

"Sandstorm"

Reflections on the Roots of West Texas Music

Nolan Porterfield

Elvis and Buddy in Lubbock, Texas, courtesy of David Dennard and Dragon Street Records



Several years ago I was in Cleveland, Ohio, for a two-day tribute to Jimmie Rodgers, entitled "Waiting for a Train: Jimmie Rodgers' America," sponsored by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Country Music Hall of Fame, and Case Western Reserve University. The event involved concerts by some of our best contemporary "roots" musicians and scholarly papers by leading academics and historians of country music. When I began writing a biography of Jimmie Rodgers in the early 1970s, I would never have imagined in my wildest dreams that he would someday be taken seriously and honored by big-city intellectuals way up north. It was sort of like Gourmet magazine devoting a whole issue to chicken fried steak.

Many of the participants were picked up by a van at the airport, and as we were checking in at the hotel, I was standing next to Guy Clark, who was there to perform at one of the concerts. He said to me, "In the van coming in from the airport, I heard you say you grew up in West Texas. Whereabouts?" He smiled, but there was just that little edge in his voice that said, "I bet where I grew up was a lot meaner, and dustier, and littler than where you grew up."

Long ago I gave up on saying, "Draw, Texas," when people ask where I'm from. So my standard reply is usually "Lubbock," and that's what I told Guy Clark. He gave me a smug smile and said, "Monahans." I said, "Okay, you win." But I thought about it a minute and I realized — hey, I can do better than that, and not even stoop so low as Draw. So I said, "O'Donnell." He said, "You win."

The point of this story, beyond allowing me to drop Guy Clark's name, is that Texans, regardless of what they may say, are partial to the places where they grew up. We may complain and carry on about it, but a strong sense of place is imbedded in all of us, and more often than not, the music of our particular place is a central part of what roots us to it. I haven't lived in West Texas in over thirty years, but I've never felt at home anywhere else, and when I think of West Texas, I think of Bob Wills and Ernest Tubb and Hoyle Nix and Tommy Hancock and the nameless *little* local bands on small 250-watt radio stations all over the plains; I think of Western swing dance tunes and honky-tonk heartbreakers, the conjunto music of the fieldhands who came to pick cotton in the fall, Friday nights when the neighbors gathered to make ice cream and play guitars and fiddles and mandolins. (No banjos, thank you very much.)

Music in West Texas has a rich history and a diverse background, but if we are talking about the music known and played

styles and forms from beyond the region.

Carr and Munde confirm what I have said about this difficulty of categorizing and defining not only West Texas music, but that of the state as a whole: "In Texas . . . the lines between musical styles have been blurred by musicians who combine many influences to create new and often exciting musical forms. . . The music of Buddy Holly and other 1950s rock and roll musicians is [just one] example of the way several musics can be molded into a new form."¹

In view of this, it's interesting and perhaps informative to approach West Texas music from the point of view of the listener. I propose to offer some sense of the general musical environment in West Texas as I knew it, growing up there some fifty years ago. Pardon my lapses into personal experience rather than scholarly analysis or academic discourse. Sometimes anecdotal evidence is the best we have.

First, about that word "roots" in the term "West Texas Music

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40 and listened to by the great majority of the population, then its roots are mostly in string bands of one kind or another — essentially, the many kinds of music historically called "hillbilly" which now fit under the broad umbrella of country music, with side excursions into rock-and-roll, rockabilly, and plain old rock (still essentially string bands). Nevertheless, the subject of "West Texas Music Roots" is vast and deep, and even a condensed survey of it is beyond the scope of this article. Fortunately we have an extensive account in a fine book by Joe Carr and Alan Munde called *Prairie Nights to Neon Lights*, published by the Texas Tech University Press.

