-slavery arguments, Redemption propaganda and the brutal justifications for Jim Crow and "Judge Lynch." *The Herald Tribune* used both of these traditions to explain and contain Ledbetter's performances in the city. To some extent Lomax fostered the image of Ledbetter as a black Other, retelling the story of the singer's crimes and suggesting he wear prison stripes for public appearances.³³ Yet the New York press and audiences went beyond the folklorist in its association of black folk culture with violence and volatility. Lomax and his son Alan denounced the caricatured depictions of Ledbetter in the press. "Yet without the violent past, the white audience never would have noticed him," Alan later recalled.³⁴ Once again, northern audiences shaped the music and image of a Texas singer to conform to their own expectations.

A final speculative example of this trend can be found in the early musical experiences of Lydia Mendoza and her family. Her early performances in Texas were intimately connected to the tourist trade. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Mendoza family sang for the coins they could coax from visitors to San Antonio's Market Square. Their modest income depended upon giving visitors the songs and styles they desired while visiting Old San Antonio. Her story thus gives an opportunity to explore

the effects of outsiders' visions of Texas culture on the life and livelihood of Texas artists.

The Mendozas came to the United States from Monterrey in 1927. They eked out an existence by singing on street corners and at local businesses in south Texas. Unable to achieve any financial security, the family traveled to Michigan as migrant farm workers. They picked beets and worked in a nearby automobile plant before deciding to return to Texas and the street performances they had left behind. After living in Houston for a short time, the family moved to San Antonio and began performing regularly for the evening crowds at the city's Market Square.³⁵

Market Square had become a major tourist attraction by the late 1920s—a cultural highlight of a city that increasingly promoted its unique mix of Mexican heritage and modern conveniences. To many United States tourists, Mexico, particularly the supposed ancient roots of its indigenous population, seemed a haven for authentic spiritualism and simplicity, an antidote to the dislocating modernity they were experiencing in their own cities. The vision of a premodern culture as close as Mexico enjoyed an “enormous vogue” among US tourists by the late 1920s, historian Helen Delpar argues. The *New York Times* described the trend in 1933: “It came into being at the height of our prosperity when people gave signs of being fed up with material comforts and turned, for a respite

Mexican and Texas-Mexican musicians were a major component of Market Square in the eyes of many visitors. Travel writer, and San Antonio resident, Mary Aubrey Keating closely related the musicians she encountered in Market Square with the site's ability to offer a relaxing respite from modernity. In 1935 she wrote,

Go down Houston Street to the Old Market and you will be in the center of the old World

Here come “Lupe” and “Pedro.” They are singing “Cuatro Milpas.” All the songs of the Mexican people are full of contrast, either wildly gay or full of melancholy, with queer racial harmonies...

As the music drifts in the glamorous Texas starlight, let us be a part with the scented darkness, be one with little lamps that flicker from tables, gay with flowers. Let us dream while the music plays, and our dreams shall waft upwards like the fragrant smoke from the charcoal braziers, upward to the star-filled sky of old Romantic San Antonio.³⁸

Lydia Mendoza might have been one of the singers Keating encountered while visiting Market Square. Yet the singer had a very different view of the economic and cultural interactions

Market Square had become a major tourist attraction by the late 1920s—a cultural highlight of a city that increasingly promoted its unique mix of Mexican heritage and modern conveniences. To many United States tourists, Mexico, particularly the supposed ancient roots of its indigenous population, seemed a haven for authentic spiritualism and simplicity, an antidote to the dislocating modernity they were experiencing in their own cities.

from the Machine Age, to primitive cultures. Mexico lay close at hand.”³⁶ San Antonio, in fact, lay closer, and city boosters proclaimed the benefits of visiting Mexico without leaving the comfort and security of the United States. Visiting the city, the traveler could enjoy the best of both worlds—“primitive cultures” and “material comforts.” The Market House, one guidebook contended, “affords one of the city's typical contrasts: a large, modern white building in a setting of age-darkened shops. The anachronism is even more evident inside, where the appointments are modern and sanitary, yet the atmosphere remains that of a Mexican mart.”³⁷ Tourist literature, in many ways, operated in ways similar to Lomax's *Cowboy Songs*. It implied Mexican residents of Texas were outside of time. Their songs, dances, and culture were evidence of a romantic past living in the present.

that took place there. The severe economic conditions many working-class Mexican migrants experienced made performing in the square one of the best options for survival. The Mendoza Family made between fifteen and twenty-five cents a day singing in the market, enough to cover their daily necessities but little more. Lydia recalls many musicians in the same situation:

There were a lot of groups in the Plaza... There were... more than ten groups there all spread out through the open area of the Plaza. And they'd just be hanging around there playing dice at the tables; waiting for someone to turn up... As soon as a car would enter, everybody, all the musicians, would run and crowd around to see.

"Can I sing for you? Me? Can I sing for you? Do you want to hear 'La Adelita'? Can I sing 'Rancho Grande' for you?"

Well, times were hard and those musicians all made their living the same way we did: just from what people would give them. Everybody was chasing after the centavos in those days.³⁹

"Americans and Mexicans—everybody—would come down there to eat and listen to music," Mendoza claims. Many white visitors to Market Square were interested in experiencing representations of a Mexican past. Mendoza's brother Manuel recalls, "The people used to ask to hear certain songs more than others. They were old songs, real old songs."⁴⁰ Within the very severe constraints of their economic situation, the singers were in little position to challenge their audiences' desire to hear only old songs. The performance of an uncomplicated vision of

presence over against those who would wield it in wholly negating ways."⁴¹ One can hear such a positive reclamation in the passion and conviction of singers such as Ledbetter and Mendoza. They declare their pride, humanity, and integrity through their art. Yet it must be remembered that their music did not grow from an isolated Texas soil. The images they fostered, the songs they sang, and the audiences they encouraged, were all part of a larger conversation among Texans, tourists, northern urbanites, and countless others.

When Jimmie Rodgers first auditioned for Victor's Ralph Peer in 1927, he performed some of the dance material that had gone over at his resort gigs. Peer was uninterested. "We ran into a snag almost immediately," Peer recalled, "because in order to earn a living in Asheville, he was singing mostly songs originated by the New York publishers—the current hits."⁴² Peer did not want a rehash of tunes and styles that were already on record. He was looking for something different. Rodgers convinced Peer

The Mendozas came to the United States from Monterrey in 1927. They eked out an existence by singing on street corners and at local businesses in south Texas.

Mexican culture placed limits upon their repertoire and constrained their ability to communicate their lived experience through their art. While Keating pined for an "old Romantic San Antonio," the pressure to survive may have often left Mendoza little choice but to contribute to Keating's vision.

Dalhart, Ledbetter, and Mendoza found their art deeply affected by the expectations and assumptions outsiders held of Texas culture. Each discovered that their best economic prospects resided in creating music that conformed—to a lesser or greater degree—to these expectations. Like many of their peers, they experienced outside influences in two fundamental ways. First, their exposure to the culture of the wider nation changed the ways they heard and thought about the country and their relationship to it. They integrated national songs and styles into their lives and their art. At the same time, however, the national culture they encountered often carried visions of Texas as a place and a people outside of the national drama. National audiences accepted Texas artists such as Dalhart and Ledbetter partially because they embodied the stereotypes audiences had of the region as a place where modern concerns and contrivances did not apply.

Within these limitations, some artists found space in which to assert a positive, more complicated image of their culture. "As can happen with stereotyping," anthropologist JosÈ LimÙn reminds, "there is a paradoxical way in which artists and intellectuals, but also the ordinary citizens, of the sectors in question can actually partake of the stereotype in such a way as to provide distinctive and ratifying cultural affirmation and

that he could come up with some old-time material by the following day. Peer worked with the singer to develop the type of material he wanted: music that sounded old yet was original enough to be copyrighted. Rodgers recorded two selections based on older compositions: "The Soldier's Sweetheart," based on a World War I era theme, and "Sleep, Baby, Sleep," a refiguring of a nineteenth-century vaudeville number. Peer copyrighted the first. The second remained in the public domain. Rodgers walked away from the sessions with a royalty deal and \$100 cash—more than his band's weekly salary—as well as the satisfaction that his recording career had begun.⁴³

In 1911, John Lomax admonished a man who had answered his call for cowboy songs: "You do not tell me if you founded the song you sent me on the poetry of Walt Whitman. I am really interested on this point, and would be glad to have you tell me definitely if you are acquainted with the work of this great American poet. If you know of the words of any real cowboy songs, — I mean the songs they sing around the camp fire on the range — I shall be very grateful for them."⁴⁴ Like Ralph Peer in Bristol, Lomax actively shaped an image of his artists' culture that obscured important wider influences and sources. They appeared to be more isolated from the currents of American popular culture than was actually the case. As we struggle to define and describe Texas music, one of our challenges involves recapturing this history of the interaction of Lone Star artists with sounds, media, and ideas that are not from Texas. As Lyle Lovett reminds, "Texas wants them anyway." ■

NOTES

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THE BLUE YODELER

Specht: The Blue Yodeler is Coming to Town

IS COMING TO TOWN:

A Week with Jimmie Rodgers in West Texas

By Joe W. Specht



Courtesy of Midland Reporter-Telegram, Wednesday March 20, 1929 p.3

Jimmie Rodgers, often called the Father of Country Music, was born, raised, and buried in the state of Mississippi. But in the minds of many, he has long been associated with Texas, and well he should be. For the last four years of his life, 1929-1933, Rodgers resided in Kerrville and then in San Antonio. He recorded three times in Dallas and once in the Alamo City, and several of his songs make direct reference to the Lone Star State. During this period, he also traveled around the state on numerous occasions performing and making personal appearances in towns both large and small. As country music historian Bill Malone has pointed out, Rodgers's link with Texas was such that noted folklorist Alan Lomax, almost thirty years after the singer's death, still identified him as "a San Antonio railroad brakeman" and "this Texas brakeman."¹ Rodgers's biographer, Nolan Porterfield, has done an excellent job of documenting dozens of Rodgers comings and goings within the state, but as he acknowledges, the full extent of Jimmie's outings in Texas remains incomplete. The following essay attempts to fill in a few of the gaps.²

A headline in the Friday, March 15, 1929, edition of the Abilene Daily Reporter announced: "Blue Yodel Singer Coming Here." The writer continued:

Jimmy [sic] Rodgers, the former Mississippi railroad brakeman whose blue yodels now ensue from scores of records of Abilene phonograph owners, is to appear in Abilene, Monday. The popular blues singer is to make a personal appearance at Hall's Music company Monday morning from 11 o'clock until noon ... His \$1,500 guitar will be displayed at Hall's Monday.³

Imagine the excitement felt by the citizens of the Key City and surrounding communities when they read this and saw the publicity photograph of Jimmie nattily dressed in suit, bow tie, and straw hat and holding a guitar (which was, by the way, a Martin guitar and not the \$1,500 model made for Rodgers by the Weymann Company). The story in the newspaper reported

Blue Yodeler's Paradise. While concern for his health and a break from the road may have been the primary reasons for Jimmie being in the area, it obviously did not prevent him from making a personal appearance or two.

This swing into Texas in the spring of 1929 was not the first time Rodgers had visited the Lone Star State. In fact, he had performed only a few months before in Houston. But the Texas connection went back much further, as early as 1916 in fact, when Jimmie arrived in El Paso looking for a job on the Texas & Pacific Railroad. In the early mid-1920s, he passed through the state, hobbing or working his way west and then back east on the railroad. Many stories have been handed down over the years about those rambling days. For example, because the T&P made regular stopovers in Abilene, old timers report the railroaders in the area knew Rodgers well. Local legend also has Jimmie strumming his guitar on Abilene street corners for tips or singing and playing on the courthouse lawn with the crowd "chippin' in." He did find himself down and out in Texas several times. On one occasion in 1926, he and Carrie and their five

Jimmie was obviously on a roll, but there was one drawback. Namely, his tuberculosis, which had been diagnosed in 1924, was getting progressively worse.

that the singer was "being brought here by Burt Ford, West Texas representative of the Victor Talking Machine company," and Jimmie's secretary, L.K. Sides, was already in town on Friday "making arrangements."⁴

Just what was Rodgers doing out in West Texas anyway? After all, the spring of 1929 found Jimmie riding a whirlwind of success. He had recently concluded a successful tent show tour of Alabama and Mississippi with the Paul English Players. His record sales were reported to be in the hundreds of thousands, and just the month before, he had recorded again for Victor, this time in New York City. This latest recording session produced "Blue Yodel No. 5," as well as "Any Old Time" and "High Powered Mama." In May, he was booked to join the R-K-O Interstate Circuit tour, scheduled to swing through Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, and Georgia.⁵

Jimmie was obviously on a roll, but there was one drawback. Namely, his tuberculosis, which had been diagnosed in 1924, was getting progressively worse. Both he and his wife, Carrie, understood that he required a climate more sympathetic to his condition, a place with, as Mrs. Rodgers described, "dry air, warm winters, [and] a fairly high altitude."⁶ The Abilene Daily Reporter confirmed as much: "A quest for health brought Rodgers out here, chiefly. He is going to buy a ranch and stay away from the stage and large cities for awhile."⁷ The "ranch" later turned out to be a house in Kerrville that he dubbed the

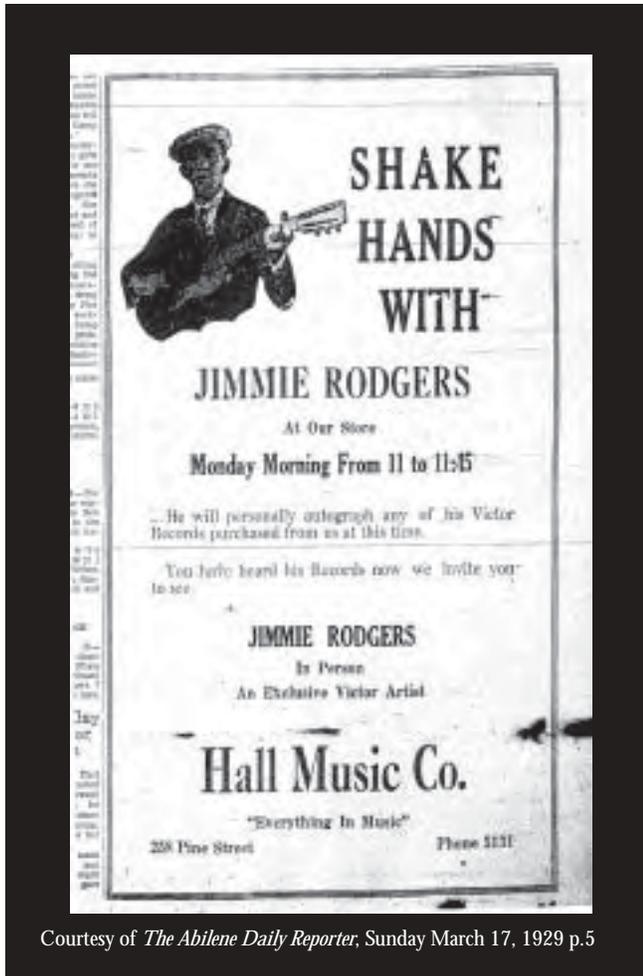
year old daughter, Anita, were briefly stranded in San Antonio with only pennies in their pockets.⁸

Jimmie eventually put these Texas experiences to good use in his songs. The first "Blue Yodel," recorded on November 20, 1927, was also known as "T for Texas." In "Waiting for a Train," recorded the next year, he recalled his hobbing days and being unceremoniously tossed off a train in Texas, "a place I dearly love." The Lone Star State creeps into other Rodgers's tunes, including "The Land of My Boyhood Dreams," "Anniversary Blue Yodel," "Mother, Queen of My Heart," and "Jimmie's Texas Blues" with its hearty declaration: "Give me sweet Dallas, Texas, where the women think the world of me."⁹

It might have been in "sweet" Dallas, Texas, where the idea for the 1929 West Texas excursion was hatched. Either traveling from Mobile, Alabama, with the Paul English Players or "barnstorming" on his own, Jimmie arrived in the state sometime in early March with plans to hook up with the R-K-O Interstate Circuit tour in May in Oklahoma. Of course, he was also there because of his health, with intentions of vacationing with his family in the Texas Hill Country.¹⁰

At some point, perhaps in Big D, Rodgers met Burt Ford who worked for Victor's Dallas distributor, the T. E. Swann Music Company. Through the encouragement of the Swann Company or on their own initiative, the two men apparently decided to team up to promote the sale of Rodgers's Victor

records. As the West Texas representative for Victor, Ford lived in and worked out of Sweetwater, forty-three miles west of Abilene on Texas Highway 1 (also known as the Bankhead Highway, later US 80, and now I-20). The plan appears to have been for Rodgers to “headquarter” in Sweetwater using the town as base of operations to “fulfill West Texas vaudeville engagements.”¹¹



Courtesy of *The Abilene Daily Reporter*, Sunday March 17, 1929 p.5

The association with Ford allowed Jimmie the chance to work at a leisurely pace without the rigid structure of the package shows. After all, he was supposed to be taking a break. It also meant he could meet more easily with his fans, something he truly loved to do. And finally, there was the opportunity to sell some product. As Carrie Rodgers recalled, her husband quickly learned on previous tours through the Southland how “autographing records at the Victor dealers” helped to spur sales.¹² From Sweetwater, then, Ford would help coordinate Jimmie’s appearances at authorized Victor dealers in the area. Unlike so many of Rodgers’s other barnstormings which were put together on the fly, this West Texas outing was more carefully planned.

Readers of the Sunday, March 17, 1929, edition of the *Abilene Daily Reporter* found this advertisement placed by the Hall Music Company: “Shake hands with Jimmie Rodgers at our store Monday morning from 11 to 11:45. He will personally autograph any of his Victor Records purchased from us at this time. You have heard his Records now we invite you to see Jimmie in person.”¹³ A similar ad for the Angelo Furniture Company ran on the same day in the *San Angelo Standard-Times*: “We are pleased to make this announcement to the many friends of ‘Jimmie’ who insists that he would like to greet everyone of you personally. Jimmie will also autograph for you any Victor Record of his purchased next Tuesday morning from 11 to 12 a.m., while he is here.”¹⁴ This was obviously part of the Rodgers/Ford plan, working in conjunction with Victor dealers in Abilene and San Angelo.

How many hands did Jimmie shake? In the Key City, the *Abilene Daily Reporter* stated that “nearly 2,000 or so of his admirers” showed up at Hall Music Company. The reporter who covered the story must have been familiar with Jimmie’s recorded repertoire, as he cleverly wrote: “The fellow that’s always got the musical blues and is ‘going home to Daddy,’ taking a train for that ‘last ride’ and getting ‘turned down’ by ‘women’ was in Abilene Monday morning.” Attesting to Rodgers’s popularity, the reporter offered, “no home with talking machine in America, it seems, is complete without one of his blue yodels,” a yodel described as “plaintive, appealing ... with that little sob effect into it.”¹⁵ Jimmie was truly America’s Own Blue Yodeler.¹⁶

The reporter also observed: “Jimmy [sic], more than anyone else right now in the talking machine record making business, is responsible for the return of the old sentimental ballads of a generation ago that the modern syncopation and fast rythm [sic] displaced.”¹⁷ While offering insight into what made Rodgers so popular to so many – a blues singer to some and a sentimental balladeer to others – the reporter, perhaps without realizing it, echoed Jimmie’s own thoughts. But even though Rodgers was sometimes ambivalent about the music he once called that “jazz music junk,” it did not keep him from dabbling in the sounds of the day.¹⁸ For example, on Jimmie’s “Blue Yodel No. 9,” recorded the next year in July, Louis Armstrong’s trumpet lays down a bluesy backup mixed with hot syncopated rhythm.

The write-up in the *Abilene Daily Reporter* concluded by informing readers that Rodgers would be in San Angelo the next day and “will return Saturday and appear at a program at Simmons University [now Hardin-Simmons University] under the auspices of the Cowboy Band.”¹⁹ This last tidbit surely delighted the Key City populace because it meant they actually could get to see and hear Jimmie perform on stage.

In San Angelo, the Angelo Furniture Company placed another ad in the Tuesday edition of the *San Angelo Morning Times* reminding Concho Valley residents: “The Unparalleled Jimmie

Rodgers in person! at our store between 11 and 12.”²⁰ The next morning the newspaper reported “a large crowd [had] greeted him ... and he was kept busy during the morning autographing his records.” Rodgers’s secretary, L.K. Sides, and Burt Ford were also along for the ride. After finishing up at the Angelo Furniture Company, Jimmie stopped by radio station KGKL, the same station for which future Hall of Famer and Rodgers’s disciple, Ernest Tubb, worked eight years later. Jimmie was on the air from 1:00 to 1:15, singing songs and telling stories. He clearly understood the publicity value afforded by radio.²¹

The story in the San Angelo newspaper does not mention where the Blue Yodeler headed next, but since he had to be back in

had used back east on several occasions.²⁸ Like many of the Victor ads, this one was generic in design – “Jimmie Rodgers In Person!” – and easily adaptable to include specific local information. In this case, location, time, and price: “Popular prices 50 cents and 75 cents. The treat of the season.”²⁹ The treat of the season, indeed.

Exactly how and why Rodgers was booked to appear at Simmons University “under the auspices of the Cowboy band” remains unknown. Band memorabilia from this period was unfortunately destroyed in a fire in 1947.³⁰ But appear he did, on Saturday evening at 8:00 p.m., to an audience of “about 1000” at the Simmons University auditorium. The Abilene Daily Reporter reported “delegations were present from Clyde,

“T for Texas, T for Tennessee, T for Thelma that gal that make a wreck out of me.”

