



Austin in the Jazz Age

By Richard Zelade (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2015)

In Richard Zelade's introduction to his *Austin in the Jazz Age*, the author claims that "as heady as the Austin music and arts scene is today, it has not equaled the explosion of talent that marked Austin's Jazz Age." This assertion proves to be no empty bit of Texas braggadocio, for Zelade's book presents ample and quite remarkable evidence from the 1920s of a wide range of creative activity, from music and literature to the arts of dance, film, and design. Not only did a number of University of Texas students become at the time up-to-date performers in a variety of fields, but most went on to enjoy nationally acclaimed careers as singers, band leaders, writers, dancers, actors, and designers. It always surprises me to learn from where in Texas such talented young men and women come to study in Austin; in the 1920s many arrived from small and smaller towns throughout the state, and this still seems to hold true today for students who attend the capital city's flagship university.

It was gratifying to me as a fan of native Texas jazz musicians to find that Zelade's book includes two early University jazz figures, Jimmy Maloney and Sykes "Smith" Ballew, the former from Mount Vernon and the latter from Palestine. These two musicians had each organized his own band, known respectively as Sole Killers and Texajazzers, but later they would combine their groups to form Jimmie's Joys, which first recorded in 1923 in Los Angeles. The Jimmie's Joys recordings are historically significant, since their versions of "Sobbing Blues" and other tunes were only recorded previously by the New Orleans Rhythm Kings in 1922, with almost no other jazz recordings made prior to that date, except for the first ever jazz records produced in New York by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, beginning in 1917. Furthermore, the Jimmie's Joys recordings appeared in the same year (1923) as the first recordings made by Louis Armstrong, then with the seminal King Oliver band in Chicago. Maloney and Ballew were but two out of a dozen or more student artists who made a name for themselves during the Jazz Age, and like others to come, both continued for decades as successful entertainers, the latter as an actor in twenty-four films, including *The Red Badge of Courage* of 1951.

One of the biggest discoveries for me was that Tex Ritter of Murvaul, who was an early singing cowboy movie star and subsequently sang the theme song in the film *High Noon* of 1953, graduated with honors from Beaumont's South Park High School, my own alma mater, after which he enrolled at UT in the fall of 1922. Another discovery for me was Eudora Garrett, a reader of the poetry of Walt Whitman and Rupert Brooke, who lived in a tent near Lake Austin while a student at UT. A musician and later a writer on Native American folklore, Garrett was profiled in 1925 in *The Daily Texan* by student Vivian Richard, whose description offers but one example of the high level of writing by students in the 1920s: "Even the most prosaic acknowledge that no more fitting place could

be found to write or dream than in this hermit maid's canvas home. From the rustic table, piled with books, to the magic rug on the floor, the whole room breathes of originality." Another fine example of student writing comes from the 1921 humor magazine, the *Scalper*, in which an apparently anonymous poet depicts vividly a jazz band's early performance: "Now louder boom the drums / And wilder grows the rhythm / And a snarling flutter-tongue / From the cornet, sends my skin a-tremble." The poet's use at this early date of the term "flutter-tongue" stunned me, but it should not have, for students were then, as they are now, quite up with their times.

In considering the nature of the Jazz Age in Austin, Zelade has divided his book into two parts. The first is an overview of the period: its jazz talk ("Jazz Baby: a woman of easy morals"; "Jelly Bean: weakling, a coward"; "buffos: dollars, and plenty of them"); its sexual revolution (shorter dresses and a braless, androgynous look); bootleg drinking in Austin's then conservative bastion and the authorities' vain attempts to police such lawless consumption; the return to the University of soldiers from the First World War; and the effects of the "Spanish Flu." The second part offers a series of portraits of "Jazz People," from Jewish football star and airplane stunt flyer Ike Sewell, who in 1943 invented deep-dish pizza pie in Chicago, to cowboy song collector John Lomax and his and J. Frank Dobie's impact on Tex Ritter's career; dancer Janet Collett, who starred with the Pavlova Company; pageant designer Jack "Shakey" Tobin and costume designer Ralph Jester, the latter a contributor to some of Cecil B. DeMille's most spectacular Bible-based films, like *Samson and Delilah* of 1949; novelist Ruth Cross, whose *The Golden Cocoon*, "a story of Austin and University life," took "the country by storm" in 1924; actor-singer John Boles, who starred in *The Desert Song* of 1929, "the first 'talkie' screen musical romance"; and pianist Rollins "Buzz" Edens, who performed in 1925 with Steve Gardner's Texas University Troubadors, which would be recorded in San Antonio in 1930 and would include the extraordinary Bix Beiderbecke-sounding cornetist Tom Howell from Cameron. Later in New York "Buzz" Edens, a native of Hillsboro, played for seven years with the Red Nichols Orchestra. Each of Zelade's portraits captures a unique character who made Austin and the University a lively place in the heyday of jazz and the cultural changes it reflected and even in some ways brought about. Many of the striking photographs and visual materials are from the author's personal collection, and they add immensely to his overall presentation of those innovative times that in so many respects have influenced our own.

