

Bob Wills:

The King of Western Swing

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In the 1930s, America was immersed in the great economic Depression, but it was also experiencing a technological and cultural explosion. The motorized transportation and the new electronic media would forever change the world. And yet, from the Midwest to the Pacific Ocean, we were still a developing, open, agricultural wild land. The music that had been carried through the folk tradition continued being passed down through the families that had worked the land, the families who had faced dust storms and other hindrances to their hard work west of the Mississippi.

But music was reaching those folks with the help of new technology, too. Radio changed things. It created national celebrities, musicians who took folk tunes and dressed them up, giv-

America's soulful blues and rhythmic jazz. "People from that area and that day and time, you think would be prejudiced, (but) he didn't seem to have a bit of prejudice," Bob's daughter, Rosetta,

Jim Rob Wills was only ten years old in 1915 when he fiddled at his first dance there in Hall County, being called to fill in for his drunken daddy.

ing them class and widespread acceptance. The strong identities with the common man and his work stayed in the music, but a new sound was creeping into it, with more structured arrangements and melodies to dance to.

The sound had been coming on for some time, with the earlier recordings of the "Singing Brakeman," Jimmie Rodgers, paving the way for cowboy singers like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. These were the musical heroes for the rest (or west) of the country, while other musical varieties developed a little further east, as Nashville, Tennessee, became the spiritual home of all country music.²

And then there was Texas. Everything always seemed a little different in Texas, and maybe it still does. Besides California and Hawaii, it was the only state that had once been a nation, and a spirit of individualism had flourished in its people for years. That iconoclastic attitude could even be found up around the Texas Panhandle and the Cap Rock Canyons, hundreds of Texas miles from the Alamo and the state capital. Truly, it was in the middle of nowhere, the unlikely little Texas town of Turkey, that folk, country, cowboy, jazz, and blues began to mix together in the mind of a young man who would lead the way in a sound we now call Western Swing.

Jim Rob Wills was only ten years old in 1915 when he fiddled at his first dance there in Hall County, being called to fill in for his drunken daddy, also the son of a fiddler.³ It was the first of thousands of nights on stage over the next six decades. Jim Rob would not realize until much later that playing the fiddle would be his true calling and the most basic element in his eventual Wall of Western Sound.

Young Jim Rob Wills held a series of jobs before adding that of Professional Musician to his resume, including selling insurance and preaching "the Word." But, for a while, he settled into a job at Turkey's barber shop, a job he took seriously enough that he completed barber college. Music had always been in his family and was still a big part of Jim Rob's life when he went into the Dallas-Fort Worth area in 1929 looking for work as a barber. Despite the Depression, he was lucky enough to find work in music as a "black face" fiddler with a medicine show. It was an interestingly ironic career move (by today's standards) for the young man who had already made music with black friends back home, whose jazz and blues influence would be heard his entire career.⁴

Blackface performances were common at the time, though playing and working with black children in the cotton fields was not. This was exactly how Jim Rob had been exposed to black

observed. "He had a lot of respect for the musicians and music of his black friends."⁵ He was such a fan of blues singer Bessie Smith that he rode fifty miles on a horse to see her perform live. "I don't know whether they made them up as they moved down the cotton rows or not," Wills later said of his black contemporaries, "but they sang blues you never heard before."⁶

In Fort Worth, Wills and Herman Arnsperger, the guitarist from the medicine show, hooked up with brothers Milton and Durwood Brown to form the Wills Fiddle Band, and later the Aladdin Laddies, after becoming regular radio performers on WBAP in 1930. Long before Michael Jackson ever held a can of Pepsi, it was not uncommon for musicians to be sponsored by, and even named for, advertisers. When the Aladdin Lamp Company dropped its sponsorship, the Burrus Mill and Elevator Company began its cross-promotional relationship with the boys. Thus



Photo courtesy of Rhino Records & Donna Kolby Jackson



Photo courtesy of Rhino Records & Steve Hathaway

were born the Light Crust Doughboys, the singing and playing billboard for Burrus's Light Crust Flour. They literally punched a time clock and worked for the company. Wills was the delivery truck driver by day, fiddler by night. Burrus's manager was the group's employer and the radio show emcee. W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel had plans for the country dance band that were in his product's best interest and not necessarily the band's; they were to perform only on radio and not at dances.⁷ But it was, after all, dance music that Wills and his friends were making. It needed real people shuffling across the floor in front of it.

When the Browns left to form Milton Brown's Musical Brownies in 1932, it was not long before Wills's earliest battles with the bottle got him fired by Pappy. Bob and his brother Johnnie Lee

and Wills over the band's name kept Fort Worth's Doughboys out of Bob's Tulsa home base. The feud lasted far longer than either man did. "O'Daniel always had a vendetta against Bob from then on," remembered Montgomery in June of 1998. "We were on the air [by recording] on KVOO all during those years, but Pappy never would book us into Tulsa, on account that Bob was big there. Last year, Borders Bookstore booked us up there. That's the first time the Doughboys ever played in Tulsa."⁹

During those early Waco and Tulsa years, the Playboys began to grow, bringing in such players as the teenaged Leon McAuliffe on steel guitar, Smokey Dacus on drums, Jesse Ashlock on guitar, and "Brother" Al Stricklin and his boogie woogie-styled piano playing. Just like the Doughboys, they even had a product to push—Playboy Flour. Bob's vision of a jazzy fiddle band was taking shape throughout the 1930s, but, to be fair, he was not the only one west of the Appalachians bringing together big city jazz and frontier fiddle. Good friend Milton Brown continued with his similar sound, enjoying great success with the Musical Brownies until his tragic death following a 1936 auto accident.¹⁰

There were others, all under the western umbrella, being influenced by Dixieland jazz and the minstrel shows. Nearly a decade earlier, Al Bernard had plugged western folk into Chicago blues, taking his minstrel-based show into the Eastern Tin Pan Alley culture. Emmett Miller and His Georgia Crackers, Roy Newman and His Boys, Spade Cooley, Adolph Hofner, and others took Gene Autry's cowboy sound a giant, soulful two-step to the left.