Abilene on Saturday, Rodgers and his traveling companions could not have strayed far, if for no other reason than that many stretches of area highway remained unpaved. Advertisements had already begun to run in the Midland Reporter-Telegram announcing that Jimmie would be appearing the following week on March 26 and 27 at Midland’s Ritz Theatre.²²

After finishing up in San Angelo, Rodgers most likely continued on to Sweetwater in his Model A ragtop roadster to set up “headquarters” as planned. There was a Rodgers sighting in Sweetwater on Saturday.²³ Undoubtedly, as Carrie Rodgers recounted, Jimmie would have had plenty of opportunities to rub shoulders with “his kind of folks ... loaf around the lot; talk shop with folks who talked his language, play with the dogs and kids; be gay.”²⁴ In other words – hang out. This is probably how he met up with “a couple of West Texas lads, one from McCaulley, who also yodel[ed].”²⁵ The lads were identified as Leon McQuire and sixteen year old Cecil Gill, but it is unclear which of the boys was from McCaulley, a small farming community located north of both Sweetwater and Abilene in Fisher County. The young men must have had something to offer in the vocal department because Jimmie recruited both to appear with him at the upcoming Saturday night gig in Abilene. Using local talent to augment a show was something Rodgers did on more than one occasion.²⁶

Meanwhile, the publicity campaign for the concert at Simmons University continued. Hall Music Company ran an ad in the Thursday, March 21, 1929, edition of the Abilene Daily Reporter: “Don’t Miss Hearing Jimmie Rodgers in Person – Simmons Auditorium – Saturday March 23.” Readers were reminded the store stocked “a collection of twenty of Jimmie Rodgers best songs [so] come in and listen to these new Victor Records soon!”²⁷ On Friday, another advertisement for the concert appeared in the Abilene newspaper. This one had a most familiar look. It was the “Coast-to-Coast Tour” promo Rodgers

Hamlin, Sweetwater, and other neighboring West Texas cities.” The Simmons University Cowboy Band, just back from Washington D.C. and the inauguration of President Herbert Hoover, led off with a couple of “popular” numbers. The Cowboy Band was followed by an “unexpected feature.” Jimmie introduced two of his own “finds” – those West Texas “lads” Leon McQuire and Cecil Gill. McQuire, backing himself on guitar, sang “A Gay Cavellero [sic]” and “Little Joe the Wrangler.” The sixteen-year-old Gill, accompanied on piano, chose to sing and yodel “Never No More Blues,” a composition Rodgers had co-written with his sister-in-law Elsie McWilliams and recorded the previous year.³¹

Rodgers then took to the stage with “his \$1,500 golden guitar.”³² Sharply dressed, no doubt, and perhaps even wearing a John B. Stetson hat, “his fine ‘Texas’ hat” as Carrie Rodgers once described it, Jimmie gave the audience their money’s worth.³³ He offered up a variety of tunes from his song bag, including “Blue Yodel,” “Treasures Untold,” “The Brakeman’s Blues,” “In the Jailhouse Now,” “Sleep Baby Sleep,” and “Blue Yodel No. 3.” According to the Abilene Daily Reporter, the two Blue Yodels “proved the most popular selections on the program.”³⁴ And it is easy to picture the audience reacting enthusiastically to “Blue Yodel” with the memorable opening couplet: “T for Texas, T for Tennessee, T for Thelma that gal that make a wreck out of me.” Of course “Blue Yodel No. 3” is no less a potential crowd pleaser with lines like: “She’s long, she’s tall, she’s six feet from the ground/She’s tailor made, she ain’t no hand me down.”

The cub reporter for the Simmons University student newspaper, in an awkward but rather charming fashion, described the yodel numbers as “featuring the peculiar type of vocal music making which he [Rodgers] himself has perfected.”³⁵ Each of the reporters commented on Jimmie’s ability to charm the audience by telling “humorous stories” between songs and

recounting “incidents in connection with the songs to add spice to the program.”³⁶ Clearly, Rodgers was in his element.

The newspaper account also mentioned in passing that Mrs. Rodgers and Anita had arrived on Sunday from Meridian, Mississippi, to join Jimmie on his “West Texas tour.”³⁷ Rodgers and Burt Ford dropped by to visit at the George Allen and P.T. Quast music firms in Sweetwater on Monday, March 25. The Nolan County News reported that he would make another personal appearance in Sweetwater “soon,” but there is no record of this in subsequent editions of the newspaper.³⁸ From Sweetwater, Jimmie and his entourage cruised over to Midland

morning Rodgers was at the Home Furniture Company from 10:00 to 11:00 to “shake hands” as well as autograph his records.⁴²

After the appearances in Midland, the next immediate stops on the “West Texas tour” are unclear. Rodgers did not roll into O’Donnell until a week later on April 5. Nolan Porterfield has speculated that Jimmie played Big Spring, but a check of the Big Spring Herald for the period rendered no reported Rodgers sightings. Other area newspapers are equally mum.⁴³ In O’Donnell, he performed the day after arriving at the Lynn Theatre, with Burt Ford again handling the arrangements.

The reporter left the newspaper’s readers with this ringing endorsement: “He was better to the nth degree than on his records – believe it or not.”

for his engagement at the Ritz Theatre on March 26 and 27.

The Ritz Theatre along with two Victor dealers, the Texas Music Company and the Home Furniture Company, had been actively promoting the Rodgers stopover with advertisements in the Midland newspaper, and Jimmie was set to perform on Tuesday and Wednesday for both the matinee and nightly shows. The featured silent film was a Colleen Moore and Neil Hamilton comedy, *Why Be Good?*³⁹ Even with bobbed-haired flappers on screen, Rodgers more than held his own as a headline in the Wednesday, March 27 edition of the Midland Reporter-Telegram confirmed: “Jimmy [sic] Rodgers Raises the Roof in His Appearance.” The writer of the accompanying piece also got to spend some time with the star in his dressing room. Here a chain smoking Rodgers enthusiastically provided “a running fire line of talk and stage patter” on a variety of topics ranging from his “nearest competitor,” Gene Austin, to a photo of his daughter Anita: “The baby is a living image of Greta Garbo, don’t you think?” Jimmie even pulled out the Weymann guitar and shared his latest composition which, according to the reporter, he had written a few nights earlier “in the lobby of a hotel in Sweetwater.” Rodgers confided that the song “will be my next record.”⁴⁰ It would be nice to think the tune was “Jimmie’s Texas Blues,” recorded five months later in Dallas at his next Victor session.

As for his performance on stage, the newspaper reported the Blue Yodeler was met at first with “a momentary silence and a detonation of applause on its heels that followed wave after wave for almost two minutes.” Jimmie then proceeded to sing and chat and sing and tell some jokes, all in the inimitable style “that was Jimmy [sic] Rodgers.” The reporter left the newspaper’s readers with this ringing endorsement: “He was better to the nth degree than on his records – believe it or not.”⁴¹ Thursday

Biographer Porterfield provides a colorful account of Jimmie’s stay in the small farming community located about halfway between Big Spring and Lubbock, just off of what is now US Highway 87. Porterfield also reports on Rodgers’s visit to Lubbock the next week for a two-day engagement at the Palace Theatre on April 11 and 12. At some point, Mrs. Rodgers and Anita had left for Madisonville in East Central Texas, where she had relatives, and it was to Madisonville that Jimmie headed after finishing up in Lubbock. From there, the family finally drove to the Texas Hill Country and Kerrville.⁴⁴

As an aside, Rodgers was back in the area in September, first appearing at the Palace Theatre in Ballinger on September 30 and October 1, along with the “talking” feature, *The Girl in the Show*, starring Hattie Hartley. He also found time to autograph his records and pictures at the L.C. Daughtery Drug Company.⁴⁵ Two days later he was in San Angelo, booked at the Municipal Auditorium on October 3 and 4. Rodgers returned to both San Angelo and Abilene at least one more time in January 1931 as part of the Will Rogers Red Cross benefit tour. Oddly enough, although there is front page coverage of the show in the Abilene Daily Reporter, Jimmie is not mentioned. This is something that apparently occurred throughout much of the tour: the other, equally famous, Rogers got all the ink.⁴⁶

The initial foray into West Texas in the spring of ’29 was clearly a success. Rodgers, as he was wont to say, had been “ovationed,” this time by several thousand enthusiastic Texans.⁴⁷ The Blue Yodeler had hit it off big time with his soon-to-be-adopted state, and the Texas connection would only grow stronger. In her memoir, *My Husband, Jimmie Rodgers*, Carrie Rodgers warmly conveys the affection Jimmie had for the Lone Star State and its citizens, and the feeling was obviously mutual. T for Texas! ■

NOTES

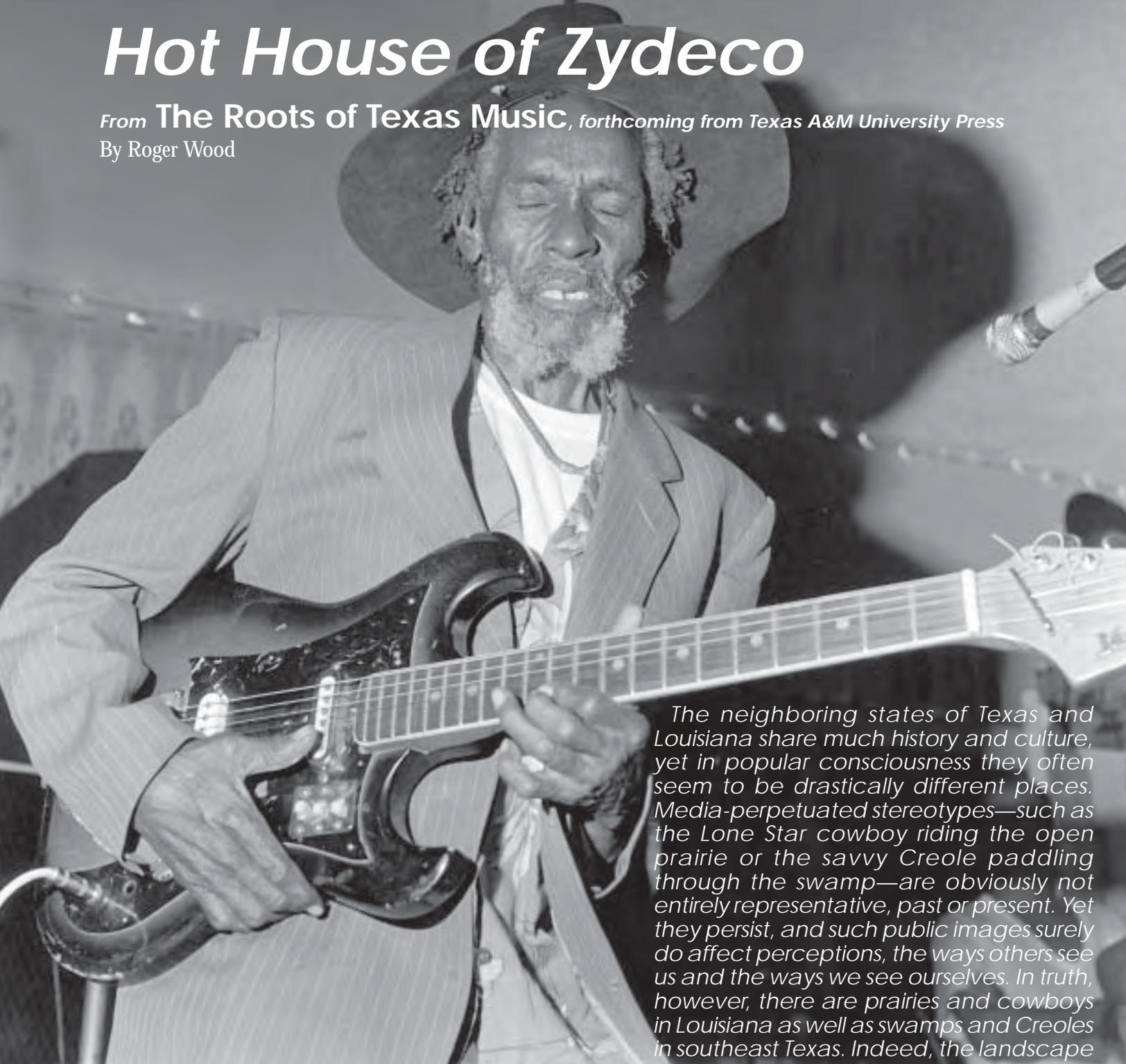
- 1 Bill C. Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, Rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 89; Alan Lomax, *The Folk Songs of North America in the English Language* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1960), 281, 612.
- 2 Nolan Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers: The Life and Times of America's Blue Yodeler* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 432. After twenty-plus years, Porterfield's biography still shines, a readable and well-researched work. A list of Rodgers appearances can be found in Appendix II.
- 3 *Abilene Daily Reporter*, March 15, 1929, 2.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 A useful chronology of Rodgers's life, compiled by Nolan Porterfield, is available in Carrie Rodgers, *My Husband, Jimmie Rodgers*, Reprint ed. (Nashville: Country Music Foundation, 1975), xix-xxiii.
- 6 Ibid. 210. Carrie Rodgers's account of her husband's life has often been maligned. Nick Tosches, for example, described *My Husband, Jimmie Rodgers* as "the first of those junk country books." See Nick Tosches, *Country: The Twisted Roots of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 137. I agree with Nolan Porterfield, who in the introduction to the 1975 reprint of the Rodgers book, firmly asserts it "stands as a supremely important, but curious document...." (p. vi). There is no doubt *My Husband, Jimmie Rodgers* is rich with anecdotal asides which capture much of the essence of Rodgers as performer and personality.
- 7 *Abilene Daily Reporter*, March 18, 1929, 1.
- 8 Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers*, 26-27, 39-40, 52-53, 61-62. I learned of Rodgers possible presence in Abilene prior to 1929 in conversation with Archie Jefferies, who also supplied the "chippin' in" quote. Jefferies, eighty-seven years old, is a local musician and longtime resident of Abilene.
- 9 For information on Rodgers's recordings, I have relied on the discography/sessionography in Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers*.
- 10 Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 81; Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers*, 190; Mike Paris and Chris Comber, *Jimmie the Kid: The Life of Jimmie Rodgers* (London: Eddison Musicbooks, 1977), 83; Nolan Porterfield, notes to *Jimmie Rodgers, the Signing Brakeman*, Bear Family BCD 15540 (1992).
- 11 *Nolan County News*, March 28, 1929, 5.
- 12 Rodgers, *My Husband, Jimmie Rodgers*, 192; Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 82.
- 13 *Abilene Daily Reporter*, March 17, 1929, 5.
- 14 *San Angelo Standard-Times*, March 17, 1929, 2.
- 15 *Abilene Daily Reporter*, March 18, 1929, 1.
- 16 For insight into the role the yodel has played in country music, see Robert Coltman, "Roots of the Country Yodel: Notes Toward a Life History," *JEMF Quarterly* 12 (No. 42), 91-94; Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 86-87, 103; Bart Platenga, "Will There Be Yodeling in Heaven," *American Music Research Center Journal* 8/9 (1998-99), 107-138; Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers*, 123-126; and Tosches, *Country*, 109-114. In his recently published treatise on Emmett Miller, *Where Dead Voices Gather* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), Tosches offers up further thoughts on the yodel and speculates on the influence Miller might have had on Rodgers. A complete list of Jimmie's blue yodels can be found in Appendix I of Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers*.
- 17 *Abilene Daily Reporter*, March 18, 1929, 1.
- 18 Rodgers, *My Husband, Jimmie Rodgers*, 69-70; Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers*, 71-74.
- 19 *Abilene Daily Reporter*, March 18, 1929, 1.
- 20 *San Angelo Morning Times*, March 19, 1929, 3.
- 21 *San Angelo Morning Times*, March 20, 1929, 4; Ronnie Pugh, *Ernest Tubbs: The Texas Troubadour*, 1st Paperback Printing [with corrections] (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 43. For background on Rodgers's radio experiences and his use of the medium, see Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers*, 70-71, 140, 182, 203, 270, 311-312.
- 22 *Midland Reporter-Telegram*, March 20, 21, 24, and 25, 1929.
- 23 *Nolan County News*, March 28, 1929, 5.
- 24 Rodgers, *My Husband, Jimmie Rodgers*, p. 229.
- 25 *Abilene Daily Reporter*, March 25, 1929, 5.
- 26 Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers*, 157.
- 27 *Abilene Daily Reporter*, March 21, 1929, 2.
- 28 Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers*, 157, 190.
- 29 *Abilene Daily Reporter*, March 22, 1929, 2.
- 30 *Abilene Daily Reporter*, March 18, 1929, 1; Dorothy May McClure, *The World Famous Cowboy Band, 1923-1973: A History of the First Fifty Years of the Cowboy Band, Hardin-Simmons University, Abilene, Texas* (Abilene: Quality Printing Company, 1983), 122-123. Rodgers is not mentioned in McClure's book. I checked further in the Cowboy Band library but could find nothing pertaining to Rodgers.
- 31 *Abilene Daily Reporter*, March 25, 1929, 5; *Simmons Brand*, March 30, 1929, 1.
- 32 *Abilene Daily Reporter*, March 25, 1929, 5.
- 33 Rodgers, *My Husband, Jimmie Rodgers*, 242.
- 34 *Simmons Brand*, March 30, 1929, 1; *Abilene Daily Reporter*, March 25, 1929, 5.
- 35 *Simmons Brand*, March 30, 1929, 1.
- 36 *Abilene Daily Reporter*, March 25, 1929, 5; *Simmons Brand*, March 30, 1929, 1. An often quoted passage which provides a vivid description of what it must have been like to see Rodgers perform can be found in Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 85-86.
- 37 *Abilene Daily Reporter*, March 25, 1929, 5.
- 38 *Nolan County News*, March 28, 1929, 5.
- 39 *Midland Reporter-Telegram*, March 26, 1929, 3, 5.
- 40 *Midland Reporter-Telegram*, March 27, 1929, 1, 3.
- 41 *Midland Reporter Telegram*, March 27, 1929, 3.
- 42 *Midland Reporter-Telegram*, March 27, 1929, 6.
- 43 Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers*, 199, 433. To check area newspapers for possible Rodgers sightings, I drove to Albany, Anson, Ballinger, Big Spring, Coleman, Colorado City, Midland, Odessa, Rotan, San Angelo, Snyder, Stamford, and Sweetwater. The *Odessa News-Times* is missing all of the 1929 issues up to August 30, and the Rotan newspaper for the period has not been preserved.
- 44 Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers*, 198-201, 433.
- 45 *Ballinger Daily Ledger*, September, 28, 1929, 1; *Ballinger Daily Ledger*, September 30, 1929, 1.
- 46 Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers*, 213-214, 276-278, 434, 436; *Abilene Daily Reporter*, January 29, 1931, 1; *Abilene Daily Reporter*, January 30, 1931, 5.
- 47 Rodgers, *My Husband, Jimmie Rodgers*, 198.

Wood: Southeast Texas: Hothouse of Zydeco

Southeast Texas. Hot House of Zydeco

From **The Roots of Texas Music**, forthcoming from Texas A&M University Press

By Roger Wood



The neighboring states of Texas and Louisiana share much history and culture, yet in popular consciousness they often seem to be drastically different places. Media-perpetuated stereotypes—such as the Lone Star cowboy riding the open prairie or the savvy Creole paddling through the swamp—are obviously not entirely representative, past or present. Yet they persist, and such public images surely do affect perceptions, the ways others see us and the ways we see ourselves. In truth, however, there are prairies and cowboys in Louisiana as well as swamps and Creoles in southeast Texas. Indeed, the landscape

Photo of Little Joe Washington at Miss Ann's Player, Houston, 1998. By James Fraher

and the people along one side of the Sabine River often have much in common with those along the other. And interchange across that waterway has occurred since the days of the earliest settlements. But the Texas heritage of one of its most fascinating musical results remains largely unrecognized today.

Over recent decades, popular music has increasingly appropriated the now familiar sound of zydeco. Its signature

accordion-led melodies, plaintive vocals in French and English, and highly syncopated rubboard-based rhythms have enhanced soundtracks of feature films, television commercials, and numerous mainstream recordings. Zydeco CDs and audiocassettes are now regularly stocked in their own category in music stores around the globe. And zydeco superstars have taken center stage at major public spectacles viewed by millions on television.¹

Like the blues many decades before it, zydeco has evolved from a folk idiom of certain impoverished and isolated African-Americans to become a commercially viable musical genre,

state events (such as the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival) grew significantly in size and number, introducing thousands of visitors to zydeco in the process. Moreover, a frequent theme

For the most part, zydeco has defined itself in an age of ever-pervasive media influence and rural-to-urban mobility, an era in which once-isolated enclaves have had access to popular musical modes, absorbing and syncretizing them with elements from the folk tradition.

complete with its own festivals, crossover hits, living legends, and emerging stars. Moreover, as Lorenzo Thomas points out, it has “contributed to the musical vocabulary of ‘rock ‘n’ roll’ which, in the late twentieth century, is nothing less than the popular music of the world.”² For the most part, zydeco has defined itself in an age of ever-pervasive media influence and rural-to-urban mobility, an era in which once-isolated enclaves have had access to popular musical modes, absorbing and syncretizing them with elements from the folk tradition. Thus, modern zydeco tunes often can sound at once exotic and familiar to first-time listeners—part of the basis for the music’s broad appeal to people beyond its primary ethnic group of origin.

But while casual observers and devoted fans alike readily recognize the zydeco sound today, popular consciousness generally misconstrues it to be solely of Louisiana origin and development. On the contrary, the roots of contemporary zydeco grow deep both west and east of the Sabine River—extending approximately one hundred miles from this naturally formed state boundary line in both directions. And though the oldest of the roots—the Creole musical forms known as *juré* and *la la*—clearly sprouted first in Louisiana, those forms subsequently found some of their most essential nutrients and significant cultivation on urban Texas soil, resulting in the eventual flowering forth of zydeco. As John Minton has convincingly argued, despite widespread misconception, zydeco most accurately refers to “a post-war popular music that first made its mark in Texas cities such as Port Arthur, Beaumont, Galveston, and Houston”³ before spreading back to the Creole homeland in Louisiana, and eventually to the world. In short, this vibrant art form is a doubly syncretized musical import-export from the Lone Star state.