Dave Oliphant

Weird, Yet Strange: Notes from an Austin Music Artist

By Danny Garrett (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 2015)

Weird Yet Strange: Notes from an Austin Music Artist showcases prolific Austin poster artist Danny Garrett's work from the 1970s to the present. Those looking to admire Garrett's detailed and attractive art that college students used to steal off light poles on the Drag as collectibles is an understandable impulse and well worth the price. But like the folk music that Garrett claims is a major source of Austin's musical renaissance of the 1970s, the words matter.

Between the high quality reproductions of decades of Austin music art, Garrett weaves a story of his life, his work, and his adopted hometown that provides context and adds nuance and meaning to his visual art. For casual fans, *The Weird Yet Strange* will provide what has become the canonical version of Austin music history. Garrett argues that what made Austin special was a collision of the conservative country sensibilities of Texas past and the progressive, rock and roll culture of the University and "the ability to synthesize and amalgamate these disparities. It's been a place where new common denominators have been forged from the interplay of the old ones."

The Threadgill's, North Texas Folk Club, Vulcan Gas Company, and Armadillo World Headquarters narratives presented by other writers such as Jan Reid and Travis Stimeling are retold here, but what elevates Garrett's work is his expanded scope and decidedly different perspective. While Garrett began doing music posters for the legendary Jim Franklin in the Armadillo phase, his most significant work was for Clifford Antone's legendary and nomadic blues venue. Consequently, after paying appropriate homage to the progressive country movement, Garrett produces an intimate portrait of Austin's second great music scene with the emotion and insight only a participant could provide. His account of Antone's role as a nationally revered temple to the disappearing elder statesmen of the blues, such as Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and Alberts King and Collins, is a highlight of the book. Stevie Ray Vaughan's rise from anonymity at the Rome Inn to worldwide praise is chronicled lovingly in these pages. Other Austin blues icons get their due as well, such as Stevie's brother Jimmie and his Fabulous Thunderbirds, Lou Ann Barton, W.C. Clark, and Angela Strehli.

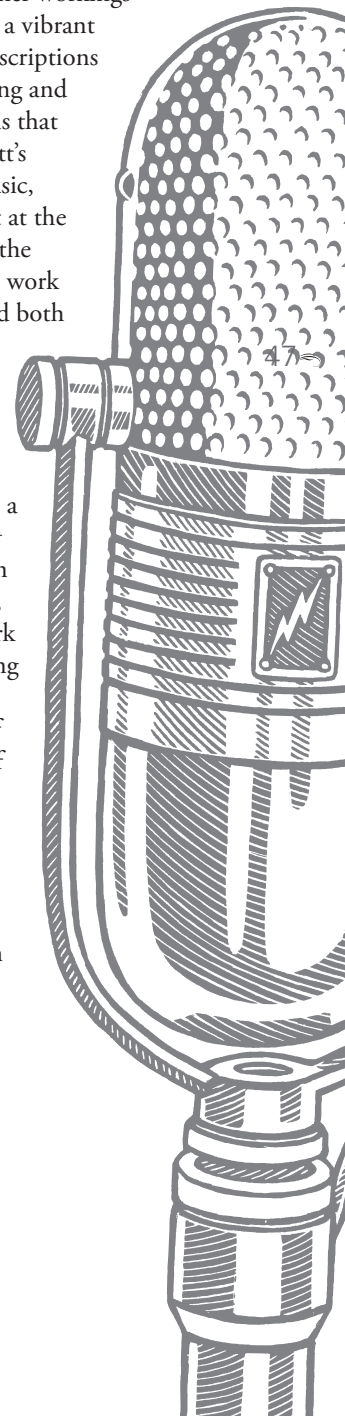
Through his poster work Garrett goes beyond the local blues and country scenes. Garrett touches on festivals such as Willie's picnics, the Kerrville Folk Festival, Spamarama, and Eeyore's Birthday, as well as the punk and rock scenes of the late 1970s and 1980s. Garrett also includes many of his posters and experiences of national touring acts that visited Austin over the decades, providing a much needed national context to a scene so often presented as insular.

