Texas Blues: The Rise of a Contemporary Sound

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

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

Govenar’s impressively long list of interviewees is supplemented with those of Jay Brakefield, Allan Turner, John Minton, and Dick Shurman (among a few others). Where he wanted to include significant contributors to Texas blues but did not have access to an interview, Govenar added his own brief, biographical summary. Examples of this include Charlie Christian, T-Bone Walker, Bob Dunn, and Leadbelly.

While this book is a significant collection of primary source material about mostly African-American musicians and music making in Texas, it also acknowledges the contributions of such white and Latino artists as Delbert McClinton, Jimmie and Stevie Ray Vaughan, Doyle Bramhall, Angela Strehli, Sunny Ozuna, and Freddie Fender, just to name a few. In particular, the extensive and very informative interview with Sunny Ozuna, documenting his take on the connection between Texas-Mexican music and black R&B, soul, and pop influences, is a gem.

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

The 25-page introduction to the book fittingly serves to introduce the opening chapter on East Texas musicians, which at first glance seems to be the only chapter missing an introduction. Among the front matter is a forward by Paul Oliver, along with Govenar’s prologue, which documents his fieldwork from a 1987 meeting with Quince Cox, a cemetery
caretaker in Wortham, Texas, where Blind Lemon Jefferson is buried, to a 1999 trip to the city of Dakar, Senegal, and back to Texas in 2004 to record and photograph Clyde Langford of Centerville, Texas.

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

While *Texas Blues* is a significant compendium of primary source material and could appeal to both the general public and to scholars, the latter might take issue with the author's seemingly haphazard approach to citing secondary source material. I found the footnotes at the bottom of the page to be informative, but I was frustrated when direct quotations appeared in the text and were not cited. One example is on page 16, in which he mentions "Walter Prescott Webb's report of his meeting with a young singer named Floyd Canada in a Beeville, Texas, pool hall in 1915." Govenar ends the paragraph with a direct quote from Webb but does not provide a footnote citation, nor is Webb listed in the bibliography. Govenar also fails to cite his source(s) for a biographical sketch of Charlie Christian. Unfortunately, there are other similar examples.

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

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

Kevin Mooney