The general public cannot be blamed for miscomprehending zydeco to be a purely Louisiana phenomenon, given the propagation of that notion in various entertainment media, as well as that state’s aggressive (and valid) marketing of itself as a cultural tourism destination with a rich French heritage. Many outsiders discovered the music in the 1980s—around the same time that traditional Creole and Cajun cooking emerged as a national culinary craze, concomitant with a period in which in-

in zydeco songs (as in many other popular forms, such as blues, bluegrass, country & western, Tejano, etc.) is the celebration of an idealized folk past in some bucolic ancestral home from which the singer has been displaced.⁴ And the homeland traditionally referenced in most such songs is, of course, Louisiana—where black Creole culture originated in the North American mainland. So it is no surprise that the key role of southeast Texas—as the hothouse for the actual blossoming of the modern zydeco sound—has rarely been acknowledged for what it is.

Yet, it was in Texas, especially in Houston, that Creole immigrants and their descendants first fused old Louisiana French music traditions with blues and urban R&B to create the new sound. And it was in Texas that the two essential instruments for zydeco music—the accordion and the rubboard (*le frottoir*)—were formally adapted in crucial ways to accommodate and make possible that new sound. It was in Houston in the late 1940s that recordings using variations of the word zydeco first appeared. And it was in the Bayou City also that the now-standard orthography and pronunciation of the term were initially established. In fact, as Michael Tisserand has noted, “Although Houston is often overlooked in zydeco history, the city’s relationship to the music can roughly be compared to Chicago’s impact on the blues.”⁵

This analogy is particularly insightful, for just as post-war Chicago became the proverbial birthplace of modern blues, post-war Houston proved to be the incubator in which the contemporary Creole music called zydeco came into being. From the 1920s through the 1950s, both cities were primary destinations for specific groups of rural African-American immigrants in search of jobs and improved living conditions. During this era of increasing urbanization throughout America, thousands of blacks left farms in the Mississippi River region of the Deep South, heading specifically for the place Robert Johnson immortalized as “Sweet Home Chicago.” As has been well documented elsewhere, many of these people took with them the acoustic folk musical idiom known as Delta blues, which soon assimilated other influences and metamorphosed into modern electric blues, the progenitor of rock ‘n’ roll. In a parallel way, during this same time period, members of a unique

ethnic group of African-Americans—black Creoles from southwest Louisiana—migrated to Houston, the nearby home of the suddenly booming petro-chemical industry. As they created and settled in enclaves such as the city’s Frenchtown district, they introduced to Texas an acoustic folk musical idiom known mainly as la la, which soon absorbed other influences and evolved into modern zydeco, the progenitor of that syncopated accordion-based sound that seemed to burst suddenly into media consciousness in the 1980s.

European ancestry, including the ethnic group known as Cajuns). These new Creoles were of mixed race, and their culture represented a vital confluence of heritages, both African and French. Prior to the Civil War, the vast majority of them remained enslaved on French plantations. However, certain others (known as *les gens de couleur libres*: the free colored people) became part of the socio-economic establishment, working as professionals and owning their own businesses—and, in some cases, even their own plantations and slaves.⁷ Further

The black Creoles that migrated to Texas from Louisiana—and eventually created the music known as zydeco—mainly have in common a direct or indirect lineage to the old French-African slave class.

As modern musical phenomena, both blues and zydeco first occurred following African-American migrations from specific rural regions to specific industrial cities. Thus, any understanding of the notion of the true “home” for either of these two types of music (and certainly for others as well) is problematized by the reality of ethno-cultural mobility. Where does the blues come to full fruition? In Chicago? In the Delta? Where does zydeco come into being? In Houston? In the part of Louisiana known as Acadia? The answer to all of these questions might be Yes, depending upon how one defines “being.” The facts of movement and syncretism often belie the myth of some idealized cultural purity with timeless roots planted firmly in one particular place. And especially for any people correctly defined as Creoles, understanding the culture—as a means of understanding its music—necessitates an appreciation of mobility, confrontation, assimilation, and change.

What are the implications of the term Creole, and who exactly are the black people referred to here by this label? Initially, this word was adopted in reference to descendants of French settlers in the Caribbean and in post-1699 colonial Louisiana. As Barry Jean Ancelet explains, “Those born in the colony called themselves Creoles, a word meaning ‘home-grown, not imported,’ to distinguish themselves from immigrants.”⁶ In Louisiana, this primary definition of Creoles originally denoted members of a privileged class of Caucasian natives based in le Quartier FranVais of old New Orleans and on plantations throughout the region, and this usage of the term persists to some extent today in reference to the socially elite descendants of the old French aristocracy.

But by the later decades of the eighteenth century, miscegenation was occurring as some of these original Creoles procreated with African slaves to produce offspring recognized as *noir*—black Creoles, an identity distinct from that of other Francophones in south Louisiana (such as those of Caucasian

problematizing the common understanding of the term, in the decades since emancipation, many black Creoles have intermarried with people of other races, resulting in an even wider range of skin tones, physical characteristics, linguistic traits, and family histories among descendants. In short, the phrase black Creoles historically refers not to a monolithic class of people but to a variety of syncretic human possibilities, both cultural and genetic.

The black Creoles that migrated to Texas from Louisiana—and eventually created the music known as zydeco—mainly have in common a direct or indirect lineage to the old French-African slave class. Nuances of genetic identity and social class notwithstanding, these people are primarily distinguished from other descendants of African slaves along the Gulf Coast by the fact of their French heritage—and its various linguistic, culinary, religious, and musical implications. But in contrast to groups such as their close neighbors the Cajuns (i.e., the descendants of French Acadians who immigrated from Canada in the late-eighteenth century, and with whom black Creoles share many cultural characteristics), these Creoles have an ancestral connection to Africa. This African-American heritage differentiates them significantly from other French-speaking peoples in the region—and ultimately sets black Creole music apart from other French-based folk forms originating in the New World.

It is clearly established that large numbers of these black Creoles came to Texas after 1920, but some such people may well have lived west of the Sabine River many decades earlier. We know, for instance, that “wealthy aristocratic Creole planters from Louisiana arrived in Liberty County with their slaves in 1845,”⁸ though the certainty of mixed-race progeny resulting from that southeastern Texas presence is merely a possibility. (However, the small community of Raywood, located just a few miles east of the town of Liberty, retains to this day a significant black Creole presence.) We also know that in the half-century

following the Civil War, the general black population in Houston alone “increased from 3,691 in 1870, to 23,929 in 1910,” and that many of these “arrived from rural areas in Texas and Louisiana,”⁹ suggesting the chance that some black Creoles may have been among those numbers, especially in the first decade of the twentieth century.

The initial major wave of Louisiana-to-Texas immigration was triggered by the discovery of oil in the legendary Spindletop gusher near Beaumont in 1901. As Tisserand notes in his comprehensive history of zydeco, Spindletop gave birth to “the modern petroleum age” and thereby initiated an interstate relocation that would ultimately change American music: “Starting almost immediately, and peaking through the years of World War II, black Creoles migrated to Texas in search of jobs, bringing along their accordions and French songs.”¹⁰ Many of them found work, money, and some measure of improved social freedom in the so-called “Golden Triangle” area of Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Orange—all located on the coastal plains close to the Louisiana border. In addition to jobs in the oil fields, they labored in the shipbuilding yards, chemical plants, rice farms, and shrimp fishing fleets of the region.

Frenchtown in 1928. As he recalls, “Louisiana people took over this town,” adding that because of their reputation for hard work, “All you had to do was say you was from Louisiana, and they would hire you right there.”¹³ Although they worked side-by-side with other African Americans, throughout the 1920s and 1930s the residents of Frenchtown generally maintained their own distinctive cultural identity within the larger black community,¹⁴ facilitated in doing so by their common Creole heritage with its uniquely accented patois, distinctive cuisine, religious foundation in Catholicism, and the unusual music they first called *la la*.

La la was the most common name of the unamplified, accordion-based black Creole musical form that would eventually undergo a crucial transformation in Frenchtown, and elsewhere in southeast Texas, to evolve into modern zydeco. Analogous to the way the word zydeco functions today, *la la* can be used as a noun referring variously to either a type of music, a dance step, or a social event at which the music and dancing occur—or as a verb signifying the action of making that music or dancing to it. As longtime Frenchtown resident Clarence Gallien once told historian Alan Govenar, “they didn’t call it

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However, large numbers of black Creoles were drawn a bit farther to the west to the quickly established center of the burgeoning petro-chemical industry, Houston. Starting around 1919 these new arrivals began to concentrate their residency in the area of the city known as Fifth Ward. Located to the east/northeast of downtown on land that had been mostly unpopulated prior to the Civil War, this area had first been settled by freed slaves. It had become the Fifth Ward in 1866 when the city increased its boundaries beyond the four original wards to raise tax revenue and provide aldermen representation for the outlying residents.¹¹ Within Fifth Ward, the Creoles settled mainly in a neighborhood that became known as Frenchtown. By 1922 when it was formally incorporated, Frenchtown contained approximately 500 hundred residents in an area that Minton defines as “a dozen or so city blocks,” noting also that “as Creole migration increased, especially after the great Mississippi River flood of 1927, the district expanded accordingly, eventually including three times its original area.”¹²

Not far from Frenchtown, black Creole men secured employment at various industries along the Houston Ship Channel, as well as at the nearby Southern Pacific Railroad yards. Anderson Moss was among these early immigrants, arriving in

zydeco at that time [pre-1950s], it was *la la*. They used to give different *la la* at the house or at a little cafe. *La la* was a house dance when thirty, forty, fifty people get together and have a good time. . . . any time anybody plays the accordion, we call it a *la la*, a country *la la*.”¹⁵

The major phase of *la la* seems to correspond not only with urban migration but also with a period in which many Creole musicians in Texas and Louisiana began to shift away from playing the old-timey single-row accordion, which had been utilized from the advent of the instrument through the early 1930s, and instead adopted the more versatile double-row and triple-row models, which offered expanded musical possibilities more amenable to an eventual syncretism with blues. In the 1930s and 1940s black Creole accordionists playing what they called *la la* also began to perform more frequently in combinations with other types of instrumental accompaniment, such as percussion (in various forms) and guitars, as opposed to the traditional solo presentation or fiddle accompaniment common in an earlier era.

In fact, pre-dating *la la*, the earliest related form of black Creole music in south Louisiana involved a type of ritualized singing with little, if any, instrumental support. Known as *juré*



Courtesy of Chris Strachwitz, Arhoolie Records

(pronounced joo-RAY) from the French verb *jurer*, “to testify,” it was a type of gospel chant that sometimes accompanied a special dance. In such cases it is understood to have been “a localized form of the African-American ‘ring shout,’ consisting of a counterclockwise procession accompanied by antiphonal singing and the shuffling, stamping, and clapping of the dancers, occasionally supplemented by simple percussion such as the ubiquitous metal-on-jawbone scraper or its descendant, the washboard.”¹⁶ However, other researchers assert that performance of *juré* by black Creole Catholics in New Orleans was completely a cappella and “most common during Lent, when instruments and dancing were taboo.”¹⁷

Noted zydeco musician Canray Fontenot defines *juré* as pre-instrumental, improvisational music built originally on nothing more than hand-clapped rhythms—and created mainly for entertainment and dancing. “They used to have that where didn’t have no musicians,” he recalls, adding, “but them old people would sit down, clap their hands, and make up a song. And they would dance on that, them people.”¹⁸ It is easy to imagine that such folks might eventually supplement their hand clapping with the spontaneous incorporation of any object readily available on which they could tap, scrape, and pound in rhythm. Since the typical venue for socializing and musical performances involving poor black Creoles of this era was the house party, kitchen utensils such as spoons, bottle openers, and washboards became increasingly common supplements as *juré*-based traditions began to evolve beyond their religious origins to inspire the more secularized form known as *la la*. But many older black Creoles did not forget where the music began. None other than the late “King of Zydeco,” former Houston resident Clifton

Chenier, located the origin of his music’s characteristic syncopation in the church-inspired *juré*. “The beat came from the religion people,” he once bluntly asserted in an interview, as he sharply clapped his hands in time.¹⁹

Thus, *juré* is the post-African source for the highly syncopated, polyrhythmic foundation common today in the black Creole music of Louisiana and southeast Texas—a signature trait distinguishing the sound from that of the neighboring white Cajuns, for instance. While the rhythms now are generated by manipulation of metal instruments, they began much more simply. Utilizing the most basic of sonic devices, the voice and the hand clap, the primary role of *juré* in the evolution of zydeco is analogous to that of a cappella “Negro spirituals” in the early formation of the secular music called blues. But the development from the instrumentally limited *juré* to zydeco would not have been possible without *la la*, the crucial link between the seed and the flower in black Creole music of the upper Gulf Coast.

Whereas the turn-of-the-century style called *juré* formally explored the creative potential of plaintive vocalizing over a musical substructure of intense syncopation, the early-to-mid-twentieth-century style known mainly as *la la* marked not only a shift from religious to secular emphasis, but also eventually initiated other distinctly necessary phases in the metamorphosis towards zydeco. Foremost, this music (referred to variously among black Creoles as “French music,” “French *la la*,” as well as just “*la la*”) had introduced the diatonic one-row accordion as lead instrument. Though this most basic push-pull version of accordion would largely be replaced by more musically diverse models (including eventually the chromatic piano-key type), from its first emergence *la la* celebrated the accordion as the

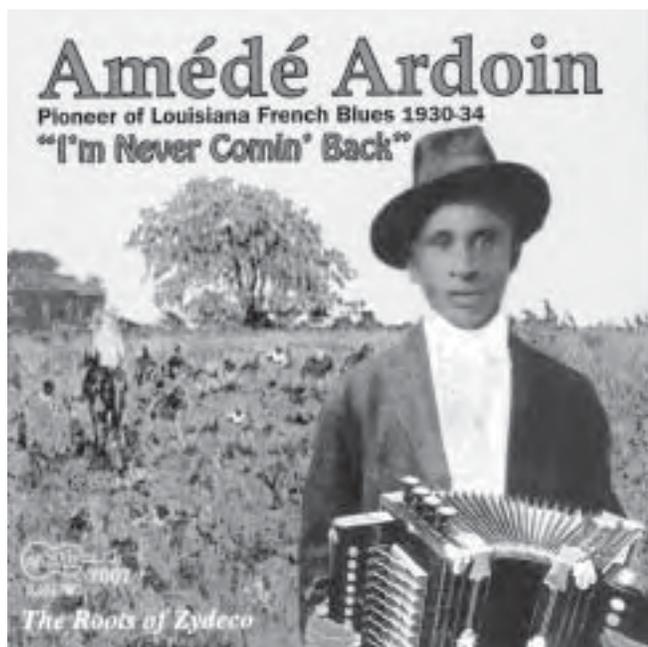


Photo of Lester Herbert & Peter King courtesy of Chris Strachwitz

primary soundpiece of black Creole music. In the early years, it was often the sole instrument backing the human voice, as well as played solo or accompanied by a fiddle. In this respect, la la was undoubtedly influenced by Cajun music, in which both

that I realized Amédé was of African-American background. To my ears, the recordings of Amédé Ardoin did not sound all that different from . . . Cajun accordionists I had heard on records.”²⁰ Confusing the matter further, many of Ardoin’s recorded

Singer and accordionist Amédé Ardoin is generally recognized as the most influential figure in the early development of both Creole and Cajun music.



Courtesy Arhoolie Records

accordion and fiddle were already established as alternating lead instruments. However, fiddle playing in black Creole music is now of minor significance (and non-existent in the more popular contemporary zydeco bands) compared to its continued featured role in Cajun culture.

Singer and accordionist Amédé Ardoin is generally recognized as the most influential figure in the early development of both Creole and Cajun music, two distinct styles which nonetheless have much in common, especially in the years between the two World Wars, when the recording of Southern folk music first became possible. Born in 1898 in Eunice, Louisiana, this small black Creole man had absorbed the elements of Cajun music so completely that many people who heard his seminal recordings (made between 1929 and 1934, including one crucially important session in Texas) did not know he was actually a Creole. Chris Strachwitz, the founder of Arhoolie Records (a key label in documenting zydeco and Cajun music since the early 1960s), recalls his surprise at learning the fact of Ardoin’s racial identity: “It wasn’t until Clifton Chenier told me that ‘Amédé Ardoin was the first colored to make French records’

performances featured accompaniment by legendary Cajun fiddler Dennis McGee in a biracial collaboration that was, and has to this day remained, fairly rare in the history of black Creole music. Moreover, Ardoin sang in a tense, high-pitched voice with a strong, pleading tone in the manner of the classic Cajun singers (as opposed to the open-throated technique more common in African-American vocalizing). His instrument was the traditional single-row diatonic accordion, and his music was based mainly on the popular Cajun waltzes, one-steps, and two-steps. So on first impression Ardoin’s special significance as the patriarch of modern black Creole music might be difficult to grasp. But key indicators of his primary role in that music discretely appear on his recordings, and most obviously so during his one session in Texas.

In downtown San Antonio on August 8, 1934, a small group of recording engineers gathered various folk performers, including Amédé Ardoin, in two rooms of the Texas Hotel to make some records.²¹ Despite his stylistic affinity with the white French music of rural Louisiana, the six tunes Ardoin documented that day (for the Bluebird/Victor company) included some distinct differences foreshadowing the future of black Creole music. Perhaps most importantly, the titles of two tracks pointed toward the just-emerging synthesis of traditional Cajun sounds and the primary secular music of African Americans: “Les Blues de Voyage” (“Travel Blues”) and “Les Blues de Crowley” (“Crowley Blues,” named after a town near Ardoin’s birthplace in Louisiana). The latter, in particular, is especially potent in its highly emotive vocal performance, consonant with the rough style of early country blues, but sung in French by an accordion player, and thus anticipating zydeco. Among the thirty-four titles that compose his entire recorded repertoire, Ardoin made specific reference to “blues” only four times, and one half of those references occurred during this single session in San Antonio, a fact that symbolically hints at the role Texas would play in the intermingling of la la and blues for decades to come.

In addition to this emphasis on blues, the Texas Hotel session marks another significant development. Although Ardoin had generally established a reputation for playing in a syncopated style more consistent with his Creole legacy than with straight Cajun music, none of his catalogue of thirty-four recordings

included any percussion instrument accompaniment, still a rarity in white French folk music at this time (with the exception of the iron triangle used in some Cajun bands). Thus, it is especially noteworthy that the six Texas tracks were the first, and only, to highlight on record the organic rhythms of Ardoin's foot tapping, the most fundamental of all percussive effects. As Jared Snyder observes, "Eli Oberstein, who was in charge of the recordings, chose not to damp the sound of Ardoin's foot tapping in time to the music. Foot tapping was a critical part of the performance and was something normally eliminated by recording on carpeted floor."²² Oberstein's decision resulted in a sound more faithful to what would surely have been heard at an old style house dance, where foot tapping was often not only present but, in a sense, "amplified" by the practice of having the musician stand upon a strong wooden table placed in one corner of a room, a platform that functioned both as an elevating bandstand and as a resonating surface for foot-based percussion.²³ Although Ardoin's clearly discernible foot tapping on the recordings was relatively subtle compared to subsequently developed percussion effects in black Creole music, it suggested (even if only by chance) the

increasingly significant role that rhythmic accents would play in the development of la la.

In the years following Ardoin's Texas recordings, la la would formalize the sophisticated musical adaptation of metal percussion devices (such as spoon scraped on washboard) as the defining source of heavy syncopation at the house dances (and eventually on the first zydeco recordings), no longer depending mainly on hand-clapping or foot-tapping to create the beat. Here black Creole la la diverged remarkably from traditional, European-inspired Cajun music, which was generally far less rhythmically complex and played at a regular, measured tempo. La la, on the other hand,

increasingly came to highlight an "Afro-Caribbean rhythmic framework" in which accents often shifted to various beats.²⁴ The role of the rubboard or washboard, known among Creoles as *le frotoir* (from the French verb *frotter*, "to rub"), became ever more pronounced, laying the trademark "chanka-chank" foundation over which a featured accordionist would perform. And the repertoire of this accordion-washboard collaboration began to expand beyond the old style French songs to encompass blues, especially as the accordionists started to experiment with the wider ranging musical capabilities of more technologically advanced instrument types.

Early la la music thus represents a confluence of Creole and Cajun musical traditions, best documented by the recordings of Amédé Ardoin (especially those made in Texas). But at black Creole house dances throughout the upper Gulf Coast region, the old style acoustic la la personified by Ardoin began to change even more in the late 1940s as ever larger numbers of Creole settled in Texas cities and witnessed first-hand the vibrant new sounds of electric blues and the polished craftsmanship of R & B.

As the black Creole immigrants to cities such as Houston experienced increasing financial and material advancement (thanks to regular paychecks from the jobs they came to find), it became more and more common for them to socialize with, and be influenced by, non-Creoles beyond enclaves such as Frenchtown. They met and mixed with the general African-American population at work and in entertainment venues such as Fifth Ward's famous Bronze Peacock nightclub or Third Ward's swanky Eldorado Ballroom. In the midst of Frenchtown itself, they crowded into the Creole-owned Johnson's Lounge to dance to big band music and see the floor shows. Although they still kept la la culture alive at private house parties, they discovered big city night clubs to offer an exciting new experience fueled by swing, blues, and jazz. And they absorbed an even wider range of popular music via the medium of sound recordings on juke boxes and broadcast radio. Unlike friends and family members they had left behind in relative isolation back in rural southwest Louisiana, many of the newly urbanized Creoles did not cling to the musical traditions of *juré* and old style la la as much as they began to expand their tastes beyond this root music, and, in some cases, to adapt it into something new, inspired by the dominant musical trends of the day.