Despite this rich musical heritage, it's difficult, if not impossible, to identify such a thing as indigenous West Texas music — that is, a particular style or repertoire that originated there and distinguishes itself as unique to that area. By and large, there's no such critter, and the reason is pretty simple when you think about it. Places where distinctive musical styles developed — like western Kentucky thump-picking, Louisiana and East Texas zydeco, Southeastern string bands, Tennessee fiddling — these are places that were settled in the nineteenth century or earlier, when making music at home was the primary form of entertainment for most people. But West Texas was only sparsely settled until around the time of World War I. My grandfather came to Lynn County in 1924 and was considered to be one of the pioneers. By that time the phonograph had become a major source of down-home entertainment, and very soon came radio and talking pictures, all of them being outside influences far stronger than what might have been developing there on its own. Thus West Texas music, like much of our popular culture, is largely an amalgamation, a grand transformation, if you will, of

Roots." Since I'll mention some people who aren't West Texans, you'll see that I define that term "musical heritage" in the broadest sense, not as specialized musicology or regional cultural history, but rather as the general musical atmosphere combined from every source, both native and national, that prevailed in West Texas in the 1950s. Buddy Holly, for instance, is known to have admired Bill Monroe, whose music is about as far from native Texas styles as it could get. To go back to the beginnings for a moment, Eck Robertson, the first West Texan to make commercial records, hardly had what could be called a "native" style — he was thirteen when his family moved to Texas and had made his first fiddle back in Arkansas at the age of eight. On the modern end, a lot of the influence that sold guitars — and ducktail haircuts — on the High Plains in the 1950s and 1960s came from a swivel-hipped kid from Mississippi. The business of tracing influences is often interesting and sometimes valuable, but it can also create false dilemmas and lead down some tangled and profitless paths.

When we look back on the country music of that era, three names immediately stand out, especially for us Texans: Hank Williams, Lefty Frizzell, and Bob Wills. Two out of the three were West Texans, more or less, and Hank Williams might as well have been.

I have a story about Hank Williams.

New Year's Day 1953, was a cold, blustery Thursday on the Plains. A blue norther was howling down out of the Panhandle, and the sky was thick with gusting sand. Coming in the middle of the week, New Year's was just another slow workday in my dad's crossroads grocery store and gas station, about ten miles from nowhere. In the early hours of that sandstorm morning,

ALWAYS LATE

Porterfield: "Sandstorm": Reflections on the Roots of West Texas Music

(WITH YOUR KISSES)

Words and Music by LEFTY FRIZZELL and BLACKIE CRAWFORD

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W S M

while I slept my zombie adolescent sleep, dreaming of misty English countrysides, Nanabeth Cox, and flashy cars, Hank Williams died in the back seat of his '52 Cadillac, somewhere in the wilds of eastern Tennessee.

I don't remember how I learned of Hank Williams's death, and I now find that strange and rather puzzling. But I was a strange and puzzled kid, square as a bear, and I missed a lot of what was going on. I was equally unaware of another great passing that very week — that of Fletcher Henderson, the musical genius who was largely responsible for the swing revolution that Benny Goodman got most of the credit for. But I had no reason to know about Henderson; after all, he was black and several cultural removes from the West Texas world of a decidedly unhip, muddle-headed white boy. Hank Williams, on the other hand, was one of us, as close to blood as blood gets, but I probably wouldn't remember much about his death if it were not for what happened when I went back to school the next day.

It took a while to figure out what was happening. Country kids in my day tended to be cold-eyed realists, too simple to be sentimental, and we desperately avoided public displays of emotion. But something was going around, quietly, awkwardly, out of a need too great to contain, in the first whispered communications that morning: "Hey. You know Hank Williams died?" Even more unsettling was the invariable response: a solemn nod of the head, a troubled sigh, even now and then a tear or two (but only from girls, of course). All that morning, kids gathered in small

That Doggie in the Window." It's possible that I read about Hank's death in the back pages of that day's edition of the *Lubbock Morning Avalanche*, headlined "Hill-Billy Song King Found Dead in Automobile by Chauffeur," along with late bulletins from the Korean War, warnings that our schools and colleges were filled with communists, and, on a note of social progress, the news that, for the first time in decades, no one had been lynched in the United States during the previous year. Eisenhower was about to take office, Stalin still ruled in Russia, our schools were segregated, Elvis was a wimpy senior at Humes High. The whole world seemed a dark and windy place.