Along the way, Wills had become the leader of the pack. It was his constant effort to put on a bigger, better show that brought about the Big Sound. He was a showman. And putting on a better show meant bringing in lots of other instruments

(The Light Crust Boys) would endure, in fact, as the keepers of a western music flame, receiving their first Grammy nomination in 1997.

took off for Waco, Texas, where the Texas Playboys were playing frequently on radio station WACO. From there, they moved on to Tulsa, Oklahoma, finding their first *true* radio home on KVOO.⁸ Brown and Wills would separately become the most important figures in this new cowboy jazz, but the Doughboys were Pappy's launching pad, too; O'Daniel's radio exposure started a political career that would take him to the Texas Governor's mansion in 1938, and in 1941, he beat out a young Lyndon Johnson in a U.S. Senate race. His Light Crust Doughboys would continue on without him or Brown or Wills. They would endure, in fact, as the keepers of a western music flame, receiving their first Grammy nomination in 1997.

That's right; more than sixty years after Wills left the band, dozens of musicians have kept the Doughboys alive. They still perform today, with Marvin "Smokey" Montgomery on banjo from 1935 up until his death in 2001. A feud between O'Daniel

and more fiddles than just his own. A good show for dancing, that was the goal, not the creation of some musical revolution.

The transition from Jim Rob to Bob was just the beginning of Wills's effort to achieve class and distinction for his western ensemble. Bob may have been country, but the image he wanted portrayed in both appearance and song, was far removed from the hillbilly style that had been coming out of Nashville, and he did not want the Playboys to be another hillbilly band. He hated the hillbilly image associated with country music. But then, this was a different kind of country music anyway. If Bob had not played a fiddle, no one would have connected country to the Playboys' music at all. It was really jazz; jazz that portrayed a dignified South, with flowing fiddles and classy, sometimes brassy, arrangements. Their rags, breakdowns, Dixieland tunes, and swingin' blues were an uplifting beacon of light in otherwise hard, depressed times.

The Playboys usually appeared in cowboy dress attire. No sequins or overalls, this was a sophisticated outfit. Bob's look was that of a well-dressed bandleader, but one from Texas. His cowboy hat, cigar, and fiddle were all part of his trademark appearance.

"Bob was a stylish, western rogue," said Ray Benson, leader of *Asleep At The Wheel*, Western Swing Bob Wills disciples for the past three decades. "He danced onstage, he was outrageous. He strutted like a peacock, unheard of back in those days."¹¹ In all other respects, he led a Big Band just like Tommy Dorsey, in a presentation that was downright orchestral—except Bob conducted with a fiddle bow.

The earliest incarnations of the group (over the years, hundreds of musicians would be Playboys) included trumpets and saxophones, and at various times, female vocalists with an Andrews Sisters style. The band's makeup and size changed frequently; it could grow into a veritable western symphony or shrink to a tight little fiddle band. The most important qualifications for Texas Playboys were that they be good musicians and good people. They had to get along with the others and with the audience. It was that simple. No matter how many players were onstage, it was a decidedly different sound from any other in country music, with that steel guitar (electrified by the late 1930s), extra fiddles, electric mandolin, even drums.

With a foundation like this, the emergence of rock and roll was only a matter of time.

The completion of the Bob Wills sound meant having a vocalist who was more crooner than cowpoke, but with a definite western touch. Tommy Duncan's relaxed, smooth voice was as appealing as Bing Crosby's, just more suited for a fiddle band. There was no pretense or exaggeration in Duncan's baritone, and when it was mixed with Bob's cheerleading interjections, it was a magical combination.

Duncan's voice fit the band like a glove, and his touch of class would not take them too far away from country music. Bob and his fiddle made sure of that. Bob was not just the leader and arranger, he was also a vocalist himself, but not in any conventional way. His running commentary during songs was as much a part of a Playboy arrangement as anything else in the mix. Bob's cheerful, nasal voice could be heard in nearly every song, as he threw hollers like "Play it, boys!," "Ahh, now!," "That's what I said!," and any imaginable thought that might (or might not) pertain to the words of the song at hand.

Bob's own personality was a musical instrument. It was the hook, the thing that put a smile on any listener's face. He would sometimes sing whole songs himself, but he was hardly a stage hog. The hollering gave all Playboys a moment in the spotlight



during a dance or radio show. Band members' names were as important as Bob's, even as the lineup changed. It was hard for any audience not to feel connected with Texas Playboys, with Bob's constant reminders of just exactly who was playing the swingin' solo in progress: "Here's the man who'll tell you about it, Tommy!," "that man they call Kelso, piano!," "the biggest little instrument in the world, mandolin! Tiny Moore!," "All right, Herbie! Herb Remington and that little ol' steel guitar!"

It was Bob's magnetic stage presence with his constant Cheshire grin and rhythmic regal bearing that brought the most basic element out of the music. It may have had roots in blues, jazz, and workingman's folk music, but it was always happy. A sense of joy could even be found in such sad Wills classics as, "Yearning," "Bubbles In My Beer," and "Lily Dale." It had to be happy. After all, it *was* for dancing.

The onstage charisma was apparently just a reflection of a genuinely nice man to start with. Light Crust Doughboy Smokey Montgomery plainly stated, "If I asked him for a dollar, he'd give

spread far and wide. So far, in fact, that a book had been written about them as early as 1938. *Hubbin' It* by Tulsa reporter Ruth Sheldon was available by mail order only, and included a dreamy glossy photo of that grinning Texan. The book was not the only fan-driven venture to come decades before Beatlemania. A fan named Ruth Thomason created a set of about a dozen guidelines and duties to keep true Bob Wills fans in line. According to Thomason, any *real* Bob Wills fan "never knocks, but always boosts Mr. Wills," "is one whose room is completely lined with Bob Wills pictures," "attends every dance possible and always listens to the broadcasts," and one who most certainly "never ridicules a Kyser or a Wayne King fan, simply pities her for not knowing enough to be a Bob Wills fan."¹⁵

Yodeler and traditional country recording artist, Don Walser, remembered the power of a Playboys radio show, as it reached into the Texas Panhandle town of Lamesa. He would walk home from school, in the days when windows stayed open, and the entire neighborhood would pick up those Tulsa broadcasts.

