

Western Swingtime Music: A Cool Breeze in the American Desert

Jerry Zolten, Sing Out!, June 1974

IN THE GOLDEN days of big band swing, while Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington were sizzling in the cities, a back-country form of big band swing was cooling down the deserts of the American Southwest.

Influenced by the swing orchestras of the day, Western bands were as popular to country audiences as Goodman and Ellington were to city folk. A developing genre in the 1920s, Western swing was called "Okie jazz," "Tex-Mex music," or even "Southwestern swing." By 1930, the form was established and consciously followed by musicians. The name "Western swing" would not be applied until the 1940s.

As an outgrowth of traditional music, Western swing evolved through human handling, the folk process of change that tempers any music of the people. Western swing was not a product of Tin Pan Alley. Its images and feelings reflected a way of life. To appreciate Western swing is a step in the direction of understanding the Southwestern experience during America's swing era from roughly the mid-1930s through the end of World War II.

The root of Western swing is the traditional Anglo string band music of the rural Southeast. Back at the start of the 20th Century, Southeastern country folk danced to the music of fiddle, guitar, and banjo. The tunes were cultural hand-me-downs and a musician by night was a laborer, farmer, or storekeeper by day. Migration was an anticipated part of life. When workers moved on in search of the next payday, the music moved with them. Some Southerners headed west to work cotton through Louisiana and over to Texas. Others found work in the oil fields of Oklahoma. In time, the Southwest became a mosaic of the musical ingredients that spawned the sound of Western swing. The Eastern "hillbilly" style and the work rhythms and black blues of the cotton field melded with the dry Western mood and heated tempos from across the Mexican border. The free and easy movement and improvisation of Louisiana jazz stole in on the way out West. All of these elements coalesced into the sound of, in its heyday, as many as twenty cowboy-clad hot-lick swing musicians bouncing in rhythm from ballroom stages throughout Texas, Oklahoma, and across to California – like the Benny Goodman Band or the Dorsey Brothers...except with a country Western twist.

Not to suggest that this music was back-woods in any way. Western swing was as sophisticated as anything the city had to offer, maybe even more so in that, unlike the popular big bands of the day, these Southern musicians knew first-hand their black blues and jazz – Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, W.C. Handy, Big Bill Broonzy – and didn't water down their performances to suit the tastes of the broad audience. This was music crafted to fit the stylish dance steps of the day.

Though the earliest combos were not much more than fiddles and guitars, they could still put out a knock-down dance rhythm at barn dances, ranch house hoedowns, and roadside nightspots.

AS WESTERN swing groups took on a broader range of instruments, the fiddle remained primary and out front. Its tone and pitch could liven up the party. Or, played sweetly, the fiddle sound could mellow down a crowd. Its sharpness could cut through the chatter, the sawing of the bow setting the pace for a hot dance rhythm. Western swing musicians knew a good thing. They used multiple fiddles, two, three, or more, a rural counterpart to the horn sections of popular big bands. Their roller-coaster harmonies could set the woods on fire. A skilled team of fiddlers supercharged a tune, their improvised hot licks passed around like the Harlem Globetrotters, each fiddler's moves more dazzling than the one before.

Another leading swing time instrument, one that owes its development to Western musicians, was the Hawaiian-style guitar. The Hawaiian method was to stop the strings with a sliding steel bar in place of fingers. Not limited by fixed fret positions, the bar could produce a pitch anywhere on the string, hitting notes in between notes. Westerners picked up the technique from Hawaiians who toured America starting in 1916. The steel guitar's crisp sliding-board sound drew new fans to Western swing. In 1923, the Dopera brothers created the Dobro, a guitar with a shiny metal resonator and raised strings, made for the steel bar technique. The musicians continued to experiment, electrifying the Dobro to amplify its sound. The graceful guitar curves were chopped off and to the surviving long rectangle of wood were added foot pedals that stretched the strings. The result was the pedal steel guitar. Both the Dobro and the pedal steel helped make the Western swing voice distinct in country music.

The other traditional string band instruments – guitar and banjo – filled in the background and reinforced the swing rhythm. They marked the pulse of the music and graced it with tonal character. The guitar or banjo, usually a four-string tenor, was usually strummed in a brisk New Orleans jazz band style, playing chords as opposed to single-note leads. In time, when the guitar had matured as a lead instrument, it supplanted the banjo and, electrified and amplified, provided the improvised hot licks that became another hallmark of Western swing bands.

While Western swing was rooted in traditional string instrumentation, these musicians were also about innovation. As the genre progressed, drums, stand-up bass, piano, accordion, and, up until then unprecedented in "country" music, reed and brass sections were incorporated, gradually at first, then full tilt. By World War II, Western swing had evolved as full-blown hillbilly jazz. Bass anchored the bottom. Drums punched out the pace. Behind the ring of strings, horns in harmony punctuated the rhythm, the trumpet or trombone stepping out front when called to add to the arsenal of lead instruments. The complete Western swing band could include a jazzy piano or, when space or convenience wouldn't allow, an accordion. Mainstream country music fans looked on with reluctant smiles, but the South westerners ate it up like sugar candy.