African-American music writer Nelson George has provocatively observed that "black music is in constant flight from the status quo."²⁵ While this sweeping generalization is subject to debate in any given case, it suggests several layers of realities (musical and otherwise) influencing the more progressive players in urban Texas la la culture of the late 1940s, of which Clifton Chenier is the most widely recognized example. By the post-war era, thousands of black Creoles working in the state's southeastern industrial cities had already fled the socio-economic



status quo of their slave-descendant ancestors back on the farms. Guitarist and singer Sherman Robertson (now an established blues recording artist but once a zydeco player with Chenier and others) recalls the situation with his own Creole father, who had been Chenier's childhood friend:

My father was a sharecropper who went off to fight World War II, a man who was driven to be somebody. I was born in 1948, after he had returned from the War in '46. When he came to Houston [in 1949] from Breaux Bridge [Louisiana], he left the mules and the plow hitched. He abandoned his field. Because he had been to World War II, and then to come back and say "I've got to get back in the sharecropping groove," well, he just didn't fit that groove anymore. . . . To my family, Houston offered a way out, a new way to live.²⁶

Like the elder Robertson, thousands of black Creoles had moved on mainly in an effort to modernize and improve their living conditions. And they concurrently and enthusiastically had begun to modernize their preferences in music too. Yet if they periodically departed from the status quo of their traditional Creole heritage, they never fully abandoned it, or its music. Like their linguistic idiom, their religion, and their distinctive food, la la composed a major element of their collective sense of self. But, until 1949, it was a musical experience mainly shared only with other black Creoles, not performed for the general public in nightclubs or ballrooms around the city. And by the time it made its presence known in the clubs, people would refer to it as zydeco.

The essential metamorphosis of la la music into contemporary zydeco did not occur suddenly in the urban environment. In fact, it is fair to assume that, throughout the 1940s, much of the black Creole music in Texas cities remained primarily acoustic and folk-based (i.e., casual in its performance at specific social functions, utilizing mainly a traditional repertoire transmitted from master to apprentice, often within the family).²⁷ But the notion of a backwards-looking French-based repertoire was increasingly being challenged by the ubiquitous sounds of popular black culture.

For instance, Anderson Moss, one of Frenchtown's leading Louisiana-born accordion masters from the 1950s into the 1990s, really began learning and playing his instrument decades after moving to Houston in 1928. Significantly, the first two songs he says he mastered came not from the Creole or Cajun tradition rooted back in rural Louisiana but from contemporary Texas blues in the form of hit records produced in California: "Driftin' Blues" and "Stormy Monday." The former had been written and first released in 1945 by the pianist and vocalist Charles Brown, originally from Texas City; the latter had been composed and first recorded in 1947 by the seminal electric blues guitarist and singer Aaron "T-Bone" Walker, originally from Dallas. Neither these artists nor these songs conveyed characteristics associated with the French Louisiana music

tradition, or even with the rural blues tradition for that matter. Instead, both Brown and Walker personified an urbane, jazzy style of blues. Yet Moss says that after learning such numbers as these hits by Brown and Walker, he soon found jobs in small cafes throughout Fifth Ward playing them on the accordion for predominantly Creole audiences.²⁸

This new form of music, though it was played by a black Creole on an accordion, probably did not sound much like the old Cajun-influenced style called la la, a label which increasingly suggested an antique mode to some of the urbanized residents of Frenchtown. In the years following World War II, as their repertoire absorbed more songs from the top blues artists of the day, and as the accordionists and washboard players eventually began to perform alongside other instruments common in typical blues and jazz combos, variations of the word now spelled z-y-d-e-c-o came to signify this distinctively syncretized music (as well as the events at which it was played, and the dance steps performed there), in lieu of the phrase la la. As black Creole guitarist Ashton Savoy, a Louisiana native and longtime Houston resident, explains, "They used to call that 'French la la'. . . . 'Well, we going around to listen at the French la la tonight,' you know. . . . But when they started putting them horns and saxophones and all that stuff in there, well then they started playing the blues, they stated mixing that stuff up then, you know. Well, that's when they started calling it 'zydeco' then."²⁹

The origins of the word zydeco have been traced to a lyric that surfaced first in various Creole folk songs in early twentieth-century Louisiana and has recurred ever since: *les haricots sont pas salé* ("the beans are not salted," a reference to the fact that the singer is too poor to afford salt or salted meat to flavor his beans).³⁰ The name zydeco derives from the first two words in this expression. Following the logic of French pronunciation, with the elision of the Z-sounding terminal s in the definite article *les*, combined with the vowel sound following the silent h in the noun *haricots* (in which the terminal t is also silent), the phrase *les haricots* sounds something like *le zarico*, (with the final syllable stressed) in standard dialect. Among the various attempts at making an English spelling correspond to the Creole pronunciation, z-y-d-e-c-o would eventually win out, thanks to the efforts of Houston folklorist Robert Burton "Mack" McCormick. He formally established the now standard orthography in his transcription of lyrics for a two volume 1959 record album called *A Treasury of Field Recordings*. This compilation included various types of folk music documented around Houston, but the key performance, as far as the future of zydeco was concerned, was by a Creole who had immigrated to the city in the 1940s, Dudley Alexander. He played a bilingual version of Big Joe Williams's 1930s-era classic blues "Baby, Please Don't Go" on concertina (a type of small accordion), accompanied by washboard and fiddle. In addition to the lyrics, Alexander added



"They used to call that 'French la la'. . . . 'Well, we going around to listen at the French la la tonight,'

Photo of Ashton Savoy at the Big Easy Social & Pleasure Club, Houston, TX, 1995. by James Fraher

a spoken-word introduction, in a mix of French and English, in which the word McCormick transcribed as zydeco occurs.³¹

The entire utterance *les haricots sont pas salé* operated originally as a common metaphor for hard times, signifying a poverty so severe that there was no money to buy salt (or salt meat) to season the homegrown vegetables. In this sense, zydeco is a word,³² like blues before it, that carries connotations of personal suffering based in socio-economic deprivation. But just as blues offered some articulation of, and concomitant creative release from, that hardship, so did this Creole music. And, in both cases, even when that impoverished milieu of a hard rural lifestyle had been left behind by black city dwellers, the old term was evoked to describe the fundamental music of the culture the migrants had brought with them. Not only did the word zydeco harken back to the old line about the beans, but McCormick and others noted that people dancing to the music often engaged in a hand gesture reminiscent of the act of breaking open bean pods, “holding closed wrists in front of the torso and then circling or flicking them in a motion that alludes to someone snapping beans.”³³

McCormick had initially settled on the word zydeco to describe both the dancing and the distinctive music that he observed among black Creoles in Houston’s Fifth Ward, not as a replacement for the older term *la la* but as a way of differentiating this now doubly syncretized urban style from the traditional music rooted back in rural Louisiana. As Tisserand observes, the Houston folklorist had intended for the term “to apply [only] to the local alloy of Texas blues and French Creole music. . . and he was horrified when the word was sucked back across the Louisiana border,” noting also that McCormick declared, “When I’m talking about zydeco, I’m talking about the music of Frenchtown.”³⁴

Not only was the term zydeco first formally established on Texas soil as a multivalent reference to a new type of music, a dance step, and an event, but the first two recordings to use variations on the term in this sense, as opposed to the original French sense referring to a bean, were produced not in Louisiana but also in Houston in the late 1940s. Significantly also, these records were made not by artists playing the accordion or in the traditional Creole style. Instead, the first was issued, possibly as early as 1947, by the very personification of Texas blues, Sam “Lightnin’” Hopkins, and the second appeared in a 1949 recording by rhythm-and-blues performer Clarence “Bon Ton” Garlow.

In the Hopkins song, which Gold Star Records producer Bill Quinn (a New Englander by birth) bewilderingly titled “Zolo Go,” the singer offered a rare performance on electric organ, forsaking the guitar for which he is most famous, in an effort to approximate the sound of an accordion, a sound he knew first hand from his cousin (by marriage), occasional music partner, and eventual zydeco superstar Clifton Chenier. Though structurally the song is a standard eight-bar blues, it began with

Hopkins declaring, “I’m going to zolo go [actually pronounced more like zydeco] for a little while for you folks. You know, the young and old likes that,” and the last lines described a woman asserting the need to go “zolo go” as an escape from hard times.³⁵ As Chris Strachwitz explains, the Gold Star recordings Hopkins made in the late 1940s were mainly limited in distribution to juke boxes around southeastern Texas, where most African Americans (transplanted Creoles and non-Creoles alike) would easily recognize the sound and the word to which Hopkins alluded on this track.³⁶

Clarence Garlow, unlike Hopkins, was of Creole heritage, having been born in Welsh, Louisiana, in 1911. But at age five he moved with his family to the Texas city of Beaumont and spent much of his subsequent life traveling and working between the two neighboring states. As Govenar has documented, Garlow started out playing fiddle and traditional Creole music, but “when he heard the ‘amplified sound’ of T-Bone Walker, his attitude changed. He wanted to play electric guitar.”³⁷ This inspiration soon culminated with Garlow fronting his own band playing R&B in clubs around Houston and landing a record deal with the local Macy’s label, for which he recorded his signature hit entitled “Bon Ton Roula” in 1949. This song pulsed with a rumba style percussion and opened with the spoken exclamation “Eh toi,” an interjection common in Creole-Cajun music culture. Though the instrumentation included drums, saxophone, piano, electric guitar and bass—not exactly characteristic of the traditional Creole ensemble—the singer identified himself as a “Frenchman” giving advice about how to enjoy oneself in a “Creole town,” with subsequent reference to “crawfish,” “Louisiana,” and “French la la.” But the key moment occurred near the end when he advised people to go to the “zydeco” [indeterminate orthography] to have fun.³⁸

The Hopkins and Garlow recordings clearly demonstrate that in the late 1940s the concept of zydeco, however it might have been pronounced or spelled, was current among blacks in southeast Texas, and not as a reference to a vegetable. As blues and R&B artists such as these two men used the term, it was something of a novelty, but it indicated the level of interchange already underway between black Creole musical culture and popular urban modes. However, at the time these records were produced, it was still practically impossible in the nightclubs around Houston to find the real music, whether it was dubbed *la la* or zydeco, played with accordion and washboard and performed by black Creoles. Such presentations remained limited mainly to the house party phenomenon. But by the tail end of the decade, on Christmas Eve of 1949, that situation suddenly changed.

The key event in the movement of black Creole music into the public venues of Houston seems to have occurred by chance. During the same post-war period when popular blues artists such as Hopkins and Garlow were beginning to notice black



Photo of Doris McClendon, owner of the Continental Zydeco in Houston, 1996.
By James Fraher

Creole music and to appropriate elements from it, a rebirth of French la la was simultaneously occurring, stimulated regularly by new arrivals from Louisiana and rural east Texas. As has been extensively documented by Minton, one of the most respected masters of the old la la accordion tradition was Willie Green, who had moved to Houston as far back as the 1920s, and who became “the first Houston Creole to perform French music in a public venue” by playing an impromptu Christmas Eve gig at Irene’s Café in 1949.³⁹ From that date until his death in the late 1960s, Green would reign as the king of the la la sound (his instrumentation usually limited to one or two accordions accompanied by a washboard) at Irene’s Café—and at other venues that had soon followed its lead in featuring this music for the entertainment of paying customers. While Green’s repertoire included Cajun-Creole classics such as “Jole Blon,” it also incorporated blues tunes such as “Baby, Please Don’t Go,” and came increasingly to be referred to as zydeco as a result. Yet Green’s music retained the stripped down, primal sound of the old house party la la,⁴⁰ as opposed to the more instrumentally diverse, amplified sound of the progressive zydeco bands that would emerge in the 1950s, inspired by the success of Clifton Chenier.

The fact that Green often played with a second accordion led him naturally into a master-apprentice type relationship with a younger player named L. C. Donatto, who had moved to Houston from Louisiana around 1944. In an interview with Minton, Donatto recounts the sequence of events leading up to that first breakthrough performance at Irene’s Café, explaining that he and Green were “just riding around in a car . . . driving and playing that thing and drinking and having fun,” when they stopped at a stranger’s front yard because a man out front with a guitar hollered at them, “Y’all come on the porch and

play.” As they obliged his request, accompanied by an unknown washboard player, they spontaneously attracted a huge crowd, including eventually the proprietress of a nearby cafe, Irene. As Donatto tells it, “she heard that, and she come on ‘round there, her and her husband, and seen all them people, said, ‘Well, why don’t y’all come to the café?’ And we started from that day. Started from that, and Count Basie or Benny Goodman couldn’t draw no bigger crowd than that. . . . And we were the first one played, that’s right, zydeco in Houston.”⁴¹

The success of this first appearance and subsequent bookings at Irene’s Café benefited not only Green and Donatto, but also other Frenchtown accordionists such as the aforementioned Anderson Moss and his best friend, an important post-1950 figure, named Lonnie Mitchell. Born around 1925 in the Creole community of Raywood near Liberty, Texas, Alfonse Lonnie Mitchell was first inspired to play the accordion around age twelve, after witnessing the skills of a respected oldtimer called Joe Jesse at a house party performance. After moving to Houston (in a year he has given variously as 1946, 1947, and 1950) Mitchell eventually resumed his accordion playing and shared the stage with Willie Green. But Mitchell’s big break came when the owner of Johnson’s Lounge in Frenchtown decided to cease booking the big bands that had been popular in the 1940s and instead to feature live Creole accordion music, following the success of the venture at Irene’s Café. Mitchell’s tenure at Johnson’s Lounge, which would later be leased for five years by the musician himself and called Mitchell’s Lounge following the death of Charley Johnson, and which would then be rechristened the Continental Zydeco Ballroom when the lease reverted to Johnson’s heir, Doris McClendon, lasted from approximately 1951 until Mitchell’s own death in 1995. Over this period of close to four-and-a-half decades, the large red-and-white painted structure at 3101 Collingsworth established itself as “Houston’s premier Creole nightspot,”⁴² and Lonnie Mitchell was the dominant presence there, sometimes performing as often as six nights per week and influencing several generations of Houston zydeco musicians and fans in the process. Of additional significance, and unlike his friend and elder Willie Green, Mitchell did not limit his accompaniment to the washboard, as was common in the old la la tradition. As he once reflected in an article Minton published in the *Journal of Folklore Research*, “It makes it sound better, you know, a guitar and drums, to me. . . . I don’t know if I could play now with just a washboard. . . . But you know, when you got a guitar and drums and all that, it just, I don’t know, give more pep to the music.”⁴³

One of the black Creoles who came to Texas in the late 1940s and became part of the 1950s Frenchtown scene at Johnson’s Lounge was Lonnie Mitchell’s good friend Clifton Chenier, the man most responsible for eventually taking Texas-bred zydeco, that potent fusion of electric blues with the la la sounds of

accordion and washboard, back to Louisiana, and eventually to the world. Born in Opelousas, Louisiana, in 1925, Chenier had moved in 1947 first to Port Arthur, Texas, where he worked at the Gulf Oil Refinery by day and played music with his older brother Cleveland, performing for tips at quitting time outside the factory gates and in the evenings at area clubs and icehouses. Eventually they would form the Red Hot Sizzling Band that played along the Gulf Coast, traveling back and forth between Texas and Louisiana, from the late 1940s into the early 1950s. As he visited and eventually moved to Houston, Chenier's self-presentation evolved from that of a country-bred Creole to an urban persona distinctly more fashionably hip. On trips back to Opelousas, his old friends noticed the difference at a glance. As Wilbert Guillory once told an interviewer, "He came back from Texas, he was a changed man. . . . He had all kinds of colored clothes, and he had his conked hair. Gold teeth, talked nice, talked proper," an opinion seconded by Louisiana radio deejay Frank Marlborough, who observed, "He brought in a new style, that's what I think it was. Texas was always ahead in fashion."⁴⁴

But the changes triggered by Clifton Chenier's late 1940s/early 1950s Texas experience would not be limited to his personal appearance; they would also influence his music, and eventually make him the undisputed father of the post-1950 modern zydeco sound. Chenier's role is enormous, for example, in affecting the primary instruments used in the rise of zydeco to a popular form.

As a child of a single-row push-button diatonic accordion player back in Opelousas, he had been raised amidst the essence of the old style sound and technique. But for whatever reasons (and as Tisserand notes, the historical facts on this matter are "not clear"⁴⁵), Chenier chose to play the large piano-key chromatic model throughout his adult life, presumably before and certainly after his move to Texas, and there is some evidence, including Chenier's own testimony to Cajun-Creole historian Ann Allen Savoy, as well as to Texas music documentarian Alan Govenar, that he really started playing the accordion only after arriving in southeast Texas.⁴⁶ This preference for the relatively newfangled version of the instrument would prove fortuitous once Chenier relocated west of the Sabine River and began to expand his repertoire beyond the rural Creole tradition of his father's generation, experimenting with his accordion's capacity to play blues and R&B. Given the ability to make music in any key, including flats and sharps, the piano-style chromatic model would prove infinitely better suited to performance of any song he wanted to attempt, especially when he played with other instruments (such as the saxophones, organs, and guitars that he would later incorporate in his various bands). Whereas the single-row diatonic models were locked in a fixed pattern of intervals and could play only in one key, obviously limiting their versatility, Chenier's choice of the chromatic accordion liberated him to explore whatever musical synthesis he could imagine



Photo of Wilfred Chenier at the Silver Slipper, Houston, 1997. By James Finher

between the popular blues tunes he encountered in Texas and the more traditional Creole sounds he recalled from back home. Moreover, the piano-style chromatic instrument would make the same note whether it was pushed or pulled, unlike the various previously developed diatonic options.

In Texas, Chenier also discovered "famed accordion builder John Gabbenelli, who had recently moved to Houston from Italy," and who would repair and modify old "junk" piano-key accordions for the young musician,⁴⁷ making it easier for him to afford and master the instrument. And Clifton Chenier did just that, influencing zydeco musicians and the genre's fundamental sound for decades to come.

The Chenier brothers' initial tenure in the Lone Star state would also mark a major innovation in the traditional *la la* percussion instrument, the washboard. Just as Clifton would update and diversify the sonic possibilities of the zydeco accordion by using a different model, he and his brother Cleveland would revolutionize the basic form, playing style, and resultant musical effects of the washboard. In short, they invented the modern zydeco frottoir. Instead of continuing to rely on the humble household utensil that had long been adapted for rhythmic accompaniment in black Creole music, they designed a truly unique musical instrument, the frottoir vest. In doing so, they directly affected practically every zydeco band to come after them. Although Cleveland had started out, like most Creole percussionists before him, holding a traditional rectangular shaped small metal washboard and scratching its surface with a spoon, in the late 1940s his brother came up with a radical new idea, which he recalled in a videotaped interview with Chris Strachwitz:

They used to tie a string around it [the washboard], you know, and play it around the neck. So I went on to a white fellow down there at the Gulf Refinery [in Port Arthur]. I told him, I said,

“You got some tin?” He say, “Yeah.” So I got down on the ground, in the sand, and I drewed that rubboard. And I said, “Can you make one like that? You know, with a collar plate?” He say, “Sure, I can make one like that.” And he made one.⁴⁸

The result was a type of curving, single-piece corrugated metal vest worn over the shoulders of the player and covering the whole front of his torso, all the way down to the waist.

This innovation provided a much wider and longer surface for percussive improvisation and freed the player to dance and move with the music, since he no longer had to hold the washboard with one hand or awkwardly manipulate the smaller flat-surfaced traditional model as it hung from a string around the neck. Moreover, this sophisticated new design expanded the musical possibilities for zydeco percussion, for, as Strachwitz points out, “The amount of air the player leaves in back of the instrument (by either standing up straight or bending forward) determines the brightness of the sound.”⁴⁹ Cleveland Chenier effectively exploited this technique and also explored other sonic

Creole music to fans of all races, and profoundly influencing the direction the music called zydeco would take in the last two decades of the century. As Chris Strachwitz, the producer of Chenier’s most significant recordings, has written, “Clifton’s success gave all the other Zydeco musicians the impetus to put more blues or rock and roll (as they called it) into Creole Zydeco music, especially in the Houston area.”⁵⁰

A former Chenier protégé, and current stalwart of the Bayou City zydeco scene, agrees: “Clifton was the first one to mix it up. Everything was strictly straight Cajun style music or la la before him,” says accordionist Wilfred Chevis, leader of The Texas Zydeco Band. “La la wasn’t like the zydeco. The zydeco is more exciting. La la was a traditional type of music, mainly just the accordion, laid-back with a slower type of beat. Zydeco has an up-tempo, and more instruments, with a little touch of blues to spice it up.”⁵¹

However, through the 1970s, at small clubs in Frenchtown and elsewhere, Chenier would still sometimes appear with minimal accompaniment, recalling the stark simplicity of la la. But for the higher profile gigs, he regularly performed with a

The frottoir vest, which is now a fixture in practically every zydeco band playing today (as well as in some Cajun bands), is arguably one of the few non-electronic musical instruments to be created in the United States of America, and by Chenier’s own account, it first came into being in southeast Texas. 35

theories by changing the type and number of hand-held tools with which the metal surface was struck. He eventually traded in the traditional one or two spoons that others had relied on (as the washboard equivalent of drumsticks), and instead he adopted a musical approach based on gripping six church key bottle openers in each hand as he performed, expanding the polyrhythmic effects and creating a richer percussion foundation for his brother’s accordion playing. Given these innovations, the frottoir vest, which is now a fixture in practically every zydeco band playing today (as well as in some Cajun bands), is arguably one of the few non-electronic musical instruments to be created in the United States of America, and by Chenier’s own account, it first came into being in southeast Texas.

The rest is music history. Energized by the lively possibilities of the chromatic piano key accordion and the newly conceived washboard vest, Clifton Chenier’s music, more so than any other player’s, changed the course of zydeco in the latter half of the twentieth century. From his first sessions in the 1950s and up almost till the time of his death in 1987, he would go on to record in Louisiana, California, and Texas and to tour the world, introducing his uniquely realized syncretism of blues, R&B, and

full band offering relatively sophisticated instrumentation. One witness to these alternating modes of self presentation was drummer Robert Murphy, a Texas-born black Creole. He recalls,

I met Clifton Chenier here in Houston. And once I started playing with him, every little squeeze-box in town wanted me to play with them. [laughs] . . . There was just the two of us. . . just accordion and drums. Sometimes Lightnin’ [Hopkins] would come on little jobs that we’d have, like on Sunday afternoons and things. He’d come by and sit in [on acoustic guitar]. . . and the three of us would have a ball! Me and Clifton and Lightnin’. . . Now when Clifton put the whole band together. . . and when we had the electric guitars and horns and all that, it was a different sound.⁵²

It was that “different sound,” of course, that pop music discovered in the 1980s, and for most of the final decade of his life, Chenier performed only with large scale units that featured progressive guitar players such as Sherman Robertson, along with a complete rhythm section, keyboards, and horns (often including, on saxophone, his son, C. J. Chenier, who remains a Houston resident to this day).