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me a ten."¹² Another Smoky, drummer Smoky Dacus once commented on his boss's largess. "After our noon broadcast, some guy in overalls would walk up to Bob and whisper in his ear. Bob would reach in his pocket and give the guy a hundred dollar bill. The story was always the same—the guy had a sick mother who was always in California and he always needed money for a bus ticket. After the guy was out of earshot, Bob would say, 'You know, that guy's probably lyin', but I can't take the chance.'"¹³

A drummer who came a little later than Smokey, Johnny Cuvillo, once told the story of how Bob had quietly relieved him of his Playboy duties: "After we would play a show or do some recording, the Bob Wills tour bus would let everyone off at the bus stop so they could go home, but they would always drive me right to my house and all of my neighbors would see me arrive home in the Bob Wills bus! After I was with the band for almost two years, the bus stopped coming by to pick me up. No one ever fired me—they just stopped picking me up."¹⁴

From 1934 to 1942, the KVOO radio program was part of the Playboys' lives, and radio's far-reaching exposure in those days was the most important publicity any musician could have. The band would travel for nighttime dances, performing in towns hundreds of miles away, but they had to be back for a live noon broadcast every weekday, and a gospel radio show on the weekend (presumably a balance for the less-than-wholesome atmosphere of dance halls).

The radio commitment was not the only one; they also played each Thursday and Saturday night at Cain's Ballroom in Tulsa. Despite such restrictions, they managed to play throughout Texas and other Midwestern states, and their grassroots popularity was

"You'd walk through there and you could hear a Bob Wills song from start to finish walking by those windows."¹⁶

In 1942, World War II brought the party to a temporary end, as a number of the guys went into the service, including Bob. Brother Johnnie Lee kept the radio show going during those years, and wound up keeping that daily noon broadcast on the air until 1958. Johnnie Lee had his own swing band by that time based right there in Tulsa, though members of his band and Playboys often overlapped, as players would float back and forth between them. Whenever Bob was in town, he would join his brother on the air. "A lot of people think that they were listening to my dad on KVOO when they probably were listening to Johnnie Lee," declared Rosetta. "Sixteen years he was on there after my dad had moved to California. They played the same kind of music."¹⁷

Bob had actually set up Johnnie Lee's band for him, just as he would do for brothers Billy Jack and Luke. All the Wills brothers were musically talented, and all were Playboys at various times, but Bob was the clear business leader behind every offspring group. There was always a pool of musicians to mix and match as the size and sound of the Texas Playboys evolved over the years. Bob was the central figure, the creative genius behind a Western Swing empire. "Johnnie Lee was always kind of in the shadows," said Rosetta. "He was a sweetheart, nicest man in the world. Uncle Billy Jack was a good musician, Luke, all of them. But Bob was the star."¹⁸ The brothers' bands were not the only ones in that musical network. Don Walser saw a number of the Playboys many times, but not as Playboys. "Whenever the guys from Bob Wills' band wanted to dry out, they'd go to

Big Spring and work for Hoyle Nix.” Nix was an important swing leader in his own right and a good friend to Bob. “They all had to watch Hoyle just like they’d watch Bob.”¹⁹

The dancing, smiling image of Bob Wills would also be brought to folks all over the country in the medium that it cherished the most. Bob, Tommy, and all the boys were brought vividly to life as they appeared in several dozen 1940s western movies, including *Go West Young Lady*, *The Lone Prairie*, *A Tornado In The Saddle*, and *Take Me Back To Oklahoma*, in which Bob and the boys shared the screen with cowboy singing star, Tex Ritter.

forever be a beat in country music. (He and the Texas Playboys, by the way, were not invited back.)²¹

Johnny Gimble first sat in with the band as a 23-year-old fiddler. Johnny’s greatest musical influence was jazz great Benny Goodman, who didn’t even have a fiddle in his orchestra. According to Gimble, Wills “couldn’t play jazz, he just loved it. And he hired guys who could play it.”²² A jazzy fiddle was just the right sound for the Playboys. Eldon Shamblin, the electric guitarist who also served as the band’s manager, understood this when he hired Gimble in Bob’s absence in 1949. “I was on my

Bob unknowingly created quite a stir at his Grand Ole Opry performance.

Radio, however, was still king, and it continued to deliver the Western Swing message to the people. In the late 1940s, Bob and the band made a series of recordings produced especially for radio. The band’s recording career had already been going strong since the mid-1930s, but these song versions were completely separate from the commercially released material. The transcriptions of these live-in-the studio sessions, handled by Tiffany Music, were then sent to radio stations as an early version of what we now call syndicated programming. The performances were formatted in such a way that radio stations could customize them with local announcers and commercials.

It had seemed like a logical business idea at the time. The band’s original legend and following had been built from the far-reaching signals of KVOO and WBAP. Despite such advertised announcements that it was a “sure-fire audience builder for your station, a powerful selling vehicle for your sponsors,”²⁰ the Tiffany music recordings failed as a business venture, but not before running for several years on dozens of stations throughout the country. It may not have generated cash, but it had kept the Playboys spirit alive. It is ironic that the Tiffany Transcriptions were not intended for commercial release, but now, decades later, they are more readily available than most of the rest the Wills recorded catalog. After sitting untouched for decades in a basement, they were released in the 1980s by Rhino Records, giving a fascinating glimpse of the Playboys’ musicianship at the time.

By 1945, Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys had achieved enough grassroots fame that they were invited to play at the prestigious home of country music a little farther east. Bob unknowingly created quite a stir at his Grand Ole Opry performance. A drum set was a natural, integral part of the Playboys’ music, but it was unheard of in the world of country music back then. When the Opry staff told Bob that his drummer could not play, he angrily declared that he would not leave a band member out. It was all the Texas Playboys or none. Bob did agree, however, to let the drums be set up behind the curtains. That is, until time to play, when he hollered, “Move those things out on stage!” In that moment, Bob Wills had left a permanent mark; there would

way to join the band and I stopped in to where they were playing in Waco,” recalled Gimble. “And Bob said, ‘There’s a little fiddle player in the house! The boys hired him. I haven’t heard him. They say he’s good. Well, he sure better be!’ I was scared to death, of course. He asked me if I could play ‘Draggin’ The Bow.’ I had learned that when I was a kid. Bob couldn’t play it; it wasn’t one of his tunes. It was something that knocked him out, though. That’s sort of the way he worked: he cut you loose to play. You played whatever you felt like. He wasn’t bossy at all.”²³

Gimble vividly remembered the feeling of a Bob Wills show, and how its star connected with his fans. Bob would spend the entire four-hour dance on the bandstand. After a show, he would travel in his car while the rest of the boys hopped in their bus. “He’d kick off the last tune and then make his way out to the car and leave while we were finishing it out. If he had to, he’d stand there and shake everybody’s hand. Sometimes he’d make his way through the crowd [while] they were dancin’, if there wasn’t a back door. You could see that white hat movin’ out through the crowd. He’d speak to everybody that stopped him.”²⁴

Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys somehow found time to write, learn, and arrange new songs in the midst of their almost constant traveling and performing throughout the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Bob wrote quite a few songs, but so did Jesse Ashlock, Tommy Duncan, the other Wills boys, and various other Playboys. Bob always incorporated pop tunes by the likes of Cole Porter, along with jazz works by W.C. Handy (a particularly soulful rendition of “St. Louis Blues”), and even traditional folk songs by influences like Woody Guthrie. He would record the blues standard, “Sittin’ On Top Of The World” many times over the years. They could do it all, and Bob was the first to say so. “We’re hep,” he once boasted. “We’re the most versatile band in America. Sure we give ‘em western music like ‘Mama Don’t Allow No Lowdown Fiddlin’ Around Here,’ and ‘Little Liza Jane,’ but we give ‘em rhumbas, too. And when there are jitterbugs in the joint, we get ‘em so happy they can’t stay on the floor. We lay it on like they want it.”²⁵

Texas songwriter Cindy Walker was responsible for a number of the songs in the films, as well as other classics like “Cherokee

Maiden” and Roy Orbison’s “Dream Baby.” One tune, which she had written when she was twelve-years-old, would also be interpreted by the Playboys.²⁶ It was perhaps the perfect Western Swing song, the one that captured its feeling the best. The sad lyrics of “Dusty Skies” paint a stirring picture of hard life on the dry western plains, as the dust storms drive hard working folks from their homes. Only Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys could tell such a

instrumental sold very well, and later, Columbia would ask Bob to record it again with lyrics.²⁷

It was 1940 before “New San Antonio Rose” came out, with lyrics as poetic as the melody itself (“Moon in all your splendor, know only my heart/Call back my rose, rose of San Antone/Lips so sweet and tender, like petals fallen apart/Speak once again of my love, my own.”). Bob’s hypnotic hollers of “San Antone!” could be heard in all the versions that he would eventually record, each time with a different Play-boy vocalist.

Its popularity reached far beyond Wills’s core audience in the rural Southwest when, in 1941, the already-legendary crooner, Bing Crosby, released his own version of the song. Crosby’s recording sold one and a half million copies, in a production that was quite faithful to Bob’s own. Crosby’s record served as a validation of Wills’s appeal beyond country music: Crosby performed it the way Bob had, and Bing was surely no hillbilly. The song would literally be heard all over the world by 1969, as the Apollo 12 astronauts sang it, looking back at the earth from a lunar orbit.²⁸

“San Antonio Rose” took Bob “from hamburgers to steaks,”²⁹ as he was fond of saying,²⁸ but it was not his only song to take on a life of its own. “Faded Love” had also started out as a simple fiddle tune, originally made up by Bob’s father, John Wills. For years, it did not even have words, let alone a name.

The mournful instrumental came to be known as “Faded Love” by the time Bob had his own band, but it was not until 1950 that he and brother Billy Jack wrote the heart-broken words to their father’s beautiful melody, just two years before John’s death. Bob would



Photo courtesy of Rhino Records & Michael Ochs Archives

sad tale with the rich, full sound of a western orchestra. The songs were as ever changing and varied as the band itself.

The Playboys would record hundreds of songs over the years, but two songs would be associated with the band in all its incarnations. They would become standards in the world of popular music.

“Spanish Two-Step” was a simple melody that Bob had made up in the early 1930s. He had written the fun little instrumental piece for the primarily Mexican audiences of Roy, New Mexico, where he had lived and played for a while. He recorded it in 1935, but it was a Dallas recording session in 1938 that brought out a new burst of creativity. “After we had cut several tunes, Uncle Art Satherley, who was the A&R man on this session asked me if I had another tune like ‘Spanish Two-Step,’” Bob recalled some years later. “I said, ‘No, I don’t, but if you give me a few minutes, maybe I can come up with something.’ In a few minutes, I had written and recorded the tune. Uncle Art asked me what I wanted to name the tune. I told him I didn’t know. So he said, ‘Let’s name it ‘San Antonio Rose.’” The

later sign over all royalties from the song to his mother, as an appropriate provision for her financial security. Since then, over three hundred artists have recorded the timeless classic.³⁰

“Fifty-seven was the first time I saw him on a bandstand. I was 17, and I was fascinated,” stated Rosetta, Bob’s second daughter. Bob’s marriage to Betty Wills in 1942 would last the rest of his life and produce three children. But this amiable fellow who never knew a stranger had known divorce long before it was, shall we say, popular. Bob Wills had been married five times prior to Betty, two of which were with Milton Brown’s ex wife. (When asked once about his many marriages, Bob simply replied, “I’ve got about sixteen more horses than I’ve had wives”). He would remain friendly with his exes, except for Rosetta’s mother, whom he had divorced when Rosetta was just a toddler.³¹ Light Crust Doughboy Smokey Montgomery performed a unique special service for his good friend with regard to the women of Wills’s past. “Every time he’d come to town (Fort Worth), I’d kind of be his transportation to see his ex wives.”³²

Rosetta had not known her father well when she was a child. Like her sister, Robbie Jo (also the product of an early marriage), she had only been around him a handful of times, and just knew him to be a very sweet and kind fellow, like a distant uncle. By the time she was 17, Rosetta was ready to get closer to this mythical father figure, who was already immensely famous when her mother had first met him in the late 1930s. "I decided I was gonna go see him," she recalled of her first trip with friends to Cain's Ballroom, the Tulsa dance hall that served as the Playboys' home base. "He, of course, did not expect us, he had no idea. I

gear into the bus. The man she got to know during those nights was exactly the same kind-hearted soul that friends and fans have commented on for years. He was as friendly offstage as on.³⁴

Certainly, there are those who have commented on his moodiness, jealousy, his tendency to withdraw, but Rosetta saw none of that. "I'm sure there was that side of him, but of course, I never saw it. I really wasn't around him enough to ever have any kind of disagreement. He always acted just thrilled to see me, I never got the cold shoulder."³⁵ Her fleeting moments were always precious.