In 1953 nobody paid much attention to country music, at least not publicly. If you had any pretensions at all to culture and sophistication — if you just wanted to be "normal" and have nice people like you — you ignored country music wherever possible. If you couldn't ignore it, you made fun of it. Historians of country music like to think of the 1940s and 1950s as "The Golden Age," but in those days everybody called it "hill-billy music," and practically no one I knew took it seriously.

What we mostly did was take it for granted. Country music was everywhere around us, as common and everyday as the dust in the air we breathed. The all-country radio station had not yet been invented (that would happen a year or so later, right in our very midst, when Dave Stone put KDAV on the air from a cotton field just south of Lubbock), but every 250-watter for miles around programmed three or four hours of pickin' and singin'

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clumps in out-of-the-way corners and vacant classrooms, talking in hushed tones, sharing the news about Hank Williams's death.

I'd never seen my schoolmates behave this way, and until then it had never occurred to me that anyone else paid much attention to Hank Williams, not the way I had. In later times, in other places, and among other people, there would be similar occasions for mourning — fashionably, in the wake of Janis and Jimi Hendrix, Elvis and John Lennon, and, of course, Buddy Holly. But in 1953, for the young, innocent, straight-arrow fans of just one more redneck troubadour (and one whose career was, after all, in serious decline), it was bizarre and rather baffling behavior. To understand even vaguely the impact and meaning of that day, it's necessary to understand something about the character back then of the music we listened to and the circumstances under which we heard it.

As I've said, it seems strange now to realize that I don't remember just how I learned of Hank Williams's death. More than likely, I heard about it from the cheap little Wards Airline radio that played incessantly in my father's store, a static hodgepodge of swing bandstand, western roundup, time-news-temperature, Les Paul's "Lady of Spain," Patty Page singing "How Much Is

daily, an early morning wakeup show beamed at the farmers, a mid-morning jamboree for the housewives, and an all-afternoon "Western Request" that kept the cards and letters coming in. While I pumped gas and stocked shelves in my dad's store, I spent a lot of time listening to Hi Pockets Duncan from KSEL, and later KDAV. When anyone else was around, I made a point of tuning to "The 950 Club" (KSEL, 950 kilocycles, not hertz!) where smooth-voiced Wayne Allen played Bobby Sherwood, Artie Shaw, and Benny Goodman.

There were no bars in Baptist-dry West Texas in those days, but every cafe and gathering place had a jukebox. There was even one in my dad's country grocery, a decrepit old Wurlitzer that held only ten records. For several months one fall, nine of the ten slots held Hank Williams's "Lovesick Blues," because the distributor got tired of changing worn-out records. (The tenth record was Theresa Brewer's "Music, Music, Music," obligatory for every jukebox in those days: "Put another nickel in, in the nickelodeon.")

Because we weren't allowed to dance at school and there were no other places to do it, on Saturday nights several couples would drive out of town to some point where two deserted dirt roads

crossed, park their cars facing the intersection with headlights on, tune all the car radios to the same station, and dance in the center, waltzing and two-stepping and hugdancing in the dusty light to string-band strains from "The Big D Jamboree" or "Louisiana Hayride." We claimed to hanker for the uptown rhythms of city orchestras, but ballroom dancing, even if we had known how, seemed out of place.

These rustic orgies left no permanent marks. Afterward we went right back to Patti Page and Frankie Laine and Joni James and Eddie Fisher — in 1953 rock & roll was yet unknown, still little more than a gleam in Chuck Berry's eye. We spoke intently of "classical music," our notions of classical tending in the direction of Mantovani or something by Sigmund Romberg, "Stouthearted Men," perhaps. I yearned for what I thought of as normalcy, "good taste," "respectability." I wanted nothing so much as to root-hog out of my country roots, get as far as I

we think of the fifties as being dominated by Hank and Lefty. Eddy Arnold, still the "Tennessee Plowboy," was outselling both of them in those days. Hank Snow had rocketed to the top with "I'm Moving On" (released about the same time as Lefty's first records), and no one could touch Ernest Tubbs when it came to touring and pulling in the crowds. I spent a lot of jukebox nickels on Kitty Wells, Red Foley, Goldie Hill, Webb Pierce, and Jim Reeves, among others.