Garrett does not just expand the scope of Austin music to other scenes; he also presents a new and valuable perspective, that of a working graphic artist. While much ink has been

spilled trying to describe Austin music, Garrett offers three simple elements for Austin art—elements of the bizarre, Texas or Austin iconography, and a sense of fun. The book is filled with details and recollections of what it was like to work with the people, materials, and spaces he encountered in those years as an artist. His memories of his time at Sheauxnough studios, mentors Franklin and Micael Priest, and colleagues such as Guy Juke and Kerry Awn both add a personal touch and expand the reader's understanding of the inner workings and complex acts and actors that constitute a vibrant music scene. This extends to his detailed descriptions of both the mechanical techniques of creating and printing his posters and the artistic decisions that constitute the design process, such as Garrett's continuously evolving attempts to draw music, and his use of sand and snow motifs to hint at the prevalence of cocaine in the mid-1970s. In the end, Garrett succeeds in bringing to life the work and the vibrant community that surrounded both Austin's musicians and graphic artists.

Garrett's status as an insider fondly recollecting his life's work is clear in his purple (or violet?) prose and occasional inside jokes. The language conveys the quirkiness associated with the scene he goes a long way towards recreating. That *Weird Yet Strange* works well as a nostalgic piece for an audience of former scenesters is no surprise, but the quality and breadth of Garrett's work and the passion and knowledge of his writing make this work a valuable volume for anyone seeking to gain an understanding of the Austin musical landscape of the last half century. Garrett's emotional link to Austin's quasi-mythic past comes through clearly, allowing even younger readers to capture the feeling of a time when "live music in the 1970s became almost an ether of sorts, in that it constituted a pervasive medium in which the most significant communication occurred—from the interpersonal, through the communal and tribal, to the esoteric."

Rich Kelly





Without Getting Killed or Caught: The Life and Music of Guy Clark

By Tamara Saviano (John and Robin Dickson Series in Texas Music. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2016)

Chronicling a human life is a daunting task, made even more difficult when that life is celebrated, beloved, and revered by devoted family, friends, and a multitude of fans. Guy Clark has been called one of Texas's greatest songwriters, a poet who honed his songs to perfection and opened his home to countless other songwriters throughout the course of his career, serving as a mentor, a collaborator, and a friend to many. Prior to this book, little had been written about him beyond the time-worn narratives and well-crafted public image of this rough-hewn "craftsman" of songs—a term he was saddled with but never liked.

Tamara Saviano is uniquely qualified to write the Guy Clark story. She is a GRAMMY-winning record producer, publicist, manager, talent booker, and former television producer and music journalist. She has known and worked with Clark for years and, through this project, became one of his closest friends. Saviano says:

There are hundreds of ways one can approach writing a biography of this breadth and scope. I hope I have conveyed how important Guy is as an artist, as well as shed some light on how his lifestyle and relationships fed his artistry. For every story, I found at least one additional source to confirm Guy's side. If Guy and Susanna Clark told me the same story separately, I felt comfortable writing it as their truth.

Saviano has organized Clark's often chaotic life into a well-researched and written study that reaches beyond the songwriter himself and delves into the culture and landscape of his childhood and his development as a musician; this includes the musical and business sides of his career, as well as her own relationship with the man.

Clark was brutally honest in sharing his story with the author, sometimes relating experiences and feelings he had never before revealed. For example, Saviano describes the unique and sometimes painfully uncomfortable relationship involving Clark; his best friend, Townes Van Zandt; and Clark's wife, Susanna. Saviano writes, "Guy and Susanna were married. Guy and Townes were best friends. Susanna and Townes were soul mates."