There was a side of him that was remote, a private side to the



Photo courtesy of Rhino Records & Steve Hathaway

just went up to the bandstand. He was totally shocked. He didn't quite know how to handle it." Bob had lived a life in barrooms and dance halls and was acutely aware of the seedier aspects of those environments. He would watch all members of his family like a hawk whenever they ventured into such a setting. "He never wanted his wives or his children at Cain's, but I was kind of outside that circle. He couldn't exactly tell me not to come."³³

It was nights like those that became the basis for their relationship. Most of the time that Rosetta spent with her father over the years would be while one was onstage, the other on the dance floor below. They would also spend hours talking in his car after a performance, while the Playboys were piling themselves and their

seemingly simple man. His struggles with the bottle over the years usually resulted in a no-show for a Playboys gig; this way, fans and friends would only see him at his friendly best. As powerful as his illness apparently was, he usually did not let it show to friends and fans. He was a binge drinker, not a constant drunk; it would not get in the way of the serious musical work to be done. Johnny Gimble only saw Bob drinking twice during his several years as a Playboy, and it did not prevent him from doing his job. Band manager Eldon Shamblin saw to that, according to Gimble. "Eldon said, 'You got a tour to do, Bob, and the bar's closed.' That's how authoritative Eldon was."³⁶

Also, as loving as Bob was towards Rosetta, he had hidden

her and Robbie Jo's existence from his other family for many years. When he did let the news out, it was with such whimsy that the mystery had hardly seemed necessary. Rosetta's first introduction to her brother was during a show, while her famous dad was literally in the middle of a song: "That was something out of a movie. He leaned down from the bandstand and said, 'James, this is your sister Rosetta.' We were just there looking at each other. Of course, I knew [about him], but he didn't know [about me]." James was eighteen, Rosetta in her twenties, and both leapt at the chance to get to know each other. "We stayed up all night until the sun came up. We were just fascinated."³⁷

riety for unrelated reasons—Jack Ruby.⁴⁰

Selling off that dance hall was just one of the ways in which Bob did his level best to pay off a crippling IRS debt. In those days, there was no opportunity like Willie Nelson would later have for a settlement and payment plan. One simply paid it. Bob sold his homes, his land, and his music. Even the rights to "San Antonio Rose" went to Irving Berlin's publishing company. This fact, according to Rosetta, "really was a crushing blow. He talked about that a lot. When I saw him in the '60s, he couldn't get over that, because he'd lost so much."⁴¹

The financial pull of the road still had a tight grip on him.

When he recorded it in the 1960s, he told me, "I sang 'Rosetta' for you, and I was thinking about you the whole time I was singing that."

The family life that Wills knew with Betty and their kids was perhaps as unconventional as his relationship with Rosetta. That presumably more stable family was not really stable either; they would move fourteen times in twenty years, but such is the life of a traveling musician. The love he clearly felt for his family can be found in the song bearing that second daughter's name. "It is a really good song, and he does a great version of it," said Rosetta of the Earl 'Fatha' Hines jazz tune that Bob had first recorded in 1938. "My mother, it was her favorite song, so I was named for the song. The song's older than me. When he recorded it in the 1960s, he told me, 'I sang "Rosetta" for you, and I was thinking about you the whole time I was singing that.' So that made it more special to me because I wasn't even born the first time he recorded it."³⁸ That later recording, by the way, was released as a single at the time that the Beatles first took over record sales in the States. The record, along with all other tunes considered country and western at that time, sold poorly as the British Invasion took hold.

Years of hard traveling and a good bit of drinking had taken their toll on Bob's health. So after a second heart attack in 1964, he simply "sold" the management of the band for ten thousand dollars.³⁹ The Playboys were left under the musical leadership of Leon Rausch, a longtime singer with the band (Tommy Duncan had been fired some years earlier, and a number of other singers had passed through since). They made Fort Worth something of a home, but life on the road was really what the band was all about. Bob would sometimes still play with them when the opportunity presented itself, but it was time to simplify his life.

Bob had pursued several business ventures in the early 1960s, such as the Bob Wills Ranch House in Dallas, which was intended to become a sort of home base. During the week, one-time Playboy Johnny Gimble and The Ranch House Boys would play there, and then Bob and whoever was playing with him at the time would handle the weekend dances. Poor management in his absence made for another failed effort, so Wills sold the joint to another Dallas club owner who would soon gain noto-

Bob made decent money on the road, and his demand in other towns kept him out there. He had bills to pay and a family to support. "He was so into music," says Rosetta. "I don't know if he could have done anything else anyway. He never really retired."⁴² Besides, playing for the people was what he did the best. He and singer Tag Lambert began touring together in a car. This was the simpler way to do it. By these years, Bob Wills had long been a musician of such stature that simply his own name was enough to create a draw. Hiring musicians was not a problem. He had done it so much for so many years as the Playboy lineup had changed, as some had moved on to other projects. Even well known members such as Leon McAuliffe, for instance, had long been out the band. Leon had his own group, Leon McAuliffe And His Western Swing Band, whose most noteworthy song was named for Bob's best-known dance hall interjection, "Take It Away, Leon!"

Throughout most of the 1960s, Bob just lined up the gigs, and local players would be rounded up before his arrival (often under the billing, "Bob Wills And His Boys"). The basics of country music and Western Swing were somewhat universal (just as they are for rock and roll; Chuck Berry has toured this way for decades). All they needed to know was how to play; all he needed was his smile and his fiddle. He would sometimes hook up along the road with friends like Hoyle Nix and singer Tag Lambert, singing and playing with his band.

At the same time, the Playboys name had continued on, with Bob's blessing, in fact. Leon Rausch, who had already made a name for himself as a vocalist with the Playboys and with Johnnie Lee Wills's band, became the front man of Leon Rausch And The Texas Playboys Band as a way of keeping the Playboys spirit alive and on the road whether Bob was part of the show or not. But frequently in 1965 and 1966, he did participate in Rausch gigs with the unusual billing of "Leon Rausch and The Texas Playboys with Bob Wills."⁴³ Egos were clearly not an issue, whatever the incarnation. It was the night at the dance hall that mattered.