Improvisational creativity was a must in Western swing. A musician was valued for his ability to make it up on the spot, color a melody in rainbows or run it up field with the thrill of a game-winning touchdown. Western musicians, impressed by black jazz, emphasized the take-off solo long before their Eastern counterparts. One of the first groups to stress hot licks was the Hi-Flyers performing out of Texas and Oklahoma in 1931. One member of the group told Western

swing researcher Fred Hoepfner that the improvised solo "became a matter of pride...and those that couldn't (play them) were looked down upon by those that could."

THE PATH TO Western swing, though, was cut by many musicians in the years before the Hi-Flyers. Some pioneered in the choice of material, what became the repertoire of the genre. Others shaped the instrumental, rhythmic, and melodic character of Western swing style. Prince Albert Hunt's Texas Ramblers, for example, specialized in melodic variations on "old-timey" country tunes. Among their late 1920s recordings on the Okeh label, "Blues in a Bottle", "Oklahoma Rag", and "Ragtime Annie". The career of the Texas Ramblers ended abruptly and unfortunately in 1931 when leader Archie "Prince" Albert Hunt was shot to death in Dallas.

The East Texas Serenaders recorded fiddle band music for Columbia in the late twenties. They helped to fashion Western swing in their choice and arrangements of waltz and breakdown tunes. The Serenaders' song list included the "McKinney Waltz", "Beaumont Rag", and the "Arizona Stomp".

In Northern Texas, Bill and Jim Boyd put together the Cowboy Ramblers. The Ramblers got their musical kicks by spiking popular country tunes with a nip of jazz. Their recording of "Under the Double Eagle" made them regionally famous.

These groups and others were the progenitors of Western swing. They did what had to be done to prepare the rural mind for the brassy, high-stepping style that followed in their wake.

Today, Bob Wills is known as the undisputed "King of Western Swing." For the most part, his decisions guided the course the genre would take. Born the first of ten children near Kosse, Texas in 1905, Bob Wills was the son of migrant cotton farmers. His father was a well-known fiddle player in the Texas panhandle. Bob started with the fiddle, too. In 1924, Wills was nineteen and working in blackface as a fiddler for a medicine show. That year while passing through Ft. Worth, he met Herman Arnsperger, also a farm boy. Arnsperger was a graduate of the Sears and Roebuck do-it-yourself school of music. Wills quit the medicine show and the two of them, fiddle and guitar, took on the Southwest as the Wills' Fiddle Band. Sometimes they even got paid. Day jobs saw them through when they didn't. Seven long years later, Milton Brown, a vocalist, joined the group. With his inclusion and under the sponsorship of the Aladdin Lamp Company, the group changed their name to the Aladdin Laddies.

Eventually, the Laddies would find success on local radio and at dances in Southwestern dance halls. In 1931 as the Great Depression impacted the nation, the band found a new sponsor. W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel was the radio advertising director for Burrus Mills, a flour-milling company out of Fort Worth. In that capacity, O'Daniel had started a country music radio program with its own band to promote the flour. Bob Wills and company would join that band and become the Light Crust Doughboys. A walking talking on-going musical advertisement for the product, the Doughboys essentially strummed and fiddled for bread. They toured the Southwest in a bouncing bus, spreading their reputation, shaping a unique swing style, and mostly shilling for flour. Burrus Mills promoted its own interests by sponsoring a live Doughboy's show on local small-time radio.

In 1932, Herman Arnsperger left the Light Crust Doughboys. He was replaced by multi-instrumentalist "Sleepy" Johnson. With Bob Wills on fiddle, Johnson on tenor guitar, Derwood Brown on guitar, and Milton Brown on lead vocal, the Victor label recorded the first Doughboys' tunes in Dallas, Texas on February 9, 1932. Billed as the Fort Worth Doughboys, the "A" side was "Nancy Jane", the flip, "Sunbonnet Sue", both traditional fiddle tunes. By the time they recorded again in October 1933, the group had expanded. Now billed as W. Lee O'Daniel & His Light Crust Doughboys, and on the Vocalion label, the group numbered eight, two of the more notable additions, Leon Huff on guitar and Leon McAuliffe on pedal steel. The success of the Doughboys' on radio, record, and in person laid foundations and benefited the future of Western swing.