Clifton Chenier is also credited with spreading the word,



Photo of Big Roger Collins, Houston, 1995. By James Fraher

literally: zydeco. Although Mack McCormick had been the person who formally documented the term and the spelling, most historians agree that Chenier is the individual most responsible for popularizing it. He had first recorded a song for Specialty Records as far back as 1955 entitled “Zodico Stomp,” but it was Chenier’s breakthrough 1964 session for Arhoolie, recorded at Houston’s Gold Star studio by Chris Strachwitz, that gave to the world the classic song called “Zydeco Sont Pas Salé,” in which the producer followed McCormick’s lead, abandoning the French phrase *les haricots* for the potent new word. As Houston promoter Clarence Gallien once explained, “The name changed from *la la* to zydeco when Clifton made the record. . . . Clifton is the man who got credit for changing the name.”⁵³

And while Chenier’s impact on the propagation of the word, as on popular music itself, has ultimately been global, he participated in changing the Houston scene in at least one other crucial way that brought the signature music of his ethnic heritage back to its cultural roots. Like many other black Creoles, Clarence Gallien had come to Houston in the early 1940s, where he promptly opened a nightclub featuring live music and dancing. After first affiliating with Our Mother of Mercy Roman Catholic Church in Frenchtown, he later moved his membership to St. Francis of Assisi, where the congregation was exploring ideas for a fund-raising activity. When Gallien suggested promoting a dance for the church’s primarily Creole parishioners, the priest approved, and within weeks Clifton Chenier was drawing huge crowds on Saturday nights to “zydeco” at the church hall. As noted by Robert Damora, Gallien had been friends with Chenier back in Louisiana where they “had worked together cutting sugarcane,” and their church dance concept

rapidly became “so successful in preaching the gospel of zydeco that too many churches began to compete for bands and audiences.”⁵⁴ Eventually the Catholic diocese worked out a cooperative plan whereby the major black Creole churches in the area would take turns sponsoring the Saturday night zydeco dances, rotating them on a regular basis with updates announced weekly in the *Catholic Herald*. Not only did this development benefit the church coffers, and Chenier’s local popularity. But also, as Strachwitz has acknowledged, these church-based gatherings appealed to oldtimers and youngsters alike, so “entire families would attend and the Zydeco once again became a communal celebration having come full circle from the old community ‘house dances.’”⁵⁵

Thus, Clifton Chenier epitomizes the paradox of zydeco, a musical cultural phenomenon that simultaneously has moved away from and back to its roots. Having helped transform the music of old-timey rural Louisiana *la la* culture into something bold and new in the cities of southeast Texas, Chenier also took part in re-establishing the communal spirit of the Acadian homeland among black Creoles who had migrated to Houston. Today Chenier, like Gallien, is gone, but the church dances continue as fixtures in the social life of many Creole Catholics living around Houston. And the zydeco played at the dances today, featuring nationally recognized stars as well as up-and-comers, reflects a continual evolution, an ongoing syncretism of elements from the original Louisiana folk tradition and its subsequent Texas transformation with an amalgam of other media-inspired influences.

Though the Houston zydeco church dance tradition has survived into the start of the twenty-first century, all but one of the old Frenchtown zydeco nightclubs is now closed, reflecting the fact that black Creoles in the state’s largest city, like their music, are no longer confined to a single neighborhood in the Fifth Ward. Until the death of longtime proprietor Doris McClendon in November 1997, the Continental Zydeco Ballroom reigned as the largest and most famous place in Texas to hear the music, hosting practically every major artist in the genre. Stephen Harris, who gratefully recalls how McClendon “took me as her nephew” and who worked as the parking attendant at the Continental for twenty-one years, remembers some of the zydeco stars that performed there:

All of them started in Houston right here: “Buckwheat” [Stanley Dural], “Boozoo” [Wilson Chavis], “Rockin’ Dopsie” [Alton Rubin], “Rockin’ Sidney” [Simien], John Delafosse, Clifton Chenier—he played his last gig right here. . . . “Beau Jocque” [Andrus Espre], Paul Richard, Wilfred Chevis, L. C. Donatto, Wilbert Thibodeaux. Lonnie Mitchell, he played his last gig here too.⁵⁶

Although the Continental's historical significance and spacious floor plan certainly contributed to its popularity with performers and fans, McClendon herself was the key to the club's continuous operation. As Harris points out, "A lot of the musicians accepted her, you know, as an auntie. . . . The majority of them that started out young here, they would call her Mama."⁵⁷ And McClendon labored diligently to promote the legendary zydeco venue, often appearing on blues and zydeco vocalist Big Roger Collins's early Sunday morning radio show (on KPFT FM) to announce upcoming events, only a few hours

zydeco's most noteworthy Texas landmark.

However, not far from the site of the old Continental Zydeco Ballroom structure, the last of the old Frenchtown zydeco clubs has carried the tradition into the twenty-first century, thanks to the Cormier family. Born in Louisiana, Curly Cormier has actually lived in Houston since childhood, when his father, like many other Creoles of the era, moved to the city to find work. In 1962, after several years in the construction industry, the senior Cormier opened a small club in a shotgun shack on Frenchtown's Crane Street. Known then mainly as Alfred's Place,

McClendon labored diligently to promote the legendary zydeco venue, often appearing on blues and zydeco vocalist Big Roger Collins's early Sunday morning radio show (on KPFT FM) to announce upcoming events, only a few hours after having closed from the previous Saturday night show.

after having closed from the previous Saturday night show. Creole musician Ashton Savoy remembers: "Doris was a good woman, and she worked hard at that place, man."⁵⁸ He cites her unwavering commitment in spite of recent difficulties, including the dwindling population of older Creoles in Frenchtown and her own health problems. Chevis adds, "She pushed zydeco a whole lot. And she kept it going till the day she left."⁵⁹ As such, McClendon perhaps did more to promote appreciation of zydeco culture in Texas than any other non-musician. And the building she presided over, the place that had started out as Johnson's Lounge remains, even in its current state of vacancy, perhaps

it featured live blues and zydeco six nights a week and provided a steady gig for Clifton Chenier for over five years. "Two pieces—just he and the scrubboard," the younger Cormier recalls, was the usual set-up, la la style, in those days. He also remembers Chenier's companion Lightnin' Hopkins frequenting the modest venue to sit in—before the original structure was expanded and remodeled to its present relative spaciousness. Yet Cormier notes, "Even after [my father] enlarged it, it was still the same thing. Just jam-packed."⁶⁰

Following the patriarch's original tenure as proprietor, one of his older daughters had managed the place for awhile, rechristening it The Silver Slipper but maintaining tradition and booking a mix of zydeco and blues. Then around 1973 Curly Cormier, who was already well established locally as a versatile guitarist, assumed operation of the popular nightspot. In continuous operation now for almost forty years, this venue consistently offers, every Friday and Sunday night, bands led by some of the best Texas Creole accordionists, such as L. C. Donatto, Wilbert Thibodeaux, and Wilfred Chevis. And though Cormier reserves one evening a week, Saturday, for his own blues and R&B band, The Silver Slipper is arguably the most historically significant still-operating zydeco house in the Lone Star state.

One of the major changes to occur in zydeco at large during the relatively long lifespan of The Silver Slipper is exemplified by the musicianship of its current owner. Like countless other males of his generation, at an early age Curly Cormier was turned on by the sound of the electric guitar, so pervasive in popular American music of the past half-century. So despite his Creole heritage, he dreamed of leading a band with a guitar, not an accordion, strapped across his chest—and playing blues and R&B, not zydeco.



It is easy to understand the guitar-infatuated Cormier's motivation. In early black Creole music, the guitar, if present at all, was mainly relegated to simple acoustic rhythm work, playing behind the accordion but rarely taking the lead. "I didn't like that too much," says Ashton Savoy, a player whose experience parallels Cormier's. "My daddy was a musician who played guitar in backyards and barns and stuff, you know. But T-Bone Walker was the style of playing I would like—him and later, Lightnin' Hopkins."⁶¹ Savoy's explanation is echoed by many of his peers who came of age in the post-war era. Influenced by mainstream African-American music culture, far more than their ancestors were, countless Creole players gravitated toward the guitar, and hence often away from zydeco. However, for reasons both cultural and economic, many of those Texas guitar players have ultimately worked both sides of the zydeco-blues fence, so to speak.

The career of contemporary blues recording artist Sherman Robertson provides a relatively high profile example of many artists' ability to move easily between blues and zydeco. Though this Frenchtown-raised youngster became a local guitar sensation in his early teens, playing mainly blues and R&B, he would achieve his first financial security as a professional musician only by backing zydeco superstars. After a strong performance leading his own blues band as one of the opening acts for headliner Clifton Chenier's appearance at the 1982 SumArts Original Juneteenth Blues Festival in Houston, Robertson accepted the zydeco king's invitation to join the constantly touring Red Hot Louisiana Band as featured guitarist. Over the subsequent three years, Robertson's innovative accompaniment became an increasingly potent element of any Clifton Chenier show. As Robertson recalls,

As we progressed, Clifton would tell me, "You kick me off two [songs] before I come on," and then, "Kick me off three of yours before I come on." He was kind of giving [me] a little bit more room. Made some of the guys angry, in the band, because they'd been with him for years, and he'd never done that with them. But he'd seen I had something to take the load off of him, something fresh to add to his show. On the bandstand, he'd say, "Now we're going to play like B. B. King meets Clifton. When I give you a solo, I want you to do like B. B. do, like he plays it with his big band. Then I'm going to come right after you and play my solo, then the horns going to accent it." Oh yeah, he had it all worked out like he wanted.⁶²

Around 1985, Robertson's decision ultimately to part with Chenier, with the intention of reforming his own blues band, happened to coincide with the zenith of zydeco's breakthrough into popular culture. Various bands, formerly obscure groups that had once played only backwoods dancehalls in southwest Louisiana and southeast Texas, were suddenly looking for talented veteran musicians to join them on international tours. The pay was good, especially for skilled guitarists (who were in

The most outrageous is the trick that earned him local recognition as "The Head-Standing Guitarist"—i.e., the ability to flip himself over, upside down, onto a tabletop and brace his legs against a low-hanging ceiling, all while blazing away on a fiery guitar solo.



Photo of Joe James, Houston, 1997. By James Fraher

demand because they played an instrument that mainstream fans could easily relate to, bridging the gap between rock and Creole dance music). Given that reality, combined with financial pressures from a growing family back home, Robertson was prompted to remain in zydeco a bit longer.

I stayed out of work for about two months. Then I started playing with a guy called Terrence Semien, of the Mallet Playboys. And I played with them around, I think, '85 or so. Then there's the time right after that with Rockin' Dopsie; that's on the Graceland record [by Paul Simon]. I played with Terrence from '85 to '86. Then I played from '86 to '88 with Good Rockin' Dopsie and the Twisters. I was still thinking about Sherman and the blues, but I needed money. And zydeco was really ripping then, man—and the phone was always ringing. When they heard I'd left Clifton, it was like, basically, I was having my price. So my wife said, "OK, I know you're thinking about Sherman, but while the cotton is good"—we used that term—"keep picking it." So I went with Terrence, and that was good. I went to northern Africa with him. . . . With Terrence I went further than Clifton could go because Terrence was younger, and the zydeco world was opening up for younger players. But right after that, I quit Terrence—because Terrence was starting to leave too much, like three or four months at a time. Then Buckwheat came to the house, Buckwheat Zydeco. He said, "I want you. I'm leaving for a tour in the morning, got dates booked all over the world." . . . Well, I told him I'd think about it over night, and that evening, that's when Rockin' Dopsie called. . . . And I turned Buckwheat down and never got to play with him . . . because [working with Rockin' Dopsie] was a more reasonable deal for my family at that time.⁶³

Although Robertson would eventually return to his beloved blues and, by the 1990s, become an established star of the genre, his Creole upbringing (and consequent musical exposure) made it easy for him to switch to zydeco when it made financial sense to do so. And in the process, his dynamic presence in zydeco bands also further enhanced the evolution of the contemporary zydeco sound,⁶⁴ which has continued to draw from both Louisiana and Texas.

Over recent decades various other Texas guitarists of black Creole ancestry have alternated between fronting their own blues bands and working for a zydeco accordionist (where often the pay is better and the responsibilities fewer). The previously mentioned Ashton Savoy, who has made many appearances with his cousin Wilbert Thibodeaux or his good friend L. C. Donatto, is one example. Joe James, an occasional blues band leader while simultaneously a regular member of The Texas Zydeco Band through most of the 1990s, is yet another. Along with adding his distinctive blues-rock guitar licks to the zydeco mix, James has also introduced some of the stage antics he perfected as leader of Joe James and The Flames, a now defunct Houston band.

The most outrageous is the trick that earned him local recognition as "The Head-Standing Guitarist"—i.e., the ability to flip himself over, upside down, onto a tabletop and brace his legs against a low-hanging ceiling, all while blazing away on a fiery guitar solo. Once in that position, he can then shuffle his feet to rotate in a 360 degree circle, the crown of his head as the pivot, while the solo builds to a frenzy. It's a crowd pleaser for sure. And whenever James pulled it off during his years with The Texas Zydeco Band, audiences roared their approval. But whether such over-the-top physical gimmicks are incorporated or not, the point is that guitarists such as James have increasingly shared some of the spotlight previously reserved for accordion players. As such, the rise of the electric guitar in zydeco is yet another way the Texas influence has helped define this still-evolving black Creole music form.

On both sides of the Sabine River, zydeco music continues to change today, especially by blending itself with other musical styles and establishing new contexts for performance. Back in the 1970s the Houston group called the Sam Brothers Five, which Tisserand describes as kind of like "the Jackson Five with an accordion,"⁶⁵ initiated the first mainstream synthesis of zydeco with funk, disco, and other post-modern forms. More recently, Fifth Ward-born composer, arranger, and jazz-blues trumpeter Calvin Owens (a former band leader for B. B. King) has collaborated with Creole accordionist Chubby Carrier to create a sound he defines as "big band zydeco."⁶⁶ On the other hand, eccentric Third Ward-based guitarist and gritty street poet Little Joe Washington sometimes worked in the late 1990s with an obscure accordion player to improvise a strange fusion of zydeco



Photo of Calvin Owens, Houston, 1997. By James Fraher



Photo of Zydeco Lady D, Houston, 1995. By James Fraher

and his own unique stream-of-consciousness talking blues.⁶⁷

Fifth Ward native Katie Webster, the late piano player and singer known as “The Swamp Boogie Queen,” was a successful songwriter and recording artist who sometimes also incorporated zydeco influences into her rollicking music,⁶⁸ indirectly introducing the form to many West Coast and Northern blues fans in the process. But while female headliners such as Webster have always been associated with blues and playing the piano, only since the 1990s have women begun to emerge in the traditionally male-dominated field of zydeco. The most prominent of these today would seem to be Louisiana-based Rosie Ledet. Though not as well known as Ledet, females fronting zydeco bands have also been part of the Houston scene for over a decade.

One such example is the old style accordionist who bills herself as “Zydeco Lady D” (Diane Weatherall, not to be confused with Houston-based blues shouter Donna “Lady D” McIntyre). As leader of the Zydeco Tornados since 1994, Weatherall is effectively established as “the Diva of Houston Zydeco,” as she also refers to herself.⁶⁹ Perhaps her closest rival for the “Diva” designation, in the Bayou City at least, is actually not another accordionist but a singer, Mary Thomas, the sister of the late Clifton Chenier. Billing herself as “The Texas Queen of Zydeco,” Thomas has worked the southeast Texas-southwest Louisiana circuit with a variety of bands over the past decade. Currently she is backed by Roy Carrier and the Night Rockers, with whom she released the CD *Whiskey Drinking Woman* in December of 2000.⁷⁰

But clearly the most significant Texas-based influence on zydeco of the 1990s (and into the early twenty-first century) is the Houston-originated phenomenon of a new musical hybrid created by a younger generation of streetwise, hip-hop-influenced black Creole bands such as J. Paul Jr. and the Zydeco Newbreeds, Step Rideau and the Zydeco Outlaws, and Lil’ Brian and the Zydeco Travelers. As veteran Wilfred Chevis notes wistfully about the current Houston scene, “Now everybody’s playing accordion but they’re playing a different style. It’s not the same style. You know, putting kind of like a rap beat or new kind of rock-n-roll beat in it. . . . You know, the young generation is really into it.”⁷¹ While some traditionalists might wince at this latest evolution, Chevis himself accepts it as a continuation of a process, recognizing that from la la to zydeco, black Creole music has never really been a static form. And though he learned from and most enjoys the style of the master (Clifton Chenier), Chevis knows that zydeco has been morphing organically for decades, reflecting changing environments and influences among its creators, and especially so in Texas.

Recently no artist has embraced change with more flair than a young Houston-area bandleader named Brian Terry, arguably the face of zydeco’s future. The originator of a sound he calls “Z-Funk,” Terry is appropriately noted in *The Kingdom of*

Zydeco as the first artist—anywhere—to forge a musical link between zydeco and rap.⁷²

For Terry, the fusion of Creole accordion dance music and a hip-hop mentality came naturally. Around age 13, he started learning how to play the accordion during visits with relatives back in Louisiana. Lucky for him, the kinfolk include the legendary Delafosse family, one of that state’s major multi-generational sources of zydeco talent. From them he absorbed basic instrumental technique and tradition, which led to bookings at places like the old Continental Ballroom back home in Texas. “Things began jumping for me in Houston around ‘89 or ‘90,” he says. “At that time I was basically playing straight-ahead zydeco. I had envisioned in my head that I wanted to do some different things with my music, but I was kind of sticking to the roots back then.”⁷³

But for an intelligent teenager who was also absorbing “Snoop Dogg rap and Tupac,” it wasn’t long before he tried something new. “Growing up around here, I was listening to a lot of different styles of music. And of course I had friends who were definitely not into zydeco. Into other stuff, you know, rap and hip-hop and R&B. So I began really trying to put some funky hip-hop grooves into what I was dealing, you know. Wasn’t nobody doing it but me.”

Terry’s experimentation immediately set his band apart from other zydeco outfits, catching the attention of Massachusetts-based Rounder Records during a talent-scouting fieldtrip by producer Scott Billington. Their collaboration eventually resulted

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in the 1995 CD *Fresh*,⁷⁴ which introduced the world to a unique hybrid of zydeco, funk and rap featuring challenging arrangements and lyrical sophistication far beyond the simplistic norm. On the track “FuNkABlUeSaDeCo,” for instance, heavy bass intertwines with pounding drums and the jingly funk of rhythm guitar. Tight accordion riffs lay down a groove like an MC scratching a turntable. On this track and others Terry makes a major breakthrough, effectively processing hip-hop elements, both verbal and musical, through a zydeco filter. “I was raised up on zydeco. That’s in the blood of my family from Louisiana,” he explains. “But the rap and the hip-hop just give me some room to play around with other stuff, to make it my own thing and mess with the ideas I have going around in my head.”

Terry’s syncretic experimentation continued on his second Rounder CD, 1997’s *Z-Funk*,⁷⁵ beginning with the opening song, “H-Town Zydeco,” a tribute to the hometown music scene. Featuring some piercing blues-rock guitar by brother Patrick “Heavy P” Terry, the song climaxes with a bass jam reminiscent of the classic funk band Parliament Funkadelic. Meanwhile, the CD’s title track offers a swaying groove—hip-hop atmospherics fused seamlessly with an eerie accordion line. In a fiercely aggressive manner, Terry recites his rhymes: “Believe it, you know that I’m here / Grew up on that blues and that Clifton Chenier / It appears that a lot of zydeco bands have lost the juice / But Li’l Brian and the Travelers, you know we’re getting loose.” Near the end of each line, the crew shouts out the final phrase. The lyrics flow forth in rapid-fire sequence, culminating each time with the major theme: “It’s the Z-Funk / And I cannot lie / Zydeco is what I know / And zydeco will never die.”

The two Rounder releases, and extensive appearances at festivals and major venues worldwide, have made Li’l Brian and the Zydeco Travelers better known, in recent years, outside of their home base. In particular the band has become popular on the East Coast college circuit. “They hear us and have a good time, tripping out because we adding elements in an original mix. We’re not just giving them a straight-up, repetitious zydeco thing all night long,” Terry says. “They really dig it because it’s zydeco but it connects with their own music culture too.” Ultimately Terry makes no apologies for being progressive. “We ain’t scared to try to push this stuff mainstream, and get it off the back burner,” he says. “Zydeco is definitely in the heart and in the blood. But I just feel like we must acknowledge rap. We must not box ourselves in.”

Houston’s Step Rideau seems to be following Terry’s lead. Though he still performs and records many traditional sounding tracks and plays the old style button accordion (as opposed to the more “modern” piano key model popularized by Chenier, and also utilized by Terry), Rideau also has experimented with the melding of zydeco and rap. On his fourth CD, the 1999 release *Im So Glad*,⁷⁶ Rideau made his boldest contribution yet to the ongoing evolution of the form.

Perhaps the most unusual track, in terms of the wedding of old and new styles, is called “Bayou Swamp Thang,” which combines the seemingly antithetical elements of waltz and hip-hop. It also features a chorus of vocal harmonies rarely encountered in zydeco, the kind of group singing one might expect to find in traditional gospel or R&B. However, the most progressive compositions are those featuring guest rappers. On “If U Don’t Use It, U Gonna Lose It” Rideau delivers some classic R&B style testifying, complemented by the slick poetry of a hip-hop poet known as “Swift Haywire,” moniker for Houstonian Vonnie C. Dones III. Following two lengthy verse-chorus cycles led by Rideau, “Haywire” takes over, seamlessly building on the song’s nostalgic theme of learning from the elders and holding on to what you’ve got. It’s an energized yet mellow sequence highlighting the value of paternal wisdom.

