

The Hillbilly Boys

Hillbilly and western swing band founded in 1935 in Fort Worth, Texas, by former Texas Governor and United States Senator Wilbert Lee ‘Pappy’ O’Daniel. O’Daniel was a flour salesman turned radio personality and politician who, through his radio broadcasts and statewide tours, led two bands, The Light Crust Doughboys and The Hillbilly Boys, to prominence in Texas.

The Light Crust Doughboys, which counted among its original members western swing legends Bob Wills and Milton Brown, was the better-known of the two bands and still performs today. Although they would never achieve the same level of fame as the Doughboys, the Hillbilly Boys, which featured some of the finest western swing musicians of the era, would play an important role in helping to promote O’Daniel’s political career.

A native of Ohio, O’Daniel moved to Texas in 1925 and became sales manager for Fort Worth-based Burrus Mills, which produced Light Crust Flour. In 1931, he hired fiddler Bob Wills, vocalist Milton Brown, and guitarist Herman Arnsperger as the nucleus of the Light Crust Doughboys, whose main job was to help promote Burrus Mills products over the radio. Although Wills and Brown soon split with O’Daniel over management differences, the Doughboys regular radio broadcasts endorsing Light Crust Flour brought them widespread popularity and a large following throughout the Southwest.

O’Daniel left Burrus Mills in 1935 and founded the Hillbilly Flour Company. He hired former Light Crust Doughboy, Leon Huff, to recruit musicians for a new band, which O’Daniel would call The Hillbilly Boys. O’Daniel, who was often called ‘Pappy,’ soon gave each band member his own nickname. The original group included Leon Huff, ‘The Texas Songbird,’ on vocals and lead guitar, Darrell ‘Klondike’ Kirkpatrick on fiddle, J. Eldon ‘June’ Whalin, also known as ‘Jerry the Love Bird,’ on guitar, Connie ‘Pancho’ Galvin on bass, Clifford ‘Uncle Cliffie’ Wells on tenor banjo, and Ray Lundy on steel guitar.

The Hillbilly Boys, who performed their first show on Fort Worth’s WBAP radio on August 12, 1935, soon were playing on the air seven days a week. In order to reach a larger audience in their efforts to promote Hillbilly Flour, the band also recorded transcriptions, which were played on radio stations in Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, and elsewhere across the state on the Texas Quality Network. For a time in 1935, the band broadcast from XEPN, a powerful ‘border radio’ station located just across the Rio Grande in Mexico.

By 1936, others had joined the band, including Carroll Hubbard, ‘Little Caesar the Fiddle Teaser,’ on fiddle, along with O’Daniel’s two sons, Pat ‘Patty Boy’ on tenor banjo and Mike ‘Mickey Wickey’ on fiddle. Kitty Williamson, ‘The Texas Rose,’ also joined the group on vocals

and second fiddle, making her the first girl singer to be featured prominently in a western swing band.

In 1938, O'Daniel ran for Governor of Texas, campaigning on the radio and in live appearances with The Hillbilly Boys. He and the band traveled throughout the state in a stretched-out Desoto. The car had a flat rack and a rail on top that served as a mobile stage from which Pappy and The Hillbilly Boys could perform and address large crowds. O'Daniel won the election and moved his family, along with the band, to Austin. In Austin, The Hillbilly Boys broadcast live Monday through Saturday from a studio set up in the Driskell Hotel. On Sundays, they played religious music from the Governor's Mansion, and they continued recording and making public appearances throughout the area, all for a salary of \$ 25.00 each per week.

O'Daniel won a second term as Governor in 1940, but he soon began campaigning to fill an open seat in the U.S. Senate. Once again, he took the Hillbilly Boys back on the road, attracting large crowds across the state. O'Daniel's efforts paid off, as he defeated his rival, a young Lyndon Baines Johnson. Once again, O'Daniel relocated the band, this time to Washington, D.C., where they sometimes played and recorded in the Senate Office Building's in-house recording studio. At this time, the group included Curly Perrin, vocals and guitar, Bundy 'Little Ezra' Bratcher, harmony and accordion, Lee Searcy, vocals and guitar, Kitty Williamson, vocals and fiddle, and Mike O'Daniel, on fiddle.

Over the years, band members continued to come and go. This was due in part to O'Daniel's reputation for being difficult and because some members left to form their own bands or to play in others. Some of the musicians who spent time in The Hillbilly Boys during these latter years were Lefty Perkins on steel guitar, Wallace Griffin, also called 'Klondike,' on bass, Kermit 'Happy Horace' Whalen on steel guitar, and Jim Boyd on vocals.

O'Daniel's political career was largely over by 1948. He bought a ranch outside of Fort Worth and worked in insurance and real estate. Although he attempted to re-enter politics during the 1950s, he was unsuccessful. With his political career finished, O'Daniel's relationship with the Hillbilly Boys also ended, and the band dissolved. Bundy 'Little Ezra' Bratcher, who lived to be 87 years old, was the last surviving member of the Hillbilly Boys. When asked why they were so popular, Bratcher stated that it was "because the music made people feel good."

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