Dance Halls and Last Calls: A History of Texas Country Music

The dance hall has been a prominent structure in many small towns across Texas for well over a century. Requiring nothing more than an open area for dancing and music, dance halls vary from small, simple structures to large, elaborate architectural statements. The dance hall serves as a communal gathering place, where people from the host town and from neighboring communities gather to socialize and to listen and dance to live music, usually country music. It has been a family-friendly gathering place, often the only other venue in town outside of church where people gather. Since the advent of the radio and of movies, and later the combination of the two into television, the dance hall has steadily decreased in popularity among an ever-modernizing Texas. Because of their historic popularity, Texas dance halls have shaped the development of country music in the state; formative Texas musicians from Bob Wills to George Strait began their careers in Texas dance halls, and the structures themselves symbolize the roots of country music in the state.

Dance halls are readily acknowledged in many music histories as an important site for exposing listeners and musicians to new styles of music. And yet, despite their important role in the development of country music, until now no one had developed an index of the dance halls in the state. Dance Halls and Last Calls is a strong addition to the healthy list of books chronicling the development of Texas music, but adds its own twist by focusing on the structure of the dance hall and its role in the community.

Geronimo Treviño is a working country music performer who has started a new career for himself with this book. Dance Halls and Last Calls is the culmination of ten years of research, interviews and photography. The publication of this book has led to new media opportunities through which the musician will promote his research. The book has inspired a forthcoming documentary to be released in the summer of 2003. A compact disc, organized by the New Braunfels Museum of Art & Music, has been released featuring selections of country music which may have been commonly played in Texas dance halls. And a museum display of photographs, poster art, and other memorabilia of Texas dance halls will tour the state through 2003-2004. All three spin-offs share the same name as the book.

Dance Halls and Last Calls begins with a forty-eight page introduction to Texas music. The introduction serves as a quick chronology of musicians who have had influential periods in Texas and who have also affected the development of country music. Most of the musicians mentioned are singers or songwriters who work primarily in country music, but Treviño also includes musicians from other genres who have influenced country. The history of country music performers in Texas has been described better and in fuller detail in other sources, but this introduction does serve to briefly remind the reader of who's who in Texas country music.

After the introduction, Treviño moves into his index of dance halls across the state. While he admits that he may have overlooked some dance halls, the book does cover more than one hundred historic music venues in Texas, many of which are still standing and operating as dance halls.

The dance halls are listed in alphabetical order by name of the venue; most entries include photographs of the site, a few paragraphs on the structure and the community in which it stands, as well as mentions of important performances that may have happened there. The sketches of the dance halls are brief, engaging and extremely readable. They are loosely historical and, while Treviño is proud of his fact-checking, the book reads like a collection of memories rather than a compilation of data. The sketches occasionally include quotes from owners or performers, which is a nice touch. Treviño takes the time to highlight the unique things about each structure (architecturally and historically) when appropriate. And, when they are consistent enough to print, he includes the performance schedule of the clubs. Treviño has included both original and previously unprinted photographs. The book has been criticized for overlooking some important dance halls, but the inclusion of so many smaller, and even destroyed dance halls makes the text admirable.

The photos make the book immediately engaging to a reader. Treviño includes great images not only of the structures themselves, but also of performers on the stage or in front of the buildings. He also includes signage and poster art, as well as photographs of the grounds of some of these dance halls. Most of the structures included in the book have photographs, even of those dance halls which have been destroyed or converted. Yet, several still-standing clubs curiously do not have photos. Also, some entries have great photographs of performers in the dance hall, but not pictures of the structures themselves. These omissions may be due to the inability to receive permission to use photos in the book, but for the sake of consistency, it would be nice to have photos of every structure, and then augment some articles with additional images. Another issue with the layout of the text that should be addressed is a future printing is that not every photo in the book is labeled. Because of the page breaks and variable lengths of text for each dance hall, without labels it is occasionally unclear which dance hall is pictured.

The index is cross-referenced, which is nice; the reader can research a dance hall by name of the venue, or by name of the town. This detail, combined with the directions to each dance hall conveniently included in each entry, makes the book particularly useful to keep in the car when road-tripping across the state. The index does not consistently include references to the introduction of the book, which is a shame; it would be useful to refer back to the introduction after reading about a dance hall, or while visiting a site, in order to see who had once played at that venue.

The two brief chapters toward the end of Dance Halls and Last Calls seem extraneous to the overall book. Treviño has included a two-page homage to smaller country music venues (bars, clubs, and other settings) and