Though he was initially a bit wary of the producer’s suggestion to weave rap into the mix, Rideau now delights at the song’s “inner message” as well as the impressive synthesis of disparate musical styles. “People don’t understand what a lot of rappers be saying,” Rideau says. “And then what they be saying is usually a lot of negative stuff.” Dones, however, was up to the challenge of keeping it accessible and positive, and Rideau soon realized that “this is the key to the rest of the puzzle.”⁷⁷ On another track, “Keep On Doing It,” rapper John Calvin Henry, aka “Dirty Red,” contributes an equally impressive series of verses. However, Rideau asserts that the hip-hop wordplay and funky beats are not the defining elements of his music. “Now I’m not fixing to go total rap,” he says. “It’s all about spice. That’s how this rap thing got to be part of my work; it’s just a spice that adds to the flavor of what I’m serving up. . . . We’re all for zydeco. But we’re open minded, and anything is possible. . . . This new way of music is just part of who we are, here and now.”

Being true to “who we are, here and now” is arguably the subtext of all zydeco history, and especially that sizable portion of it based in the Lone Star state. Despite the fact that popular consciousness will likely persist in imagining zydeco to be a uniquely rural-Louisiana-based sound, some people are beginning to recognize the importance of urban Texas as the locus for some of the genre’s most significant development. For instance, the Zydeco Hall of Fame was established in 1998 by the National Zydeco Society, a Houston-based organization.⁷⁸ And southeast Texas remains a creative center of zydeco culture, which is fitting, it being the place where la la and modern blues initially fused to form the new sound, where the defining word itself first formally appeared on record and in print, where the genre’s signature instruments were adapted in crucially progressive ways, where the classic sound established by Clifton Chenier first underwent subsequent metamorphosis to incorporate influences ranging from disco to rap, and where many black Creoles continue to thrive today. ■

Notes

1. Among the many examples of zydeco's mid-1980s breakthrough into popular culture are Paul Simon's zydeco-inclusive best-selling album *Graceland*, which won the 1986 Grammy for Album of the Year; rock star Eric Clapton's 1987-1988 affiliation (in the recording studio and on tour) with Stanley Dural, the artist known as "Buckwheat Zydeco"; the soundtrack to the 1987 box office hit film *The Big Easy* directed by Jim McBride; and numerous television advertising campaigns (especially in the 1990s) for major corporations from Toyota to the makers of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. Musical performance by Stanley "Buckwheat Zydeco" Dural was featured also at the globally televised closing ceremonies of the Summer Games of the twenty-sixth Olympiad in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1996.
2. Lorenzo Thomas, "From Gumbo To Grammys: The Development of Zydeco Music in Houston," in *Juneteenth Texas: Essays in African-American Folklore*, eds. Francis E. Abernethy, Patrick B. Mullen, and Alan B. Govenar (Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 1996), 139.
3. John Minton, "Houston Creoles and Zydeco: The Emergence of an African-American Urban Popular Style," *American Music* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 487.
4. See Minton, 505: "Both as a musical and linguistic idiom, zydeco is distantly tied to a culture approximating the ideal 'folk society' . . . In reality, though, as both a musical genre and a generic term, zydeco was coined by urban wage earners, more specifically by professional musicians . . . not in rural Louisiana—the 'back home' of the zydeco ethos—but in urban Texas."
5. Michael Tisserand, "Zydeco Beat," *Living Blues* 131 (Jan.-Feb. 1997): 74.
6. Barry Jean Ancelet, "Cajuns and Creoles," in *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, Vol. 2, eds. Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 38.
7. *Ibid.*, 40.
8. *The Handbook of Texas Online*, 1999 ed., s.v. "Liberty County," by Diana J. Kleiner.
9. Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz, eds., *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 88.
10. Michael Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco* (New York: Arcade, 1998), 15.
11. Bob Tutt, "Houston's Historic Wards Work to Reverse Fortunes," *Houston Chronicle*, 4 August 1996, 37(A).
12. Minton, 492.
13. Quoted in Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 76.
14. Beeth and Wintz, 89.
15. Alan Govenar, *Meeting the Blues: The Rise of the Texas Sound* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 151.
16. Minton, 490.
17. Grace Lichtenstein and Laura Dankner, *Musical Gumbo: The Music of New Orleans* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 220.
18. Quoted in Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 14.
19. Quoted in Govenar, 155.
20. Chris Strachwitz, co. booklet for *Zydeco: Volume One, The Early Years, 1949-62* (Arhoolie CD 307, 1989), 5.
21. Jared Snyder, "Amédé's Recordings," in co. booklet for *Amédé Ardoin: The Roots of Zydeco* (Arhoolie CD 7007, 1995), 12-13.
22. *Ibid.*, 13.
23. *Ibid.*, 13.
24. Nicholas R. Spitzer, "Zydeco," in *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, Vol. 3, eds. Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 348.
25. Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Plume, 1988), 107, 108.
26. Sherman Robertson, interview by author, tape recording, Houston, TX, 19 January 2000.
27. Thomas, 146.
28. Moss identifies these two titles as the first songs he learned, and the key to his early popularity among Houston Creoles, in Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 77.
29. Quoted in Minton, 503.
30. While numerous scholars have documented the etymology of the word zydeco, perhaps the definitive discussion of the issue occurs in Tisserand's opening chapter (entitled "What's In a Name?") in *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 9-21.
31. This album was released on the label called 77 Records in England. For more on McCormick's role in creating the now common spelling, see Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 17-20.
32. Like alternate pronunciations, alternate spellings have persisted over the years on signs promoting black Creole musical events in south Louisiana and southeast Texas, including zodicco, zordico, zologo, and many others; see Spitzer, 347. And for more on a possible West African cognate and the etymology of the word, see Barry Jean Ancelet, "Zydeco/Zarico: Beans, Blues, and Beyond," *Black Music Research Journal* 8 (1988): 33-49.
33. Govenar, 141.
34. Tisserand, 20.
35. This song, originally recorded on 78 RPM disc, is now available on CD: *Lightning Hopkins, The Gold Star Sessions, Vol. 1* (Arhoolie CD 330, 1990).
36. Chris Strachwitz, interview by author, tape recording, Jonesboro, AR, 16 April 1998.
37. Govenar, 151.
38. This song, originally recorded on 78 RPM disc, is available on CD: *Zydeco: Volume One, The Early Years, 1949-62* (Arhoolie CD 307, 1989).
39. Minton, 496.
40. Field recordings of four songs, including the two titles mentioned here, performed by Willie Green at Irene's Café in 1961 are included on the CD, *Zydeco: Volume One, The Early Years, 1949-62*, cited above.
41. Minton, 496.
42. *Ibid.*, 497.
43. John Minton, "Creole Community and 'Mass' Communication: Houston Zydeco as a Mediated Tradition," *Journal of Folklore Research* 32, no. 1 (1995): 1-19.
44. Quoted in Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 95, 97.
45. Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 93.
46. Minton cites the Savoy reference in "Houston Creoles and Zydeco," 506-507. In an interview with Chenier, Govenar quotes him as saying, "I learned to play in Lake Charles and in Texas, Houston mostly. . . . I never picked up an accordion until 1947," 155.
47. Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 102-103.
48. This interview is documented in the videocassette *Clifton Chenier: The King of Zydeco*, dir. Chris Strachwitz (Arhoolie, ARV 401, 1987).
49. Strachwitz, Booklet for *Zydeco*, 7.
50. *Ibid.*, 10.
51. Wilfred Chevis, interview by author, tape recording, Houston, TX, 18 August 1999.
52. Robert Murphy, interview by author and James Fraher, tape recording, Houston, TX, 3 October 1997.
53. Quoted in Govenar, 151.
54. Robert Damora, "Houston Zydeco: From Churches to Clubs," *Living Blues*, no. 116 (August 1994), 44-47.
55. Strachwitz, Booklet for *Zydeco*, 10.
56. Stephen Harris, interview by author, tape recording, Houston, TX, 7 January 1998.
57. *Ibid.*
58. Ashton Savoy, interview by author, tape recording, Houston, TX, 14 January 1998.
59. Wilfred Chevis, interview by author, tape recording, Houston, TX, 15 January 1998.
60. Curly Cormier, interview by author and James Fraher, Houston, TX, 8 January 1998.
61. Ashton Savoy, interview by author, Houston, TX, 11 November 1995.
62. Sherman Robertson, interview by author, Houston, TX, 19 January 2000.
63. *Ibid.*
64. Perhaps the best documentation of Robertson's impressive on-stage collaboration with Clifton Chenier is found in the videocassette *Clifton Chenier: The King of Zydeco*, cited above (c.f. note 48).
65. Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 318.
66. See the track "Take Me to the Zydeco" on the Calvin Owens CD *Stop Lying in My Face* (Sawdust Alley Records, 2000).
67. While Washington's bizarre innovations have yet to be recorded for public release, they have occurred from time to time in Houston nightclubs and are documented on an untitled self-produced audiotape cassette, CD duplicates of which he sometimes sells from the bandstand.
68. Perhaps the best single example of Webster's fusion of zydeco and blues is the track "Zydeco Shoes and California Blues" on her 1991 CD *No Foolin'!* (Alligator Records CD 4803).
69. Diane Weatherall, telephone conversation with author, notes, Houston, TX, 30 July 2001.
70. Thomas sings lead vocals on ten of the eleven tracks on this self-produced disc (no label information available).
71. Wilfred Chevis, interview by author, tape recording, Houston, TX, 18 August 1999.
72. Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco*, 319-320.
73. Brian Terry, interview by author, tape recording, Houston, TX, 9 September 1999. (All subsequent quotations from Terry are documented in this same interview.)
74. Rounder CD 2136.
75. Rounder CD 2146.
76. Bridge Entertainment CD BEZ 2004-2.
77. Step Rideau, interview with author, tape recording, Houston, TX, 28 September 1999. (All subsequent quotations from Rideau are documented in this same interview.)
78. Roger Wood, "Zydeco Hall of Fame Inaugurated," *Living Blues*, no. 142 (Nov.-Dec. 1998), 12.

Marvin "Smokey" Montgomery: A Life in Texas Music

By John Dempsey

Photo of Smokey Montgomery in the 1950s, courtesy of Art Greenhaw and the Light Crust Doughboys.



The Light Crust Doughboys launched the careers of Bob Wills, who went on to legendary status as the "King of Western Swing," and W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel, who became a popular, but lightly regarded, governor of Texas and U.S. senator. Another original Doughboy, vocalist Milton Brown, was perhaps the most popular musical performer in Texas when he was killed in a car accident in 1936. The Doughboys' popular noontime radio program became an integral part of daily life in Texas from the 1930s to the 1950s. The lives of Wills, O'Daniel, and Brown have been chronicled in full-scale biographies. But the man who became the Doughboys' foundation, over an era lasting more than 65 years, was Marvin "Smokey" Montgomery, a four-string banjo virtuoso whose boundless energy led him into other venues as Las Vegas entertainer, television performer, hit-record producer, and musical impresario.

Marvin Montgomery was an Iowa farm boy who "never learned to milk a cow." Born in Rinard, Iowa, a town of 160 people, on March 7, 1913, as Marvin Dooley Wetter, his musical career began when he won a ukulele as an award for delivering newspapers. "I got me a little chord book," Montgomery later recalled. "I've still got that book. . . . It said, Learn the Ukulele in Five Easy Lessons. My mother, every time she would go to Fort Dodge, Kansas, would bring back some sheet music. I'd learn to play the chords along with her [as she played on piano]. Then she got this banjo for my brother and I picked it up."¹

Montgomery's father, Charles Henry Wetter, "gambled" on the grain market. "One day we would be rich, and the next day

Morgan, was impressed by Montgomery's banjo virtuosity. "About two weeks later, after I entered that contest, J. Doug sent me a telegram and said, 'Can you join the show down in Grinnell, Iowa?' My grandfather carried me down, and we saw the tent. He dumped me out with my suitcase and my banjo, and I've been on the road ever since."⁴

Soon after, Marvin Wetter became Marvin Montgomery. An official with the show, Neal Helvey, said "Wetter" would not look good on a marquee. "At that time, Robert Montgomery, the movie star, was real famous. I said, 'I like ol' Robert Montgomery.' . . . So I became 'Marvin Montgomery: The Boy with Two Voices and the Fastest-Playing Banjo Player in the

Neal Helvey, said "Wetter" would not look good on a marquee. "At that time, Robert Montgomery, the movie star, was real famous. I said, 'I like ol' Robert Montgomery.' . . . So I became Marvin Montgomery."

he wouldn't have anything," Montgomery remembered. His parents divorced when he was 13. "I've been on my own since then," Montgomery said. "I always wanted to be in show business or to be a musician, in my heart. I called my cousins, and I got kazoos. I organized little orchestras with those kids playing the kazoos. None of them could carry a tune. . . . Out in the old barn, where my grandfather kept his car, I built a little stage in there and had a little show. Charlie Chaplin was the big guy then, and I would be Charlie Chaplin and do these little shows."²

Music was very important in the Wetter family, and especially to Marvin, who showed his commanding presence as a musical leader at an early age. Montgomery ruefully remembered the time when he was about six years old, and he and his younger brother sang a song in church. "We rehearsed that song, and during rehearsal my brother just goofed off and wouldn't sing his line right. Sure enough, that night when we were doing the Christmas program at the church, he missed his line, and I slapped him. Boy, I felt bad about that. . . . In the back of my mind, I've always had a guilty conscience about that incident. I was the serious one about music." In high school, during the early days of the Depression, Marvin played in a dance band with his mother Mabel and for a time traveled from town to town with a piano-tuner cousin, passing the hat or playing for a dozen eggs. In 1933, a traveling tent show from Texas came to Ames, Iowa. Marvin won second place in an amateur contest, playing on his banjo "The World is Waiting for the Sunrise," a song he would still be performing 65 years later with the Light Crust Doughboys. "This little gal won the five dollars [first place]. She was about five years old and did a tap dance. I won the three dollars. That was enough to eat for two weeks."³ The manager of the tent show from Jacksonville, Texas, J. Doug

World." Two voices? "Oh, I used to do a thing where I would sing, 'Carolina Moon Keep Shining,' in a normal voice, and then I would sing it higher."⁵

Playing with the Texas tent show, Montgomery became homesick for Iowa. He soon left for home, but his money only took him as far as Dallas. He arrived about 4 a.m. and walked to the Adolphus Hotel knowing that Blackie Simmons and His Bluejackets performed an early-morning show on KRLD, which had its studios in the hotel. "I said, 'I'm a banjo player and a guitar player,' and I picked up a guitar and did a few things. I stayed for the program, and he [Simmons] said, 'Are you looking for a job?' I said, 'I sure am.' I was broke. I had spent all my money for my train ticket." Simmons told Montgomery that the manager of KRLD needed a guitar player for a party that night. "That night, the piano player picked me up, and we went out to the Dallas Country Club, of all places. It was a stag party, and I'd never seen a stag party. This gal took off things she didn't even have on. We played the music, and I was crosseyed looking at the girl."⁶ Suddenly, Montgomery was not homesick for Iowa anymore.

The piano player at the party told Montgomery that a fiddle band called the Wanderers, who performed on *The Early Birds* program on WFAA, needed a banjo player, so he went to audition. "I played a few licks on the banjo, and they said, 'Well, play with us on the program this morning.'" Later, the Wanderers invited Montgomery to play a show with them. "They said, 'Come on, we'll try you out. We're going down to Kilgore [Texas] tonight and play at the Casa Linda Ballroom.' . . . I became an important part of the group."⁷

While young Marvin Montgomery was busy launching his remarkable career in music, the Light Crust Doughboys were establishing themselves as the most popular musical performers

in Texas. The Doughboys — originally Bob Wills on fiddle, Milton Brown, guitarist Herman Arnsperger, and sometimes Brown's younger brother Derwood on guitar — promoted Light Crust Flour, manufactured by the Burrus Mill and Elevator Company of Fort Worth, first on Fort Worth radio station KFJZ beginning in early 1931, and later on WBAP. W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel was the sales manager of Burrus Mill. At the urging of Wills, O'Daniel spoke a few words on the program one day, and soon became the program's master of ceremonies, spouting homespun philosophy while pitching Light Crust Flour. Soon, the Doughboys, broadcasting on the O'Daniel-instigated Texas Quality Network, became household names across the state.⁸

The Doughboys were best known for their jaunty theme song, whose lyrics Milton Brown wrote as an adaptation of "Eagle Riding Papa," a song recorded by Mississippi bluesman Big Bill Broonzy's group, the Famous Hokum Boys:

Now listen everybody from far and near,
If you want to know who we are,
We're the Light Crust Doughboys,
From Burrus Mill.⁹

Leon McAuliffe, who later served two stints with the O'Daniel-era Doughboys and became a legendary steel guitarist as a member of Wills's Texas Playboys, remembered hearing the

and was making more on Saturday night than Bob was making all week long. Because of continued conflicts between Wills and O'Daniel, O'Daniel fired Wills in August 1933.¹³

The Light Crust Doughboys continued to prosper even after the departure of Bob Wills, with a succession of members coming and going. "Bob, at that time, wasn't as big in Texas as the Doughboys, not by a long ways," Montgomery said.¹⁴ As Wills biographer Charles Townsend wrote:

The Light Crust Doughboys, which he [Wills] originated, went on to even greater success. They had one of the most popular radio shows in the Southwest for the next twenty years, made over two hundred records, and, like most of the western bands in that area, maintained much of the musical style Willis set in the beginning. Between 1929 and 1933 Bob Wills made Fort Worth the cradle of western swing and western jazz.¹⁵

The bad blood did not end when Wills left the Doughboys. O'Daniel later sued Wills for using the "Light Crust Doughboys" name in promoting performances of Wills's new band, which would become the Texas Playboys. O'Daniel lost the case in a Waco court, but he continued to hound Wills. "He had a vendetta against Bob when Bob left," Montgomery recalled.

"In the summer every window was open, and every radio was tuned to the Light Crust Doughboys."

Doughboys' noon-hour program on KPRC as a teenager in Houston. "The people of Houston had never heard anything like it," he said. "There was no western music there at the time. . . . I would walk three blocks to the store and never miss a word of a song. In the summer every window was open, and every radio was tuned to the Light Crust Doughboys."¹⁰

However, by mid-1933, the original Doughboys had gone their separate ways. O'Daniel wanted to maintain a wholesome image for the Doughboys and forbade them to play dances. Milton Brown thought he could make more money performing at dances with his own band and left in 1932. Bob Wills also chafed at the ban on dances, but he valued the security of a steady job at the height of the Depression, so he stayed with O'Daniel. Wills replaced Brown with vocalist Tommy Duncan, later a mainstay of Wills's Texas Playboys.¹¹

The Doughboys managed to play dances on the sly, but Wills continued to resent O'Daniel's "no-dances" edict. "Bob wanted to play dances," Marvin Montgomery related. "Milton Brown was playing at Crystal Springs and had his band going real good

While Wills biographer Ruth Sheldon wrote that Wills left Waco [and WACO radio station] at the end of 1933, because the Central Texas cotton-picking season was over and Wills knew money would be scarce,¹⁶ Marvin Montgomery told a different story. "Bob had his band down in Waco [playing on WACO], and Pappy went down and told the radio station, 'I'll buy an hour of your time [daily] if you'll kick Bob off the air.' They kicked him off, and he [Wills] went to Oklahoma City. They did the same thing up there, and Bob was really getting discouraged by that time. His manager at the time called KVOO in Tulsa, and told them what was happening. They said, 'Well, come on up here, and we won't let Pappy take your time.'"¹⁷

By 1935, O'Daniel himself was on the way out. "Jack Burrus, who owned the Burrus Mill and Elevator Company, had a percentage deal with W. Lee 'Pappy' O'Daniel, where Pappy received so much money for every sack of flour he sold," Montgomery said.

Pappy had the Light Crust Doughboys going and making more money than Burrus was making. Mr. Burrus was looking

to get rid of Pappy. O'Daniel was taking the Doughboys up to Oklahoma City and playing a theater and maybe getting \$1,500, which in those days was a stack of money. Pappy was keeping the money himself; he wasn't splitting it with the boys, and he wasn't turning it into the mill. Ol' Cliff [Gross, the fiddle player who took Bob Wills's place in the group] – 'Doctor' we called him – went to Mr. Burrus and told him about it. That gave Burrus the chance, the excuse, to get rid of Pappy. . . . Burrus, said, 'Pappy, get your stuff and go.' He did. That was the way Pappy lost his job."¹⁸

While the drama surrounding the Light Crust Doughboys was unfolding, Marvin Montgomery was establishing himself as a top musician in the Dallas-Fort Worth radio business. The unceremonious departure of W. Lee O'Daniel indirectly led to Montgomery's joining the Light Crust Doughboys on October 22, 1935. "Mr. Burrus hired Eddie Dunn [the *WFAA Early Birds* program announcer] to take Pappy's place," Montgomery said. The Wanderers, including Montgomery, played on the *Early Birds* show. Dunn essentially brought the Wanderers with him to Burrus Mill.

Gene Autry pays a visit to the Light Crust Doughboys at their Burrus Mill studio.

L to R: Cliff Gross, Zeke Campbell, Bert Dodson, (unidentified), Autry, announcer Eddie Dunn, Marvin Montgomery, Kenneth Pitts. Photo courtesy of Art Greenhaw and the Light Crust Doughboys.



"The Doughboys then had nine musicians," Montgomery recalled. "Eddie wanted to upgrade the band, and he wanted Bert Dodson and Dick Reinhart [members of the Wanderers] to come over and join. They were both singers, and Dick played the guitar, and Bert played the bass. Mr. [Roy] Dodson [Bert's father and the Wanderers' manager] said, 'If you take Marvin, I'll break up the band. I'm tired of riding around in that old station wagon [playing dances] every night anyway.' Eddie said, 'Okay, I'll take three of them,' so Eddie fired six of the guys in the Doughboys and kept three. With us three, we had a six-piece band."¹⁹ Marvin Montgomery would be a Doughboy for the rest of his life.