Country music's enduring star, Mel Tillis, recalled his im-

Courtesy of Rush Evans



promptu recording session with his musical hero, which also led to one of those dance hall gigs in Bob's later years. Tillis was a young recording artist on Kapp Records at the same time that Wills was a living legend recording for the Nashville-based label. Tillis was at the recording studio to talk with the label's Paul Cohen about his next album, when he learned who was standing in the next room. "I said, 'Who you cutting?' and he said, 'Bob Wills.' I said, 'Who?' Oh, my God!" He said, 'Would you like to meet him?' and I said, 'Yes I would!' I went out in the studio and there was Bob. He had his cigar and his hat on and I met him and he was very nice. Paul Cohen said, 'Mel, would you like to cut a song with Bob?' And I said, 'Would I?! Which one?' Bob said, 'Any of 'em.' I picked out one song. I can't remember which one I did first but it came off really good. And then I had written a song called 'Looking Over My Shoulder,' and we cut that. Harlan Howard had a song in there called 'I Wish I Felt This Way At Home.' They put that one out as a

it up, he had his cigar in his mouth, he had his fiddle in his hand, and a cowboy hat on, and all those drunks at the bar and at a table, there was just a complete hush," remembered White of that night in 1966. "It was just the biggest thrill of my life to walk Bob Wills up on the Broken Spoke bandstand. I can still visualize him right here."⁴⁶

That night, it was Bob and The Playboys. White would book him several more times in the next few years, some with just Bob and Leon Rausch as his singer, then later Bob and Tag Lambert. As for that first time, White "got him for 400 dollars, band and all," an unbelievable amount for a guy with such musical influence. "If it wasn't for people like him and Hank Williams, George Jones, Jimmie Rodgers," White added, "these people today are kind of ridin' the gravy train when they get one song out."⁴⁷

During those years, Bob had continued a recording career, releasing numerous albums with session musicians and several that reunited him with Tommy Duncan, one album title refer-

Wills, ever the gentleman, removed his trademark white cowboy hat and said, "I don't usually take my hat off to nobody, but I sure do to you folks."

single. I think I wound up with about five songs in there."⁴⁴

Shortly after the record's release, Tillis was afforded the heady honor of performing on stage at a Bob Wills show, with Bob Wills himself—or so he thought. "Later on, they put Bob and me down at Dancetown USA in Houston, Texas. At that time he traveled with Tag Lambert and that was all; they'd hire the house band [at the dance halls]. They booked me to come down there and be on the show with them. Bob did three sets, and at midnight, he got off that stage and out in the audience and got in his car and left! And I had never been on stage. I sat there and waited and waited and waited. I almost got drunk waiting on my turn. Finally, about fifteen minutes before they closed down, they introduced me. I got up and I did the song, and I turned around to Tag and I said, 'Drop it half a key.' He said, 'We'll do it in what you recorded it in.' So I did it in that key. And then he left, and they ain't said one damn word to me! And my feelings [were hurt]! Clyde Brewer was there, a fiddle player, and Bob White was on stage with us.

"A few years after that, I asked Clyde about that. He said, 'You know, that made me mad, too.' And I said, 'What happened?' And he said, 'It made me so damn mad, I asked Bob about it the next time I seen him.' He said that Bob said that he could see the boy didn't need any help when he got up there. So I took it as a compliment!"⁴⁵

James White clearly recalled the first time he was able to bring the legendary fiddler and band to his humble Broken Spoke bar and dance hall in Austin. After telling the joint's regulars that the one and only Bob Wills was coming to play, they simply did not believe him, or at least they were certain that he would not show up. "About that time, the door opened. Bob Wills opened

ring to them as "Mr. Words and Mr. Music."

The decades of original music loved by millions also finally received validation from the music city with which he had shared ambivalent feelings. In 1968, friends coerced Wills to attend Nashville's Country Music Association awards ceremony in the hope that he would be voted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. Bob had never seen himself as a "country" artist and believed that the Nashville community of musicians felt the same. He simply wasn't a member of their club. Wills was surprised and deeply moved at the ceremony when he learned of his induction. Accepting the honor onstage that night, Wills, ever the gentleman, removed his trademark white cowboy hat and said, "I don't usually take my hat off to nobody, but I sure do to you folks."⁴⁸

By the early 1970s, Bob Wills's poor health had caught up with him. Several strokes and heart attacks had left him paralyzed, confined to a wheelchair. In 1973, some of the Playboys got together, with the help of country music star and Wills fan Merle Haggard, to try to put together one last album while Bob still had the strength to participate. It was eventually released as *Bob Wills And His Texas Playboys For The Last Time*.⁴⁹

Light Crust Doughboy Smokey Montgomery was at the sessions. "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."⁵⁰

In what he referred to as a "cosmic juxtaposition," Ray Benson and his fellow Asleep At The Wheel-ers also had the privilege of meeting their musical mentor at those sessions. "He had a stroke about four or five hours after we met. He was really sick, really just dying. We got to watch the band [record] 'Big Balls In

Bob Wills tribute.

Asleep At The Wheel has been the most visible keeper of the Bob Wills musical flame, but as Ray Benson said, Western Swing has remained alive and well in the dance halls thanks to hundreds of artists and bands throughout the country, most notably, Jody Nix (son of Hoyle), The Hot Club Of Cowtown (an Austin, Texas-based swing trio), and regional acts working

Benson and his band mates have kept Bob's spirit alive in their music, operating under the slogan: "Western Swing ain't dead, it's just Asleep At The Wheel."

Cowtown,' 'Twin Guitar Boogie,' 'When You Leave Amarillo.'"⁵¹ Since witnessing that historic session, Benson and his band mates have kept Bob's spirit alive in their music, operating under the slogan: "Western Swing ain't dead, it's just Asleep At The Wheel." And Ray's proud of that. "It's an honor to be the mantle-bearer of this music, along with George Strait [who's fond of covering Wills tunes], and many other very dedicated, not-so-famous people."⁵²

Bob Wills died on May 13, 1975 at the age of 70. He had been in a coma since that recording session. The headstone of his grave bears the epitaph, "Deep Within My Heart Lies A Melody." The melody remained in the hearts of millions, just as it had for all the former Playboys. They had vowed after that last stroke not to play anywhere as the Texas Playboys as long as Bob was alive. Some of them had continued making music, others had gotten day jobs. Several years after Bob's death, however, a number of them gathered to make music together again.

Austin City Limits, the public television live music program, helped to reunite the core members of the band. Although the TV show could not pay much to the musicians who had been out of the business for a while. James White and friends, including Austin fiddler Alvin Crow, threw a fundraiser at the Broken Spoke the day after the "Austin City Limits" taping, raising enough money to cover hotel and other expenses for the boys. From then on, Leon McAuliffe, Al Stricklin, Johnny Gimble and other reunited Playboys began a new career, keeping Bob's original vision going.⁵³

When Al Stricklin and Leon McAuliffe passed away in the 1980s, that core group wound down its successful revival years. But other former Playboys, of which there are many, still play together whenever they can at tributes, festivals, and the annual Bob Wills Day in Turkey, Texas. It would have been fine with Bob. He had always said that anybody who had ever played with him and had gotten paid was a Texas Playboy.⁵⁴

And they have all worn that title with honor, as Rosetta confirmed. "When I see these former Texas Playboys get together, they play, of course, without my father, [but] it's fun, it's always up."⁵⁵

The spirit of Western Swing has been kept alive in other ways, too. Asleep At The Wheel's second Bob Wills tribute album, *Ride With Bob*, was released in 1999, winning critical acclaim and more Grammys for the band whose very existence was a

throughout the Southwestern U.S. and beyond.