And Bob Wills, of course. If I had to name the five greatest country songs, two of them would be "Faded Love" and "San Antonio Rose." They really don't write 'em like that anymore.

I could go on forever talking about Bob Wills's impact on West Texas music, but I'll limit it to one quick story out of my own experience, and it actually doesn't have much to do with Bob Wills.

During my freshman year at Texas Tech, I sometimes worked 50 hours a week and carried a full load of classes. Needless to

By eleven o'clock or so, the joint was, as they say, jumping, and we were doing our best to keep time with Bob Wills, both on the dance floor and on the bandstand, where he could barely stand up.

could from all the "howdys" and "you-alls," and sandstorms and hard-scrabble hickness that seemed to be everywhere I turned. I never quite made it and lived to be grateful I hadn't. But I went on suffering from the symptoms of hypertoxic cultural dysfunction for some time.

After Nanabeth Cox broke my heart our freshman year of high school, my pal Bobby Kitchen and I spent a lot of time hanging out at Jackson's Drive-in, consoling ourselves with hamburger steaks and hillbilly music from the jukebox. Bobby, who looked like James Dean and had a mildly tough reputation, broke the hearts of more girls than I ever said hello to, but he always seemed to be between romances and as much in need of a cheatin' song as I was. Hank's "Cold, Cold Heart" and Lefty Frizzell's "Look What Thoughts Will Do" seemed to fill the bill: equal parts of she-done-me-wrong, Lord-how-it-hurts, and pull-up-your-socks.

As a fan of Lefty Frizzell, I take a back seat to no one. Even now, after the passing of so many years since Nanabeth dumped me for the O'Donnell Eagles' star half-back, I still get weak and moony and somehow revived when I hear "I Love You a Thousand Ways" or "If You've Got the Money, I've Got the Time." We lived narrow, cut-off lives in those days; it was years before I learned that Lefty Frizzell was working just down the road, in Big Spring, when he made those records. I don't know where I thought he was — off in some mythical place that didn't really exist, like New York or Nashville, I suppose, but I'd have crawled all the way to Big Spring if I'd known he was there.

But Hank Williams and Lefty Frizzell weren't the only ones. Country music was rich and diverse back then, just before the rock & roll deluge. It's only with the benefit of hindsight that

say, that didn't leave much time for a social life. A lot of the other guys on my floor at West Hall were in the same shape; as the school year drew to a close in the spring of 1955, we were all quivering masses of pent-up frustration. Four or five of us scraped together the wherewithal to buy a fifth of cheap whiskey, Heaven Hill, as I recall, sold to us by our wing supervisor, a senior who put himself through Tech selling brewed and distilled spirits to his fellow students but who would not, of course, allow any of us to consume them in the privacy of our own dorm rooms.

Our communal purchase of a flask of Heaven Hill coincided with the appearance of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys at the old Cotton Club on the Slaton Highway. Someone rustled up a car, and we betook ourselves and our flagon of rare nectar off to hear Bob Wills. We went stag, of course; no time to arrange dates, even if we'd known any girls to ask.

By eleven o'clock or so, the joint was, as they say, jumping, and we were doing our best to keep time with Bob Wills, both on the dance floor and on the bandstand, where he could barely stand up. In fact, he finally fell off and had to be carted away, while the Playboys carried on as though nothing had happened. We weren't in much better shape. I didn't dance much, but my buddies had discovered that there were plenty of willing young ladies, and at some point they all went off to the dance floor and left me to guard our bottle of Heaven Hill. In a minute or two, I realized that if I didn't get up and walk around, I'd pass out, so I carefully clutched the bottle in both hands, stood up, and wobbled off, holding our Heaven Hill as if it were the crown jewels.