Meantime, the Doughboys, especially Bob Wills and Milton Brown, were increasingly drawn to the black jazz, blues, and swing styles flaring around them. They wanted to express these "new" ideas in their own music but were not permitted. The Doughboys were restricted by their sponsors who did not want to offend or otherwise put off their potential customers. They could not play "sinful" dance halls and the repertoire was limited to the traditional or sentimental. But what really dampened the swing was that the Doughboys had to sweat it out working in the flour mill by day. The evening and weekend shows were a sugar coating on an otherwise bitter pill. Wills and Brown were unhappy with the situation. The Doughboys, having made Ft Worth the "cradle of Western swing," saw 1933 without Bob Wills or Milton Brown, each going off in separate directions to form their own bands and make music on their own terms.

Brown, a vocalist and bandleader, put together the Musical Brownies, a fiddle, banjo, and bass combination. He phrased his singing after the Wills swing fiddle style. The group clicked and they added Cecil Brown, a trained fiddler, and Fred "Papa" Calhoun, a jazz pianist. But the best of the Musical Brownies in terms of Western swing musicianship was Bob Dunn, a steel guitarist. Dunn made his strings sound like the short bursts of a horn. He felt that the steel had a place in jazz and called it a "truly modern instrument." Bob Dunn was possibly the first to electrically amplify the steel. He aimed for jazz, but Western swing was the benefactor.

BOB WILLS and the Texas Playboys hit the territory in 1933. They were extremely popular. Wills led the band and played fiddle. He was backed by his brother Johnnie Lee Wills with vocalist Tommy Duncan, Kermit and June Whalen, Don Ivey, and O.W. Mayo, the announcer and business manager. The band made music with fiddles, a guitar, a banjo, a bass, drums, some horns, and a singer. As their fame spread, the band grew. Two later standouts were steel player Leon McAuliffe and guitarist Eldon Shamblin. McAuliffe's lead and back-up techniques defined the role of steel guitar in Western swing and later commercial country. Eldon Shamblin's stunning licks and arrangements became a Playboys trademark. The Texas Playboys rolled on to become the very definition of Western swing. Their repertoire was unrestricted, and they could perform anywhere. In addition to originals and swing arrangements of traditional tunes, the Playboys innovated in recording a variety of African American blues and jazz tunes such as "St. Louis Blues" (1935), "Basin Street Blues" (1935), "Trouble In Mind" (1935), "White Heat" (1937), "Bleeding Heart Blues" (1937), "Keep Knockin' but You Can't Come In" (1938), "Black Rider" (1938), and "Empty Bed Blues" (1938).

The Texas Playboys new sponsor, Red Star Milling, piped the group and their brand of Western swing over a 50,000-watt clear channel Tulsa radio station. Under those auspices, Western swing via the Playboys reached their biggest audience yet. By 1935, Bob Wills had become one of the best-known country music stars in the Southwest. Eventually, Wills would have his own flour company and a ballroom for dancing.

The Playboys injected all kinds of music with a swing beat. They recast old time fiddle tunes such as “Beaumont Rag”, “Lone Star Rag”, or “Prosperity Special”, also called “Rat Cheese Under the Hill”. The traditional “Cotton-Eyed Joe” was played as a breakdown. The Playboys set list also included “Sittin’ On Top of the World”, “Four or Five Times”, “Smith’s Reel”, “Steel Guitar Rag”, “Tulsa Waltz”, and “Oozlin’ Daddy Blues”. There were covers of Jimmy Rodgers tunes such as “Never No More Blues”, “Blue Yodel #1”, “Everybody Does It in Hawaii”, and “Never No More Hard Times Blues”.

The originals by Wills and his band mates became longstanding favorites and ultimately standards of the genre. Wills’ songs began to make the country charts in the middle 1940s. One of the first and best known was “San Antonio Rose”, recorded the first time around in 1938 as an instrumental. Vocalist Tommy Duncan later added lyrics and re-recorded the song in 1940. Bing Crosby’s recording of “San Antonio Rose” brought Western swing to nationwide attention when it charted at #1 in 1941.

Remarkably, many Playboy originals are still popular today. Noteworthy are “Roly Poly”, “Whose Heart Are You Breaking Now”, “My Confession”, “Maiden’s Prayer”, “Stay All Night, Stay a Little Longer”, “Take Me Back to Tulsa”, and “Faded Love”.

Another compelling aspect of the Wills approach to Western swing was his singular ability to inject his personality into the mix. Wills was not a singer, but his voice was heard on most every recording. His signature was a raspy high-pitched "aaaah-haaaaaa" that cut over top the melody, a stamp of his approval. Wills frequently called out to individual musicians as they played, egging them on, encouraging them to step out. "Take it away, Leon," Wills might yell, and Leon McAuliffe would fire up his steel solo. Or he might interject a bit of humor in between verses. "Aaah, brother Billy Bowman, a man after my own heart...with a razor." The musicians loved how Wills threw the spotlight on them, something that did not happen in any other band. Fans got to know their favorite soloists by name, just as it happened in the world of jazz.