A great many prominent country music artists, including Merle Haggard and George Strait, still feel the influence of the man who had been their musical hero. In the case of Mel Tillis, "he still is." Tillis and his Statesiders even recorded a tribute album to the music of Bob Wills, only available through his website and concerts. In true spirit of Playboys Swing, he made the record quickly without taking advantage of modern recording and production technology. There was simply no need. There were no overdubs and fancy recording systems in the dance halls during the decades of Bob Wills shows. Besides, Bob had made his records live with the band in the studio, why shouldn't he? "I cut an album called *Big Balls In Cowtown* about fifteen years ago, and I'm still selling it. You know we went in and we turned the machine and we did the whole album without even stopping. And I said, 'Boys, any mistakes on here and I'm gonna dock your pay!'"⁵⁶ Haggard's Wills tribute had followed the same philosophy: *A Tribute To The Best Damn Fiddle Player: My Salute To Bob Wills* was recorded by Haggard and his Strangers in two quick days in 1970.

Rosetta Wills has continually represented her father's work, accepting awards on his behalf from both the Texas and Oklahoma Music Halls of Fame (both states claiming him as their own, and both being right), and many other musical organizations.⁵⁷

The greatest exposure of Bob Wills music to a new audience came when Wills was inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame in March of 1999. The Western Swing music that had been revolutionized by Bob and the hundreds of musicians he'd taken along for the ride over four decades was now officially recognized as a significant early influence on rock and roll music. Rosetta and Cindy Wills accepted the award on their father's behalf. Addressing the community of rock music executives, many of rock and roll's greatest artists, and millions of television viewers, Rosetta spoke of her father, beginning with a quote that he had told a reporter in 1956:

"Rock and roll will be around forever. What I mean is that people don't change much. We didn't call it rock and roll when we introduced it as our style in 1938, and we don't call it rock and roll the way we play it now. But it's just basic rhythm and has gone by a lot of different names in my time. It's the same,

whether you follow just a drumbeat like in Africa or surround it with a lot of instruments. The rhythm is what's important.'

"My father's tremendous energy, spontaneity, and innovativeness changed the face of American music. He led the way to rock and roll by combining black blues and white fiddle music, amplifying his sound with electric instrumentation, and adding drums to a string band."⁵⁸

In 2001, Rosetta moved to her father's original hometown of Turkey, Texas, where his music plays continuously at the Bob Wills monument, and comes alive each April at the annual Bob Wills Day celebration. In 2002, 16,000 fans converged on the little town with a population of 494.⁵⁹

Waylon was right. The sound created by Wills and Company left a huge influence on the work of Willie Nelson, and many others. In his autobiography, Nelson remembers the thrill of seeing Wills perform. Fifteen-year-old Nelson and his brother-in-law had booked Wills to play in their hometown: "Watching him move around, I thought: this guy ain't real. He had a presence about him. He had an aura so strong it just stunned people. I doubt very seriously if Bob was aware how much that had to do with his popularity. . . You had to see him in person to understand his magnetic pull."⁶⁰

Willie Nelson also commented about the thrill of getting to know his musical idol. "He was a great showman and a great bandleader. He was one of the guys that I looked up to. I was probably the youngest promoter that ever booked him. I just felt like I could promote. We had a beer joint and we had Bob Wills. Well anybody ought to be able to fill it up with that, and we did. A good night. It was after Tommy Duncan had already left the band and Joe Andrews was singing. It was one of those nights you never forget. Later on I booked him again in California, and worked several shows with him, and I got to know him pretty good. He had already gotten sick before I knew him that well. He was trying to retire, and just kept coming back."⁶¹

That is a feeling of Bob's with which Nelson can identify all too well, as his own overwhelming urge to take his music to the people keeps him performing a few hundred shows a year as he approaches 70. (When asked about his own retirement, his stock answer is, "All I do is golf and play music, which one do you want me to quit?")

Music historian and syndicated radio show host "Dr. Demento" understood that magnetism. "I got to see him perform once, in the later part of his career," remembered the good doctor, who saw Bob and the boys at the Palomino Club in Los Angeles: "He didn't really do too much. He let other people do most of the singing and playing, he fiddled maybe twice, and went 'Ah-hahhh!' a lot. But mostly what he did during the performance was to shake hands with everybody who came up to the stage, and he acted like he'd known all of them for fifty years."⁶²

"He taught me that music was more important than money." Don Walser (dubbed by *Playboy Magazine* as the "Pavarotti of the Plains") saw that Wills's greatest strength was in the freedom he gave his musicians. "Some [musicians] have a set list. They play the same set list from the first note to the last note;

it's all the same everywhere they go. Bob didn't do that. The only thing that he wanted them to do is, when he pointed that fiddle bow at 'em, he wanted 'em to play. He didn't tell 'em what to play. He was a great bandleader."⁶³

Bob's democratic leadership has mostly become a thing of the past. "Nowadays, they play riffs and chords, they don't play music anymore," said Walser. "The musicians hold the singer up while he's singin', but they don't [get to] contribute to it. They want to play. It's like eatin' watermelon, everybody wants a slice."⁶⁴

That confidence in his fellow musicians can be heard in the grooves of his records. "A lot of those records he didn't play on," Gimble noted, pointing out that, for many of Bob's recordings, "he didn't even pick up a fiddle. He'd sit there and direct it and give his hollers, you know. His spirit was there. He was a leader."

For Asleep At The Wheel's Ray Benson, "influence" is simply an inadequate word when describing Bob Wills's role in his musical life. "Wills, for Asleep At The Wheel, was our prototype, that's who we wanted to be. He was not the father of Western Swing, but he was the Elvis Presley of Western Swing. He was the most popular, charismatic ambassador that Western Swing could ever have. What he meant to rock and roll is equally important. He put drums and electric guitars into country music. He brought a style and a stage presence that was so in-your-face. It was what the rock and roll attitude was all about. Also, he's given Texas and Oklahoma such a musical identity."⁶⁵

"When my dad was there, he was the star. He was what you came to see," Rosetta Wills said. "There's something about people like that, the way they look at you, they're so intense, there's just something about the presence."⁶⁶

That presence was not part of a calculated mission. It was just the personality of a fellow who loved music, one who experimented with sounds to create something fun; a guy who played the fiddle with feeling and could get the crowd with him. A crowded room full of people having a good time; that was all it was ever about, really. Bob's simple message was found in the words of a song.