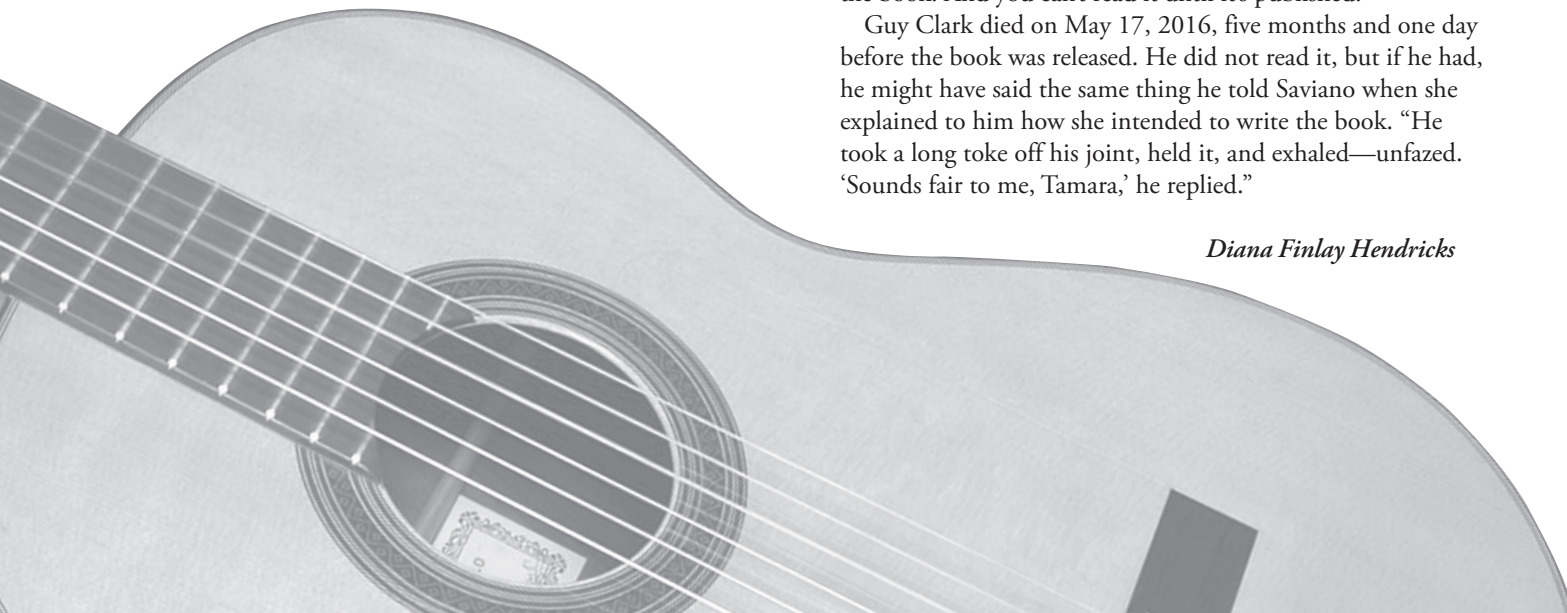
Joe Nick Patoski's *An Epic Life: Willie Nelson* (Little, Brown and Company, 2008) and Peter Guralnick's two-volume Elvis Presley biography *Last Train to Memphis and Careless Love* (Little, Brown and Company, 1994 and 1999, respectively) set high standards for musical biographies. Each author brings a unique voice to the stories of two of the world's most well-known entertainers. Although Saviano's subject may not be as famous as Elvis Presley or Willie Nelson, she also provides an intimate, behind-the-scenes look at the making of one of the Lone Star State's most beloved and influential songwriters.

More than eight years of research and interviews with two hundred people bring the private world of Guy Clark out of the shadows. The book divides Clark's story into three sections, and within these sections, each chapter could stand alone as an essay about that period in his life. Saviano's close personal relationship with Clark allows her to provide intricate details, along with broader brush strokes, that make for a damned good story. In the end, it seems that Saviano may know more about her subject than he knew himself.

When Guy Clark agreed to this project, Saviano asked, "Are you sure you're up for this? I want you to spend hours and hours with me and let me interview you about your life. I want you to introduce me to your family and friends and cowriters and colleagues and anyone who is important to your story and tell them to speak honestly with me. Then I'm going to write the book. And you can't read it until it's published."

Guy Clark died on May 17, 2016, five months and one day before the book was released. He did not read it, but if he had, he might have said the same thing he told Saviano when she explained to him how she intended to write the book. "He took a long toke off his joint, held it, and exhaled—unfazed. 'Sounds fair to me, Tamara,' he replied."