A Doughboys custom that began with O'Daniel continued after he left to pursue his political career. After he fired Bob Wills, O'Daniel hit upon the idea of giving the members of the Doughboys generic nicknames, so that as the inevitable

them," Marvin Montgomery said. "If he had made a record by himself on guitar, you'd probably think he was a black guy. He'd do 'Matchbox Blues' and 'Gulf Coast Blues.'"²⁴ In trips to Deep Ellum, the downtown Dallas district of bars and music clubs, Marvin Montgomery was introduced to African-American blues. "Dick would say, 'Come on, let's go down to Elm Street,'" Montgomery recalled. "He'd name a place. I don't remember what the names were. But he'd take his guitar, and I'd listen and watch them play. We'd be the only white people in there."²⁵

In their book *Deep Ellum and Central Track*, Alan B. Govenar and Jay F. Brakefield wrote: "As a musician, Montgomery touches on all the musical diversity that Deep Ellum has come to represent. . . . Montgomery is completely eclectic, integrating elements of black and white minstrelsy, popular songs, and show tunes with strains of traditional country, jazz and blues."²⁶ Montgomery

"In the 1930s, after O'Daniel left, we were just as popular in Texas as The Beatles became in the 1960s,"

personnel changes continued, they would be less apparent to the public. For example, during the post-O'Daniel, pre-World War II period, Marvin Montgomery was "Junior," and guitarist Muryel Campbell was "Zeke," a nickname that stayed with him the rest of his life. Fiddler Kenneth Pitts was "Abner," bassist Ramon DeArmon was "Snub," fiddler Clifford Gross was "Doctor," and guitarist Dick Reinhart was "Bashful." "Part of the formula for the Doughboys' enormous popularity was personalizing the band," Pitts's daughter, Janis Stout, wrote. "People followed them like friends of the family."²⁰ As musicians came and went, most of the listeners were unaware of it. Fiddlers Robert "Buck" Buchanan and Cecil Brower (who used his own given name), guitarist/bassist Jim ("Bashful") Boyd, guitarist/bassist Joe ("Bashful") Ferguson, and pianist John "Knocky" Parker later played for the group during the period.²¹ "In the 1930s, after O'Daniel left, we were just as popular in Texas as The Beatles became in the 1960s," Montgomery said. "We would announce on the radio that we were going to be in Hillsboro at 10:00 tomorrow morning at the square to play a 15- or 20-minute program. If we were going to San Antonio, we'd stop at two or three places. Boy, there would be 10,000 people there, everybody in town plus a lot more people would show up. All we had to do was announce it on the air."²²

O'Daniel favored traditional numbers and hymns, such as "Shall We Gather at the River."²³ But the Doughboys' new personnel brought an increasingly complex sound to the group. Dick Reinhart introduced a guitar style that was heavily influenced by black music to the Doughboys. "Dick was the only one I knew who really picked up their [black musicians'] songs and learned

believed the Doughboys played a major role in bringing the style of black musicians to a wider audience in Texas and the Southwest. "Once we did a song on the Doughboys program, everybody did it. . . . Every other band started playing it. Like 'South' [an instrumental hit by the Doughboys], every other band picked up on that real quick. 'Trouble in Mind' and several of those songs that Dick [Reinhart] learned from those guys [Dallas black musicians], we started doing them, and first thing you knew, everybody else was recording them and doing them, too."²⁷

After joining the Doughboys, Marvin Montgomery changed from playing mostly rhythm to playing solo. "I tuned my banjo like a viola and fingered it the same as a violin, only it was pitched a fifth lower," he said. "This came out so vaudeville musicians could switch from violin to banjo. When Dixieland jazz got popular in the 1920s and earlier, a lot of fiddle players began to lose their jobs and they started playing the banjo."²⁸

The Doughboys recorded for Columbia under its subsidiary labels Brunswick and Vocalion, and were produced by the Country Music Hall of Fame member "Uncle Art" Satherley. But they never sold a lot of records on a national scale. The record business was different then; sales to jukebox operators were important, and the Doughboys concentrated on that market, which accounted for half of the record sales in late 1930s.²⁹

The Doughboys and others recorded songs not meant to be played on the radio, but, rather, on honky-tonk jukeboxes. One of these was provocatively named, even by today's standards: "Pussy, Pussy, Pussy,"³⁰ a song which innocently began with Marvin Montgomery himself asking in falsetto, "Fellas, will you help me look for my cat?" The other members replied, "Sure.



The Doughboys go to Hollywood for their appearance in the Gene Autry movie *Oh Susannah*.
L to R: Zeke Campbell, Dick Reinhart, Marvin Montgomery, Kenneth Pitts, Cliff Gross, Bert Dodson. Photo courtesy of Art Greenhaw and the Light Crust Doughboys.

Here, pussy, pussy, pussy . . .”³¹ Obviously, there is curiosity about a song with the title of “Pussy, Pussy, Pussy.” Montgomery said the record sold well as far away as New York, despite the understandable absence of radio airplay. “Knocky [Parker] went up to see ol’ Fats Waller [the jazz pianist], who was real popular and wrote a lot of good music. He went to Fats and said, ‘I’m Knocky Parker with the Light Crust Doughboys from Fort Worth, Texas.’ Fats said, ‘Oh, you were the boys who put out ‘Pussy, Pussy, Pussy.’ . . . I don’t know where I got the idea for that song. It’s only got two chords. We had three chords and took one of them out. I was trying to write songs that I thought the jukeboxes would take, and they took that one.”³²

Many, many years later, Montgomery was stunned to find that the Doughboys’ recording of “Pussy, Pussy, Pussy” had been included in the soundtrack to the Demi Moore movie, *Striptease*. The novelty song is briefly used in a scene featuring a dancer in a cat outfit. The movie’s closing credits list Marvin Montgomery as the composer and the Light Crust Doughboys as the performers. Finally, Montgomery received a payment. “They thought I was dead,” he said.³³

Montgomery recalled making records when the master recordings were literally made of wax. “One of my first sessions they used a disc about this thick [indicates about one inch] of bees’ wax,” he said. “They’d tell you, ‘If you make a mistake,

don't quit unless we [the technicians] stop.' The minute they got one made, they'd put it in a big box, I guess they used some kind of ice, and when they got six of 'em [individual recordings] they'd send them up to the plant in up in Connecticut to have 'em processed."³⁴

In his 1989 discography of the Light Crust Doughboys, Montgomery identified the June 14, 1939 session as the best recording session ever for the Doughboys. "We recorded in the old Brunswick Warehouse with no air conditioning and it was hot. We played with our shirts off, and I suspect the bottle was passed around a few times among some of the band members as well as the boss man [Parker Willson, by that time the Doughboys' master of ceremonies] – why hide it – Willson, Brower, DeArman and [Art Satherley's associate] Don Law, and maybe a swag or two by Boyd." In this day-long session, the Doughboys recorded "Let's Make Believe We're Sweethearts," "Thinking of You," "If I Didn't Care," "Mary Lou," "In Ol' Oklahoma," "Tea for Two," "Little Rock Get-a-way," and "The Cattle Call." They also recorded the Marvin Montgomery compositions "She Gave Me the Bird," "Three Naughty Kittens," "We Must Have Beer," "The Texas Song of Pride," and the follow-up to the notorious "Pussy, Pussy, Pussy," "We Found Her Little Pussy Cat."³⁵

The Doughboys' massive radio popularity led to a brief movie career. They were hired to appear in a Gene Autry movie, *Oh, Susanna*. "'Uncle Art' Satherley of Columbia Records recommended that we go," Montgomery said. "He was the fellow who was the A&R man for Columbia who made our records for us. He produced them, so he recommended to Republic Pictures that they use the Light Crust Doughboys. We were the first regular well-known group to be in a musical western. . . . Of course, later on Bob Wills and a lot of guys got into it, but we were the first ones."³⁶ Marvin Montgomery had fond memories of performing in the singing cowboy movie, even though he was less than a natural horseman. "I went to get on this horse, and this ol' Hollywood cowboy, he was holding the horse. I put the wrong foot in the stirrup and started up, and I realized I was getting on the horse backwards. They said, 'Here's a kid from Texas who doesn't even how to get on a horse!'"³⁷ Part of the Doughboys' second movie with Autry, *The Big Show*, was filmed at the site of the Texas centennial celebration, Dallas's new Fair Park. Another legendary group, the Sons of the Pioneers, also was appearing in the movie. While working on the movie, Montgomery made friends with young Leonard "Len" Slye, then an upcoming Western singer. The world would soon know him as Roy Rogers. Montgomery tells a story about Len Slye that contrasts sharply with the image of Roy Rogers, the man who would later become the wholesome hero to millions of American boys and girls. Because Slye had a tendency to prowl the city streets at night and get into trouble, Republic Pictures executives locked him in his room at the Adolphus Hotel in

Dallas, Montgomery said. But, while Montgomery waited outside his door, Slye would climb over the transom, and he and Montgomery would then hit the funky clubs in Dallas's Deep Ellum district.³⁸ The Gene Autry movies may have had a greater impact musically than they did as films. "I'm surprised how many banjo players I influenced by their seeing me in that movie, *Oh, Susanna*," Montgomery said. "This one guy said, 'I was nine years old and I went to see that movie 10 times just to see you play 'Tiger Rag.'"³⁹

Under W. Lee O'Daniel, the Doughboys had traveled in a customized car. But just before Montgomery joined the group, O'Daniel had acquired a new tour bus that was to stay with them for two decades. The bus cost more than \$50,000 in 1935. The Doughboys used it for the first time on their trip to California to make *Oh, Susanna* with Gene Autry.⁴⁰ They performed on a sizable back porch built into the bus, similar to the train-caboose platforms used by politicians on whistle-stop campaigns. Marvin Montgomery and Knocky Parker recalled sitting on the platform and jamming together as the bus was speeding down the blacktop.⁴¹ Montgomery remembered the bus with great fondness. "The last time I drove it, it had over 200,000 miles on it, which I made every one," he said. In the 1950s, the bus was sold to the American Legion and was used for a time in the Fort Worth Fat Stock Show parade. "The last time I saw it, it was sitting up on a hill over in Fort Worth, up above Herring's [recording] studio. It was just falling apart. I wish that I had got a hold of it. Later on, this guy who has the [transportation] museum in Fort Worth, called me and wanted to know if I could find it. He wanted to put it in that museum. . . . I called everybody I knew . . . I sure wish I could have found it for him, because if he had it down there, it would be there yet."⁴²

Montgomery recalled that life on the road for the Doughboys was relatively sedate, by today's standards. "I did a little hugging and kissing, but I was afraid of a social disease," Montgomery wryly recalled. "Of course, we had all kinds of chances with these little sixteen-year-old girls." Montgomery remembered one Doughboy member who would proposition young women in the bluntest possible way. "He'd be successful about one out of four times, I'd say."⁴³ Joe Ferguson, who inherited the nickname "Bashful," recalled, "Those ol' girls would be on the back of that bus, and they would say, 'You don't look bashful to me!'"⁴⁴

With any group of young men traveling and performing together, tempers are bound to flare. But one incident on the Doughboys' bus nearly got out of hand. Montgomery remembered an incident involving Clifford Gross. Soon after Montgomery joined the group, the Doughboys were performing a skit involving a moonshine jug. Someone put black goo from a melted acetate in the jug, and it ran out on Gross's shirt. Gross took offense, and later on the bus, he pulled a switchblade knife and held it to announcer Parker Willson's throat. "We were

scared," Montgomery said. "Dick Reinhart started talking to Gross – they were kind of buddy buddy – and he talked him out of hurting Parker. Gross finally pulled the knife away." Gross quit the group the next day.⁴⁵

Although the Doughboys' daily radio program remained popular even after the start of World War II, Montgomery said it did not come as a shock when Burrus Mill dropped the original radio program in 1942. "They couldn't get tires or anything for that big bus to send us around [because of war rationing]," Montgomery recalled. "And several of the guys already had been drafted. . . . We had to keep getting guys to come in who couldn't play."⁴⁶

During the war, Montgomery served as a shift supervisor at Crown Machine and Tool in Fort Worth, making shells for the

Doughboys," he said. "But obviously their power and their grip on the Texas public remained well after World War II. Bob Wills was out on the West Coast. They [the Doughboys] were sort of the standard bearers after Wills went West."⁵⁰

The Light Crust Doughboys first return to radio lasted about three years. The program on the Texas Quality Network began in 1945 and ended before the end of 1948, despite their growing popularity. The Doughboys' loyalty to their musicians' union would help bring about their demise. The fierce leader of the American Federation of Musicians, James Caesar Petrillo, in an effort to protect musicians' jobs, called several strikes to fight the increased on-the-air use of recordings.⁵¹ That prevented the Doughboys from making recorded programs, then called

In late 1946, the new Doughboys reached 861,000 listeners per day on the live Texas Quality Network program, and the transcribed program reached another 2.285 million people, for a total of 3.146 million listeners, according to figures compiled by Burrus Mill.

52 U.S. Navy, and played part-time on some radio programs.⁴⁷ But after the war, Montgomery joined a new incarnation of the Light Crust Doughboys. Burrus Mill and the Tracy Locke Advertising agency built the new band by combining former Doughboys with WFAA radio's vocal group, the Flying X Ranchboys, which included Mel Cox, Red Kidwell and Hal Harris. The newly reinvented Doughboys then added guitarist Lefty Perkins, accordionist Charley Godwin, and fiddler Carroll Hubbard. "Of course, they knew that I had been with the Doughboys for years and years. Burrus Mill asked them to see if they could get me back. Of course, I jumped at the chance to get back with them. . . . I went back with the Doughboys, and got the name 'Junior' again. I've been playing with them ever since. I guess if it wasn't for me, they'd have never lasted this long."⁴⁸

The new Doughboys quickly picked up where the old group had left off, even surpassing the former band, in terms of popularity. In late 1946, the new Doughboys reached 861,000 listeners per day on the live Texas Quality Network program, and the transcribed program reached another 2.285 million people, for a total of 3.146 million listeners, according to figures compiled by Burrus Mill. The Doughboys had stations in Alabama, Arkansas, California, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. The program was heard in such major cities as Atlanta, New Orleans, Memphis, and San Diego.⁴⁹ Texas music historian John Morthland believes the post-war Doughboys continued to have a major influence on the state's musicians. "When people talk about the Doughboys, they generally talk about the pre-war

"transcriptions." "Petrillo up in Chicago put a strike on union musicians making recordings," Montgomery said. "So we lost our jobs, as union musicians. And they [Burrus Mill] hired a scab outfit out of Dallas. They were on for about three months or so, with Jimmy Jeffries from the *Early Bird* show [on WFAA] as MC. They just made transcriptions. They weren't on the air live. . . . The guys they [Burrus Mill] picked up were all union guys, but we had enough loyalty that we wouldn't do it [record the transcriptions] because we were union."⁵²

Fortunately for the "real" Doughboys, the union dispute came just as television was getting its start. The Doughboys performed for about a year on WBAP-TV, now KXAS, under the old "Flying X Ranchboys" name. In fact, they became the first musical group to perform on television in Texas, when WBAP-TV, the earliest television station to make regular broadcasts in the state, sent out its first test transmission on June 20, 1948.⁵³ Marvin Montgomery acquired his nickname of "Smokey" while performing on television as a member of the Flying X Ranchboys. "I lost my nickname ['Junior'] in September of 1948, when I went on Channel 5, which was WBAP at that time. It was black and white. . . . When I played my banjo, a solo, my hand would blur. That old black-and-white television couldn't keep up with my hand. Ol' Mel Cox, our MC, would say, 'Junior will now smoke up the banjo.' That's how I got a new nickname. I said, 'Give me the name Smokey from now on, and get rid of the 'Junior.'"⁵⁴

Meanwhile, the group continued to perform in live shows for Burrus Mill as the Light Crust Doughboys. At the same time, Burrus Mill created a new radio program for the group, aimed

at advertising the company's Texo Livestock Feed. As the Texo Hired Hands, Montgomery and others performed on WBAP at 12:30 p.m. daily from the Fort Worth Livestock Exchange. "We'd go out and make these trips around the state, down to Louisiana and Arkansas," Montgomery said. "In one town we'd be the Texo Hired Hands with [WBAP agriculture reporter] Ted

traveling. We were doing the hard work. He [Thompson] was doing the easy work," Montgomery said.⁶² It was not the first time an upcoming singer's name had been attached to an ersatz Doughboys' radio show. In 1949, yodeling Slim Whitman briefly hosted a program under the Light Crust Doughboys name.⁶³ And in 1951, Tennessee Ernie Ford performed on *The Light*

As the Country Gentlemen, the group performed on an East Texas tour with the young Elvis Presley. They played three shows a day. "We had to go get him [Presley]," Montgomery recalled. "He'd go back to the room and go to sleep. He was a sleepy kid. He was lazy or something. . . . We'd go wake him up: 'Time to do a show, Elvis! Come on!'"

Gouldy as our MC, and the next town we'd be the Light Crust Doughboys. We'd just put on a Doughboys shirt, and Paul Blunt, our steel guitar player, would MC. He took the place of Mel Cox. [Cox] never did get back with us after the union strike."⁵⁵

In 1951, the Light Crust Doughboys returned to the air for the final time on a regular basis. "They [Burrus Mill] got on this Mutual Network, or the Dixie Network [a part of Mutual], and we did some of that. This was in 1951 and 1952." During that time, the group recorded transcriptions (no longer banned by the union) at the WFAA studios in Dallas.⁵⁶ Smokey Montgomery remembered that, for the Dixie Network show, the Light Crust Doughboys played on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. On Tuesday and Thursday, Montgomery (on guitar) and Doughboy Paul Blunt (on steel guitar) played with an organist and a singer, while a woman broadcaster delivered Light Crust recipes.⁵⁷ "They [Burrus Mill] didn't want to pay enough to have the Doughboys five days," Montgomery said wryly.⁵⁸ The early 1950s radio incarnation of the Doughboys was heard on about 170 stations from New Mexico to Florida.⁵⁹

As television grew more popular and radio tried to compete, the Doughboys were replaced on radio by yet another reincarnation of the Light Crust Doughboys. Hank Thompson, a Country Music Hall of Fame member from Waco well known for "The Wild Side of Life" and other hits with the Brazos Valley Boys, hosted a radio program from 1952 to 1954 as "Hank Thompson and the Light Crust Doughboys." Thompson was actually backed by his own group.⁶⁰ "Live radio was fading," Thompson said. "Some of your network [radio] shows, like Gunsmoke, went into the '50s. But television was really taking hold about that time. We were kind of in the waning days of live radio. If I had had that show five or ten years before, it would have been a great success. Radio became a secondary thing."⁶¹ Meanwhile, a touring group of Doughboys, led by Montgomery, remained on the road. "We were doing the

Crust/Tennessee Ernie Show, which used the famous Light Crust Doughboys' theme.⁶⁴

Even after the Doughboys stopped performing regularly on the radio, their association with Light Crust Flour continued. The Doughboys still promoted Light Crust at county fairs, grocery store openings, and other live performances well into the 1980s, when Cargill, the company that bought Light Crust in 1972,⁶⁵ sold the brand to the Martha White company.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Smokey Montgomery branched out into other successful musical ventures. Throughout the 1950s, Montgomery served as the music director of the *Big D Jamboree*, a weekly country music radio show at the Sportatorium in downtown Dallas. For these shows, the Doughboys performed as the house band under the name of the Country Gentlemen. As the Country Gentlemen, the group performed on an East Texas tour with the young Elvis Presley. They played three shows a day. "We had to go get him [Presley]," Montgomery recalled. "He'd go back to the room and go to sleep. He was a sleepy kid. He was lazy or something. . . . We'd go wake him up: 'Time to do a show, Elvis! Come on!'"⁶⁷

During the folk boom of the early 1960s, Montgomery began playing on a regular basis at the Levee Club, a popular nightclub owned by his friend Ed Bernet, with whom Montgomery became the co-owner of the Sumet Recording Studio in Dallas. Montgomery, Bernet, erstwhile Waxahachie rock 'n' roller Ronnie Dawson (who did a tour of duty with the Doughboys in the late 1950s), and Bob Christopher formed a folk singing group called The Levee Singers.⁶⁸ The group performed at the Mockingbird Lane club five nights a week. "Sometimes there'd be so many people that it'd take 15 minutes to get to the stage," Dawson said.⁶⁹ Christopher recalled: "I sat down and did the numbers once. We played five nights a week for 10 years. A million people saw us at The Levee, and probably six million saw us live across the country."⁷⁰

Skillfully promoted by Hollywood agent David Sonntag, the Levee Singers were soon performing in Las Vegas as the opening act for comedian Joey Bishop. Montgomery recalled that they got great support from major stars such as Milton Berle, whom they met while performing at the Mapes Hotel and the Sands. "When we opened at the Sands that first night, we were all kind of scared. And in the front row was Milton Berle. He jumped up and yelled, 'There's my boys, there's my boys!' . . . He got the crowd with us."⁷¹ Then came television appearances on *The Danny Kaye Show*, *The Hollywood Palace*, *Hootenanny*, and *The Jimmy Dean Show*, among others.⁷²

Despite his long career in western swing and country music, Montgomery became a highly successful Top 40 record producer in the 1960s. He produced "Hey Baby," a 1962 hit for Bruce Chamel of Jacksonville, Texas. Montgomery played piano on the record while Ronnie Dawson played drums. "Hey Baby" featured the bluesy harmonica playing of Delbert McClinton,⁷³ a young Texas rhythm 'n' blues singer who later became known for "Givin' It Up for Your Love." McClinton's harp blowing on the record caught the ear of John Lennon, who produced similar sounds on The Beatles' first three hits in Great Britain, "Love Me Do," "Please Please Me," and "From Me to You." The Beatles even performed "Hey Baby" in their early stage act.⁷⁴ In fact, as Chamel's tour manager, Montgomery traveled to England, where he, Chamel, and McClinton met the Fab Four in the Cavern, the dank Liverpool club in which they got their start. "Delbert, of course, had his mouth organ with him, and he sat there and played with them," Montgomery said. "And the Beatles just went nuts."⁷⁵

In 1962, Montgomery produced an even bigger hit, "Hey Paula," by "Paul and Paula," who were, in reality, Ray Hildebrand and Jill Jackson from Brownwood, Texas. Montgomery played guitar and vibes on the record, Dawson again played drums, and latter-day Doughboy Bill Simmons played piano. Jackson's mother called Montgomery and asked him to audition her daughter. Hildebrand came along, and they sang "Hey Paula," which Hildebrand had written the night before. They quickly recorded the song. "About that time Major Bill [Smith, the owner of the recording studio] came in," Montgomery recalled, "and he said, 'Make me an acetate and I'll take it over to KFJZ tonight and see what they think of it.' Well, about midnight, the phone rang and it was Major Bill. 'Hey, Marv, we've got a cotton pickin' hit.'" Released in late 1962, "Hey Paula" earned a gold record, sold 1,030,000 copies, and became the second-biggest selling single of 1963.⁷⁶

As a leading figure in the Dallas-Fort Worth music scene for over six decades, Montgomery was part of Bob Wills's final recording session. Wills continued to perform and record throughout the 1960s, but his health began to fail in the early 1970s. In December 1973, country superstar Merle Haggard gathered some of the surviving Playboys and others in Dallas

for one last recording with their mentor and friend. The 24-tracks resulting from the session were released as *Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys For The Last Time*. Smokey Montgomery recalled:

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

Wills never recovered from the stroke before he died on May 13, 1975 at 70 years old.⁷⁷

While keeping the Light Crust Doughboys going, Montgomery continued to push ahead musically, at an age when most men have left the creative life behind. In 1989, in a flight of fancy, Montgomery founded the Dallas Banjo Band. The Banjo Band comprised 30 or more banjos and a tuba. They tackled such unlikely numbers as *Beethoven's Fifth Symphony* and George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. "Every tune that they played when I sat in on a practice last weekend made me think idly about picnics and summer swims and somebody's great-grandfather throwing down his crutches and dancing at a tent revival," wrote *Dallas Morning News* columnist Jacquelynne Floyd.⁷⁸ Montgomery's musical enterprises also included the Dixieland groups Smokey and the Bearkats and the Hot Five.