[Kind thanks to those I interviewed: Ray Benson, Mel Tillis, Willie Nelson, Dr. Demento, Johnny Gimble, Lex Herrington, Smokey Montgomery, Don Walser, James White, and Rosetta Wills.]



Photo courtesy of Rush Evans

BOB WILLS DAY, 1981

In 1981, there were not many college kids listening to Western Swing music. Most of my friends were into Adam And The Ants, Blondie, and Christopher Cross, the local chart-topping success story who had been playing frat parties the year before, right there at the University of Texas.

My personal tastes leaned to what was already classic rock: The Beatles, The Who, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen. But I had also been into what was then called Redneck Rock, the Texas country sound that Willie Nelson had personified. Through him, I had even gotten into tunes older than Beatles music: the swinging sound of Bob Wills, whom my dad had seen at a Neodesha, Kansas rodeo in the 1940s. I had also had the good fortune of seeing The Original Texas Playboys at a taping of *Austin City Limits*, the public television series. Their performance that night in 1978 had sealed the deal for me.

When I met Lex Herrington at my college dorm, I was thrilled to learn that he too was a fan of this special brand of Texas music. But he was more than just a fan; he was from the land of Bob Wills. It was a place where everyone of all ages was not only aware of that swinging sound, but they thought it was as natural a part of the culture as the West Texas plains. In Turkey, Texas, Bob Wills music was literally played out in the open air, around the clock at the Wills monument. No one there had ever heard of Adam and The Ants.

Lex was actually from Quitaque (pronounced “KIT-uh-kway”), the town just ten miles from Turkey, both far off the beaten path of any major highway, a combined population of about a thousand people. Turkey had been home to Wills in his younger days, though The Road had been his true home for half a century. But it was by mutual agreement that Turkey would forever be considered Bob’s original home (though he was born in Kosse, Texas). It was, after all, Turkey where he had learned to fiddle, where he had played his earliest gigs, where he had cut hair at Ham’s Barber Shop, where he had been jailed for rowdiness in 1929.⁶⁷ All was forgiven from both sides by the time his music had reached its legendary status.

Lex had never missed a Bob Wills Day, and he certainly did not plan to miss the festival’s tenth anniversary. At the first celebration in 1972, sixteen-year-old Kim Ham, Lex’s sister, was selected as the first Bob Wills Day Queen. It was only later that the judges realized that she was the granddaughter of the barber who had employed Bob Wills in his last day job. On that first Bob Wills Day, a wheelchair-bound Wills shared the stage in the only way he could at the time. It would also be his only time to attend the celebration in his honor. A stroke had deprived him the use of his right hand, so he did his best to participate by fingering the notes of his fiddle on “Faded Love” while Playboy Sleepy Johnson handled the bow.⁶⁸ The front page of the local paper showed a photo of Wills and some of the Playboys on stage. A nine-year-old Cub Scout named Lex was seen leaning on the stage in that photo. Nine years later, he still had the same enthu-

siasm for the music of Wills and his Playboys, so driving 400 miles for just a weekend college road trip was not a problem.

Four of us left straight from class in Austin, driving ten hours, directly to the monument of Turkey’s favorite son: a marble tower with etchings of the man and his story, and the statue of a fiddle sitting on top, some thirty feet in the air. “San Antonio Rose,” “Faded Love,” and other Wills tunes rang through the air continually from a speaker at the site. Our musical pilgrimage was already in full Western Swing.

That night, we went to the first of two nights of live dance music at the high school gym. Several thousand folks, some who had traveled further than we had, slid across the floor to the still fresh sounds of many former Texas Playboys with their leader at the time, Tag Lambert. Even more former Playboys gathered the next afternoon at the high school’s football field, including Johnnie Lee Wills, to play and reminisce in front of a sea of cowboy hats (just a few of us big city types lacking the requisite headgear).

We wandered around the grounds that afternoon, checking out the Bob Wills Center, which housed the local library, the Justice of the Peace, and the three-room Bob Wills Museum. Photos, movie posters, cigar holders, spurs, boots, and, of course, fiddles were on prominent display. My friends and I were interviewed for Amarillo radio station KGNC’s coverage of this Panhandle Lollapalooza (we had achieved a sort of Grateful Dead-head-styled loyalist status for our youth and willingness to travel such a long distance in the name of western swing music).

Lex had a mission that afternoon. He wanted to buy the new album by Hoyle Nix: Playboy alum, Saturday night’s headliner, and established Swing Master (Hoyle’s son Jody is still swinging today on the road with his band). Upon spotting the bus of Hoyle Nix And The West Texas Cowboys, Lex climbed onto the front tire and pounded on the window by the driver’s seat. When a country gentleman in a sharp straw cowboy hat stuck his head out, Lex enthusiastically declared, “Hoyle, I need to buy your new record!”⁶⁹ A ten dollar bill, an autograph, and a few seconds later, Lex was the proud and happy owner of the latest in swingin’ western music. I had been to quite a few rock concerts by that time, and nothing like that had happened at a Van Halen show.

Before Hoyle’s show Saturday night, we shared a calf fries supper with some rugged bikers (even Harley riders love the Playboys). It was an evening I will not soon forget, as I witnessed the crossroads where seemingly clashing cultures meet, and I ate a part of the cow that I never ever dreamed I would (yes, calf fries are from male cows only, and no, they don’t taste that good). Another large time was had by all at Saturday’s dance. By then the spirit of What Had Made Bob Holler⁷⁰ was forever deep within our hearts.

On Sunday afternoon, we piled back in the truck to boogie back to Austin, eight beats to the mile.⁷¹ ■

NOTES

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- 7 Townsend, "Homecoming," 3-5.
- 8 Townsend, "Homecoming," 3, 4.
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- 10 Townsend, *San Antonio Rose*, 73.
- 11 Benson, Ray, interview by author, tape recording, Austin, Texas, June 1998.
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- 30 Collins, 66-68.
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- 66 Rosetta Wills, interview, June 4, 1998.
- 67 Lex Herrington, interview by author, June 1998.
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 Reference to Cindy Walker's song, "What Makes Bob Holler," written for "For The Last Time" recording sessions.
- 71 "Eight beats" line stolen from Ray Benson song, "Boogie Back To Texas."