I have neglected to mention that the guy working the door that night was none other than Hi Pockets Duncan, the well-known country DJ, whom I had been listening to for years and

who was, in my eyes, a very famous person. I should also explain that in those days one of my greatest aspirations was to be a DJ on the radio, just like Hi Pockets, entirely oblivious to the fact that when I opened my mouth what came out sounded a lot like Gomer Pyle, or worse. At any rate, emboldened by quantities of Heaven Hill and burning with youthful ambition, I found the courage to walk up to Hi Pockets, still clutching the precious flask in both hands, and started babbling: how I was a big fan of his and how I wanted to be a DJ and how could I get a job and would he help me, etcetera, etcetera. To his credit, Hi Pockets listened to it all very patiently, on and on till I finally began to run down. Then he reached out and took the bottle of Heaven Hill and put it in his coat pocket. He said, "Son, do you know how much money I make?" Well, of course I didn't, but I knew it must be a lot, because he was on the radio and famous and all that. He said, "Sixty dollars a week," turned on his heel, and walked off with what was left of our bottle of Heaven Hill.

I don't know if he was telling the truth about the sixty dollars a week, but a short while later, when I got a lousy job with a small daily newspaper out in New Mexico at seventy-five dollars a week, I consoled myself with the thought that at least I was making more than Hi Pockets Duncan. You could starve without trying very hard even on seventy-five dollars a week, back in 1955.

I have remarked on Carr and Munde's fine book, *Prairie Nights to Neon Lights*. It's a comprehensive account, but there are a few omissions. I wish, for instance, that there was some mention of The Caprock Playboys, whose blazing, brilliant, and notorious career lasted about three months in the summer and fall of 1952. During all that time we played maybe two stage shows and about three dances, as I recall, but we were on the radio (unpaid, of course) every Saturday afternoon, from KPET, Lamesa (also known as "A Friendly Voice from a Friendly Town"). Anyway, we thought it was the big time; we came on right after Hoyle Nix and the West Texas Playboys and right before the Fluvanna Fencejumpers, another grievous omission from Carr and Munde's book. Fluvanna is about the only place more obscure than Draw. The Fluvanna Fencejumpers consisted of a very pretty teenage blonde, I don't remember her name, who played great honky-



Courtesy of Texas Music Museum, Austin

tonk piano, accompanied by her little brother on the fiddle and his friend, more or less pretending to play guitar. The piano player often wore tight jeans and bounced around a lot when she played. On those tight-jeans days we stayed after our show and lined up at the studio window to watch the action on the piano stool.

I also wish there was something in *Prairie Nights to Neon Lights* about Ronald Mansfield, about whom I know nothing except he had a local hit in the early sixties with a great song called "Tell Me Pretty Words." I once used it to demonstrate for a Yankee friend of mine the difference between "bluegrass" and the kind of music I

grew up on in West Texas, which I proposed to call "sandstorm" instead of "bluegrass." "Tell Me Pretty Words" was the quintessential "sandstorm" record. If there is such a thing as native West Texas music, "sandstorm" is it.

Perhaps that bears a slight adjustment. When I remarked earlier that there is hardly any such thing as indigenous West Texas music, I was speaking from an historical viewpoint, looking back to the beginnings, which for West Texas came along too late for the kind of home-grown, folk-based music that developed in older cultures. Since the 1950s, however, there seems to have been an emergence of styles and attitudes that are distinctively West Texan, a kind of latter-day "indigenous music" that will serve as a base and beginning point for future generations. This includes, for example, musicians once identified with the short-lived Flatlanders: Butch Hancock, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Joe Ely, and others. Moreover, there's the very unique and original work of Andy Wilkinson, which more than any other music that I can think of, draws on the culture, history, and heritage of West Texas, and which may very well be laying down the foundation for what in the future will be identified as the truly native music of that region. ■

(This article contains revised portions of a paper that was read on September 4, 1999 for the program entitled "Roots: A Symposium on West Texas Music," held at Texas Tech University)

NOTES

1. Joe Carr and Alan Munde, *Prairie Nights to Neon Lights, The Story of Country Music in West Texas*, Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1995, 5-6.