Wills may have gone through hundreds of musicians in his time. He had a reputation for being stern. On one occasion, so the story goes, the drummer played through part of a hot break by one of the other musicians. The drummer knew it and so did Wills. Cigar in mouth and without missing a beat, Wills fired him right on stage. But Wills could also be flexible, and he knew when to laugh. Noted steel player Red Rhodes tells this story. Wills was auditioning a nineteen-year-old on the pedal steel. The kid’s electric cord kept shorting, and his notes faded in and out during the tune. He was nervous. Wills stepped around to him. "Your break is coming up. Better do something exciting." A minute later, Wills gave him the nod, but the kid’s cord cut out completely. He stood up and kicked the steel guitar off the stage. Wills said, "Now, *that* was exciting!"

THE 1930S AND '40s were tough times for an esoteric band and a regional genre to come up. A depression, a war, forced migration in the wake of the Oklahoma dust bowl, the oppressive desert heat, a harsh land with the texture of sandpaper. Western swing provided sweet relief and distraction. Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys were welcome entertainment. The music and the band stood out against the stark backdrop and the dance beat gave men and women a reason to get together and hold each other close. That was the spirit of the music and the man who helped shape it. Bob Wills would ride big band Western swing into the sunset just like in the movies. And, in fact, his musical path eventually did lead him to Hollywood where he starred in over forty films as a singing cowboy.

California, meantime, saw Western swing through its brightest days. At the height of their popularity in the 1940s, the Playboys blossomed into a spectacular twenty-piece orchestra. Western swing bands toured the many ballrooms on down the Pacific coast and over to Las Vegas. One of the better-known bandleaders and a competitor to Bob Wills was Spade Cooley, whose band in the mid-1940s had an 18-month run at Santa Monica's Venice Pier Ballroom. But the swing tidal wave began to recede in the late forties. The crowds got smaller and as their popularity waned, the big bands faded, lumbering off like prehistoric dinosaurs taking their final steps into oblivion.

Bob Wills and some of the Playboys returned to perform mostly in the Southwest by 1949. The 1950s brought even leaner times for swing musicians. Rhythm & blues and rock "n" roll loomed just around the corner and small combos were the economically feasible thing. Bob Will's brother, Johnnie Lee, tried to run a big band but was forced to break it up later in the decade. Pee Wee King, Cliff Stone, Tex Williams, Jimmy Wakely, and Speedy West were some who kept the music alive. The last of the big bands was organized by Leon McAuliffe, the steel guitarist who played with Bob Wills for many years. McAuliffe went into the fifties with a twelve-piece band that included brass and reeds. But the decade saw him cut down to five or six pieces. McAuliffe couldn't compete with the smaller Western swing groups.

Bob Wills was able to support a smaller group in the fifties. In fact, some of the records he cut for M-G-M during that period presaged rock "n" roll. Titles such as "Ida Red Likes to Boogie", "Bottle Baby Boogie", "Dog House Blues", and his final side for M-G-M in 1954, "Cadillac in Model A", anticipated the beat and spirit of rock "n" roll. By the 1960s, however, he carried only a vocalist and used local sideman. His last dance was in 1968 at his annual birthday party at Cain's Ballroom in Oklahoma. A month later he had a stroke and has not played since.

A GENERATION of Americans in the Southwest grew up swaying to Western swing. At present, most any community in Texas or Oklahoma will have a small band that plays the music. For that matter, country music, the Nashville sound in particular, took a lot of ideas from Western swing. In the Southwestern desert, the drums, steel guitar, piano, horns, and other unorthodox flavorings were first applied to country music. High caliber musicianship and the value placed on skilled improvisation all originated in the West. Country music plucked the fruits of Western swing and now call them their own. Even the showy cowboy outfits were lifted from the backs of Western swing musicians.

The music is still happening these days. Merle Haggard, for one, recently [1970] assembled some of the ex-Playboys and recorded a tribute album to Bob Wills. [*Merle Haggard, A Tribute to the Best Damn Fiddle Player in the World (or, My Salute to Bob Wills)*] Doug Sahm recorded “Faded Love” with Bob Dylan [1973]. Dan Hicks, Commander Cody, and the Central Park Sheiks all play Western swing tunes. On the East coast, Lewis London, a hot-shot guitarist, is billing himself as the "Eastern King of Western swing." Steve Goodman was heard performing “San Antonio Rose” in a Toronto club appearance. Rumor has it that a cult of Western swing musicians is flourishing at the home of the San Francisco Folk Song Society on Clayton Street. Guy Logsdon, Director of Libraries at the University of Tulsa, has plans for the first Western swing music festival to be held in Tulsa next November. Just look around. Western swing lives!