Diana Finlay Hendricks



Comin' Right at Ya: How a Jewish Yankee Hippie Went Country, or, the Often Outrageous History of Asleep at the Wheel

By Ray Benson and David Menconi (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015)

Ray Benson is quick to point out that he is often in the wrong place at the wrong time, but if his autobiography is any indication, that's mostly because he is somehow in so many places at once. The 6'7" frontman for Asleep at the Wheel is a self-professed expert in hanging out with the right folks, so it is no surprise that *Comin' Right at Ya*, which he co-wrote with David Menconi, is a free-ranging and often hilarious ride through forty years of American music history. Commander Cody, Willie Nelson, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Junior Brown (who might be the only person besides his ex-wife that Benson has a negative word for), James Hand, Dolly Parton, and a host of other musicians and industry folks populate Benson's autobiography and provide valuable insight into his influences and worldview. Like his longtime friend Willie Nelson, who encouraged Benson, Waylon Jennings, and others to move to Austin in the early 1970s, Benson is a country music industry outsider who has long since proved himself the ultimate insider. But the book isn't just stories about other people. Benson's ruminations on his life and work are thoughtfully sprinkled throughout, so that his experiences as a "Jewish Yankee Hippie" in the country music world adjoin bigger questions about individualism, performativity, irony, and identity in American culture. The result is a readable, funny, and thought-provoking book whose juicy details sit well with more academic studies of country and alt-country music.

Benson's autobiography is, in a sense, a study of a character rather than a person. As he tells it, Ray Benson Seifert was born to Jewish parents in Philadelphia in 1951, but Ray Benson was created on a farm in Paw Paw, West Virginia, in 1970, when Seifert and the original members of Asleep at the Wheel decided their real names weren't "colorful" enough for honky-tonk. East Coast college dropouts, they moved to Paw Paw to connect with the rural working class, play music that was genuinely of the people, and pay as little rent as possible while they did it. Their West Virginia neighbors found their Bob Wills-inspired performances too modern (an irony not lost on Benson), but the band was able to gain some traction in Washington, D.C., and later in San Francisco. There, however, their main paying gig was as the backup band for a country singer named Stoney Edwards, criss-crossing the country and booking as many of their own gigs as they could. The "Wheel" gained national attention when Van Morrison mentioned them in *Rolling Stone*, and by late 1972 they had a record deal with United Artists. Their first album, *Comin' Right at Ya*, was produced by Tommy Allsup (who had once worked with Bob Wills), but it garnered mostly confused reviews and little airtime; like Wills, Asleep at the Wheel drew on so many different genres that they didn't fit neatly into any of them.

The larger paradox, of course, is one that has impacted countless country musicians since the Wheel, the Byrds, and

other alt-country acts. The more traditional or "real" country the band performed was in direct contrast to the pop country coming out of Nashville and L.A. at the time. With flagging record sales, Asleep at the Wheel moved from record label to record label, trying to find a good fit. Native Texan Willie Nelson convinced the band to move to Austin in 1973, arguing that the Wheel's eclectic mix of Western swing, boogie woogie, and honky tonk would fit nicely into the city's burgeoning Progressive Country music scene. In Austin, Benson and the group finally felt at home. This led to more touring, recording, and finally a charting album with *Texas Gold* on Capitol records in 1975. With the band's first Grammy in 1978, the same music that had long been rejected by the music industry was finally embraced. Benson felt vindicated, remarking that, if the music industry had only let the Wheel be their "weird-ass selves" rather than trying to force them into a particular genre, they would have had a lot more hits.

While Benson emphasizes the importance of individual self-expression throughout the book, this isn't his main message. The project he is by far most proud of is Asleep at the Wheel's 1993 *Tribute to the Music of Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys*, which made it into the pop album charts, sold 400,000 copies, and netted two more Grammys. Drawing on decades of connections, he assembled an all-star cast, including Vince Gill, Chet Atkins, Huey Lewis, Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, Dolly Parton, Garth Brooks, George Strait, and as many of the original Bob Wills Texas Playboys and Asleep at the Wheel alums as he could find. Wills had long been a shared influence for these artists, and the album revealed that Asleep at the Wheel was the conduit connecting past and present.

In *Comin' Right at Ya*, Benson is light on negativity and lighter still on some of the darker moments of his life—the drugs, the near disintegration of the band, the darker years of the 1980s, his difficult divorce, contracting Hep C—these are all here, but treated with humor and minimal detail. Ever mindful of the importance of connections, Benson mentions countless people, and the stories he tells are often funny, sometimes loving, rarely damning. Ultimately, the authors create a fascinating portrait of who Ray Benson is and who he wants to be. His values are clear—work hard; know what you want; value your social connections; and know that, by not fitting in anywhere, you actually fit in everywhere. As Benson writes in his acknowledgements, "If I'm not the American dream . . . well, sir, at least I did the soundtrack."

Kirsten Ronald