In the 1990s, the Light Crust Doughboys enjoyed a remarkable renaissance when a younger man, Art Greenhaw, joined the group and teamed up with Smokey Montgomery in what would be a final burst of creativity for the banjo virtuoso. Gospel music was always part of the Doughboys' repertoire, but they entered the field in a major way, recording several gospel albums with gospel music legend James Blackwood, the last surviving member of the Blackwood Brothers, and Elvis Presley's vocal backing group, the Jordanaires. Three of the recordings on Greenhaw's independent Dallas-based label received Grammy nominations in the gospel category: *Keep Lookin' Up: The Texas Swing Sessions* in 1998, *They Gave the World a Smile: The Stamps Quartet Tribute Album* in 1999, and *The Great Gospel Hit Parade* in 2001.⁷⁹

At the same time, the Doughboys tackled several ambitious live performance projects. In 1998, they collaborated with the



Smokey Montgomery later in life. Courtesy of Art Greenhaw and the LightCrust Doughboys

Lone Star Ballet in Amarillo for a joint performance. Greenhaw, Montgomery, and his second wife Barbara (whom he married following the death in 1992 of his wife of 55 years, Kathleen)⁸⁰ wrote the music and lyrics for the performance, which was called *God Bless Amarillo (And All the Cowboys, Too)*. The Doughboys recorded the songs and released them on a CD. In fall 2000, the

inducted Montgomery into its Ring of Honor in 1997, and he was the first person inducted into the National Four-String Banjo Hall of Fame Museum, also in Guthrie.⁸⁴ After a long battle with leukemia, Smokey Montgomery died on June 6, 2001. He had performed on stage with the Light Crust Doughboys less than a month earlier in a concert with the

Montgomery arranged for the musical performances by bands that he had led. But the greatest performance was to take place beyond the sight and hearing of the mourners: A heavenly reunion of the departed Light Crust Doughboys. "When I get there, we'll have the biggest jam session ever," he said.

Doughboys performed again with the Lone Star Ballet in a program called *Gospel, Strauss and Patsy Cline*. The group also performed with the Fort Worth Symphony, the Dallas Wind Symphony, the Texas Wind Symphony, the Abilene Philharmonic, and the Midland-Odessa Symphony.⁸¹

Montgomery took a very active role in all of these projects. "People don't realize what a great arranger Smokey is," latter-day Doughboy fiddler Jim Baker said. "He can just do stuff on the fly. The first [recording] session I got to do with the Doughboys, we had three fiddles, Johnny Strawn, John Walden, and me. He had some stuff written out and we weren't quite getting it, so he just grabbed it up, rearranged it, and slapped it back down, and we went on. He's a whiz."⁸² The bold musical collaborations thrilled Montgomery, by this time well into his 80s. "We played in Abilene a couple of years ago. . . . We had a big rehearsal, and they had all these violins playing behind us on 'Tumblin' Tumbleweeds,' and it gave me goose pimples," Montgomery said, laughing at his own exhilaration.⁸³

Montgomery was a member of the Texas Western Swing Hall of Fame, as a member of the Light Crust Doughboys, and the Western Swing Halls of Fame in Sacramento, Seattle, and Nashville. The Jazz Banjo Festival in Guthrie, Oklahoma,

Abilene Philharmonic. He received a funeral service befitting his status as a Texas music legend. The Hall of State on the Texas State Fair grounds in Dallas was the setting. Montgomery's Dixieland group, the Barkats, performed, as did the Dallas Banjo Band. And, of course, the Light Crust Doughboys took center stage, with Montgomery's stool placed before his microphone, and his beloved tenor banjo resting on its stand between keyboard player Bill Simmons and fiddler John Walden. The Doughboys performed Art Greenhaw's gospel composition, "Sending Me You," Montgomery and his wife Barbara's song, "Lord, Take All of Me," and "How Great Thou Art." After the service, the Barkats led a New Orleans-style musical procession to the hearse, and again from the hearse to the grave.⁸⁵

Montgomery had planned his own funeral years before, with the exception of its setting in the Hall of State, which Greenhaw orchestrated. Montgomery arranged for the musical performances by bands that he had led. But the greatest performance was to take place beyond the sight and hearing of the mourners: A heavenly reunion of the departed Light Crust Doughboys. "When I get there, we'll have the biggest jam session ever," he said.⁸⁶ ■

Notes

- 1 The story of Smokey Montgomery's early life is found in John Daniels, Interview with Marvin 'Smokey' Montgomery, University of North Texas Oral History Collection, No. 1152, , 7 September 1996, 9.
- 2 Ibid., 10.
- 3 Ibid., 2.
- 4 Ibid., 20.
- 5 Ibid., 30-31.
- 6 Ibid., 33.
- 7 Ibid., 35.
- 8 Cary Ginell, *Milton Brown and the Founding of Western Swing* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Charles R. Townsend, *San Antonio Rose* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1976). Ginell and Townsend each covered the first three years of the Light Crust Doughboys' history. Although Ginell writes from Milton Brown's perspective and Townsend from Wills's, they agree on most basic facts. Ginell also contains information about other members of the Light Crust Doughboys, including Cecil Brower, Buck Buchanan, Kenneth Pitts, John "Knocky" Parker, and Dick Reinhart.
- 9 Ginell, *Milton Brown*, 38, 46.
- 10 Townsend, *San Antonio Rose*, 73.
- 11 Ginell, *Milton Brown*; Townsend, *San Antonio Rose*.
- 12 Townsend, *San Antonio Rose*, 76.
- 13 Daniels, Interview, 96-7.
- 15 Townsend, *San Antonio Rose*, 77.
- 16 Ruth Sheldon, *Hubbin' It: The Life of Bob Wills* (Kingsport, Tenn.: Kingsport Press, Inc., 1938), 119.
- 17 Daniels, Interview, 96.

- 18 Ibid., 38-40.
- 19 Ibid., 40-1.
- 20 Janis Stout, "The Light Crust Doughboys Were On the Air: A Memoir," *The Journal of Country Music*, 18, no. 3 (1996): 5.
- 21 Marvin Montgomery, "Light Crust Doughboy Recording Sessions," unpublished manuscript, 1989, 17, collection of Janis Stout, Bryan, Texas.
- 22 Daniels, Interview, 95.
- 23 Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1983), 696. Caro wrote about W. Lee O'Daniel in connection with Lyndon Johnson's campaign against O'Daniel for the U.S. Senate in 1941. O'Daniel won the election, the only time Johnson ever lost. After O'Daniel left Burrus Mill, he promoted his own brand of flour, Hillbilly Flour, and started a new string band, the Hillbilly Boys. The Hillbilly Boys performed on radio and toured with O'Daniel around the state of Texas, promoting Hillbilly Flour and O'Daniel's candidacy for governor and senator. O'Daniel had been elected governor in 1938 and 1940, was elected to a full term in the senate in 1942, and did not seek re-election in 1948. (Caro 1983, 698-702, 706-2; Seth Shepard McKay, *W. Lee O'Daniel and Texas Politics, 1938-1942* [Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech Press, 1944] 615-616; Ginell 1994, 225-226). It is a common mistake to say that the Doughboys toured with O'Daniel on his political campaigns.
- 24 Alan B. Govenar and Jay F. Brakefield, *Deep Ellum and Central Track* (Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 1998), 144. Govenar and Brakefield provide a good deal of information about other members of the pre-war Light Crust Doughboys, including Jim Boyd, Cecil Brower, John "Knocky" Parker, and Dick Reinhart. Reinhart later left the Doughboys, recorded with his own band, the "Lone Star Boys," became a member of Gene Autry's band and played on Autry's radio program *Melody Ranch*. (Ginell, Milton Brown, 260). Govenar and Brakefield also published Marvin Montgomery's discography of the Light Crust Doughboys as an appendix to their book.
- 25 Govenar and Brakefield, *Deep Ellum*, 143.
- 26 Ibid., 138-9.
- 27 Daniels, Interview, 111.
- 28 Govenar and Brakefield, *Deep Ellum*, 145.
- 29 Daniels, Interview, 65; Chris Rasmussen, "Risky Records (or, The 'Dirty Thirties'): Risque Songs and Jukeboxes in the 1930s," paper presented to the Popular Culture Association, Philadelphia, PA, 14 April 2001.
- 30 Daniels, Interview, 105, 194.
- 31 Govenar and Brakefield, *Deep Ellum*, 160-1.
- 32 Daniels, Interview, 130.
- 33 David Tarrant, "Smokey Montgomery: The Doughboys' Longtime Banjo Player is Far from Stale," *Dallas Morning News*, 19 January 1997, 1-E; Marvin Montgomery, interview by author, Denton, Texas, 3 May 2001.
- 34 Marvin Montgomery, interview by author, tape recording, Dallas, Texas, 21 March 2001.
- 35 Montgomery, "Light Crust Doughboy Recording Sessions," 10-11.
- 36 Daniels, Interview, 45-7.
- 37 Ibid., 53.
- 38 Ibid., 56-57.
- 39 Marvin Montgomery, interview by author, tape recording, Mesquite, Texas, 3 January 2001.
- 40 John Daniels, Interview with William 'Zeke' Campbell, University of North Texas Oral History Collection, No. 1138, 14 September 1996, 90; Daniels, Interview, 43.
- 41 Lowell Schreyer, "Banjo Legend: Smokey Montgomery," *FIGA* [Fretted Instruments Guild of America] Magazine, May/June 1997, <<http://www.texas-music.com/old/figa.htm>> (10 May 2001).
- 42 Daniels, Interview, 146-8.
- 43 Ibid., 119.
- 44 John Daniels, "Interview with Joe Frank Ferguson," University of North Texas Oral History Collection, No. 1161, 9 November 1996, 66.
- 45 Daniels, "Interview with Marvin 'Smokey' Montgomery," 82, 84-85.
- 46 Montgomery, interview by author, 21 March 2001; Daniels, "Interview with Marvin 'Smokey' Montgomery," 87-8.
- 47 Ibid., 88.
- 48 Ibid., 131, 137.
- 49 "Burrus Mill and Elevator Company — Radio Stations Carrying Transcribed Light Crust Doughboys as of 11/7/46," advertising poster, collection of Art Greenhaw, Mesquite, Texas.
- 50 John Morthland, interview by author, tape recording, Denton, Texas, 4 May 2001.
- 51 "Petrillo, James Caesar," Infoplease.com, <<http://infoplease.looksmart.com/ce6/people/A0838631.html>> (23 February 2001).
- 52 Daniels, "Interview with Marvin 'Smokey' Montgomery," 138; Montgomery, interview by author, 3 January 2001.
- 53 Richard Schroeder, *Texas Signs On* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 1998), 139; Ginell *Milton Brown*, 226, 268.
- 54 Daniels, "Interview with Marvin 'Smokey' Montgomery," 59.
- 55 Montgomery, interview by author, 3 January, 2001.
- 56 Daniels, "Interview with Marvin 'Smokey' Montgomery," 145.
- 57 Ibid., 115.
- 58 Marvin Montgomery, interview by author, Dallas, Texas, May 28, 2001.
- 59 Daniels, "Interview with Marvin 'Smokey' Montgomery," 167.
- 60 "Hank Thompson: Biography," <<http://www.country.com/gen/music/artist/hank-thompson.html>> (8 March 2001); Hank Thompson, interview by author, tape recording, Denton, Texas, 8 March 2001.
- 61 Thompson, interview by author, 8 March 2001.
- 62 Daniels, "Interview with Marvin 'Smokey' Montgomery," 167.
- 63 K.L. Gobble, *Mr. Songman: The Slim Whitman Story* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1982), 60; L.K. Knapp, e-mail note to author, 10 April 2001. Knapp manages a web page dedicated to information on Slim Whitman.
- 64 Montgomery, interview by author, 3 January 2001; Glenn White, letter to author, 24 March 2001. White is a collector of Light Crust Doughboys memorabilia and owns a recording of one of the Tennessee Ernie/Light Crust shows.
- 65 Bruce Bruemmer, e-mail note to author, 9 March 2001. Bruemmer works for Cargill as a public relations specialist.
- 66 Daniels, "Interview with Marvin 'Smokey' Montgomery," 149.
- 67 Daniels, "Interview with Marvin 'Smokey' Montgomery," 70.
- 68 Matt Weitz, "A Flood of Memories: The Levee Singers Regroup for a Good Cause," *Dallas Morning News*, 18 January 2001, 5-C. The article was published on the occasion of a reunion performance of the Levee Singers, including Smokey Montgomery.
- 69 Ronnie Dawson, interview by author, tape recording, Denton, Texas, 14 March 2001.
- 70 Weitz, "A Flood," 5-C.
- 71 Montgomery, interview by author, 21 March 2001; Weitz, "A Flood," 5-C.
- 72 Montgomery, interview by author, 3 January 2001.
- 73 Montgomery, interview by author, 21 March 2001.
- 74 *The Beatles Anthology* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000), 101.
- 75 Montgomery interview by author, 21 March 2001.
- 76 Montgomery, interview by author, 3 January 2001; "2 singles, 27 LPs certified by RIAA," *Billboard*, 76, no. 1 (4 January 1964): 3.
- 77 "Famous Texans: Bob Wills," <<http://www.famoustexans.com/bobwills.htm>> (25 April 2001); "Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys," <<http://www.westernmusic.org/fame/BobWills.html>> (24 April 2001).
- 78 Jacquelynn Floyd, "For a Joyful Noise, Pick a Banjo Band," *Dallas Morning News*, 13 July 2000, 23-A.
- 79 Press Release, Light Crust Doughboys Official Web Site, <<http://www.lightcrustdoughboys.com/news/grammy/htm>> (30 July 2001); Press Release, Light Crust Doughboys Official Web Site, <<http://www.lightcrustdoughboys.com/news/third/htm>> (30 July 2001); Darren Watkins, "Greenhaw Record Grabs Grammy Nod," *Mesquite News*, 11 January 2001, p. 1; Susan Morrison, "Local Band Xnags Grammy Nomination," *Mesquite News*, 15 January 1998, p. 1.
- 80 Tarrant, "Smokey Montgomery," 2-E.
- 81 Jeff Rhoads, "Lone Star Ballet to Perform with Forefathers of Western Swing," *Amarillo Globe-News*, 8 February 1998, 9-D; Neil Hess, interview by author, Denton, Texas, 24 April 2001; Art Greenhaw, interview by author, tape recording, 26 March 2001; Montgomery, interview by author, 3 January 2001, 21 March 2001, 28 May 2001.
- 82 Jim Baker, interview by author, tape recording, Denton, Texas, 17 April 2001.
- 83 Montgomery, interview by author, 21 March 2001.
- 84 Joanne Smith, "Seven Decades of Western Swing: The Light Crust Doughboys," *Texas Highways*, 47, no. 1 (January 2000): 18.
- 85 Art Greenhaw, interview by author, tape recording, Denton, Texas, 29 June 2001.
- 86 Tarrant, "Smokey Montgomery," 2-E.

The Billboard Guide to Tejano and Regional Mexican Music.

By Ramiro Burr (New York: Billboard Books, 1999).

For aficionados, ethnomusicologists, and historians of Tejano music, highly respected music journalist Ramiro Burr, of San Antonio, has provided an indispensable reference guide to Tejano performers and producers and the transnational cultural influences that shaped their music. Using an encyclopedic format with the bulk of its approximately 300 entries in the form of brief biographical sketches of performers and groups, this handy resource also contains a useful introduction, glossary, Tex-Mex chronology, and Burr's Top Ten list of songs and albums.

In the context of the rising commercial success of Tejano music and the shocking murder of superstar Selena, Burr undertook this book to make the public more aware of the long evolution of Tejano music. In the introduction, he discusses this evolution in the political, social, and cultural context of Texas, northern Mexico, and the Greater Southwest from the late nineteenth century to the present. He emphasizes the blend of transnational cultural influences, including the incorporation and adaptation of German, Mexican, Czech, and Polish instruments and traditions, that have contributed to the distinctiveness of Tejano music.

Burr also recognizes class-based distinctions within this genre. He shows, for example, how Narciso Martinez and Santiago Jimenez ("Flaco," senior)-pivotal figures in the genesis of conjunto music

(Tejano's predecessor)-traveled around during the Great Depression, playing dances and taking manual labor jobs where they could find them. Much like their Anglo counterpart, Woody Guthrie, they performed songs that spoke to the shattered dreams and working-class struggles of down-and-out *obrerros* and *campesinos* in rural areas.

As Burr points out, although Tejano music has often expressed and reinforced a sense of identity, ethnic pride, and political consciousness, Mexican Americans face enormous pressures from the dominant Anglo culture to assimilate. In fact, tensions often surface between musicians and record labels that at times stifle creativity in the name of industry standardization and profits. Tejano music's evolution cannot be understood without taking into account such economic, social, and political pressures, not only on individual artists but on their audiences as well.

Written in a very lively style, this book should appeal to a wide audience of music fans, critics, and scholars. It is highly readable and engaging, and I strongly recommend it for libraries, music history collections, and music aficionados.

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Telling Stories, Writing Songs: An Album of Texas Songwriters

by Kathleen Hudson, Foreword by Sam Phillips, Introduction by B.B. King, Austin: (The University of Texas Press, 2001).

During the past few decades, oral history has come to play an increasingly important role in the preservation and study of our nation's past. Not only does oral history permit us to document the lives and stories of those who, otherwise, might not have left behind easily accessible records of their existence, it also allows the people we are studying to speak "in their own words."

As important as oral history can be in documenting the historical evolution of society, it also can be problematic. Interviewers must be capable, objective, and well prepared in order to draw the most relevant and accurate information possible from the subjects interviewed. This is not as easy as it may sound. Some interviewers are guilty of focusing too narrowly, asking unfair or leading questions in order to elicit particular responses, or simply not being considerate enough to be quiet and allow the subject to open up and speak freely.

However, in this superb new book about Texas singer-songwriters, Kathleen Hudson does everything right. The result is a wonderful collection of interviews that is as historically significant as it is enjoyable to read. Hudson includes a colorful cast of characters, thirty-four in all, who represent a broad range of Texas music, literature, and popular culture. A foreword by Sam Phillips and an introduction by B.B. King help put Texas music and its impact on national and international musical traditions in proper perspective. In her conversations with Willie Nelson, Tish Hinojosa, Townes Van Zandt, Marcia Ball, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Johnny Rodriguez, Tanya Tucker, Lyle Lovett, Robert Earl Keen, and others, Hudson presents a broad spectrum of personalities, musical styles, and perspectives on the shaping of Texas music history.

In addition to having assembled a diverse and intriguing group of individuals, Hudson conducts the interviews with sensitivity, insight, and a deep understanding of the importance of these people and their

contributions to Texas music. Hudson asks the right questions, keeps them brief, and remains flexible enough to allow the conversation to develop organically, rather than trying to steer it into particular directions to suit her own needs. Perhaps most importantly, she does a great job of getting out of the way and letting her guests talk. Consequently, Hudson evokes a good deal of candid, amusing, and always informative responses from her subjects.

One of the best examples of Hudson's skill in interviewing is her conversation with Darrell Royal, University of Texas coaching legend and close friend of many prominent Texas musicians. At first, Royal is puzzled as to why anyone would want to interview him regarding the historical and cultural importance of Texas music. However, after Hudson explains that his lifelong support and friendship of Texas music and musicians makes him uniquely qualified to comment on such matters, Royal opens up immediately and ends up having far more to say about the subject than he probably ever even realized.

All of the other interviews are as fascinating and important in their own ways. Hudson digs deep and succeeds in drawing out the honesty, humor, and, in some cases, vulnerability of these prominent Texas figures. Although some readers might fault her for focusing mainly on "folk" or "country" artists, Hudson acknowledges that this study is not intended to represent all genres of Texas music. For such comprehensive coverage, she remarks, "perhaps a series" of such books is needed. Here's hoping that Hudson and/or others will continue working toward fulfilling that need and shedding even more light on the history and humanity behind Texas music.

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