

Buddy Ray

Ray, Robert James “Buddy”: Buddy Ray, western swing and jazz violinist, saxophonist, vocalist, songwriter, and actor, was born Robert James Ray in Waco, Texas, on November 30, 1919. A formally trained violinist who was influenced by early jazz violinists, such as Stuff Smith, Eddie South, and Joe Venuti, Ray got his start with his mother’s band, Lucille Ray and Her Moonglow Orchestra in Waco. In 1937, Ray joined the Modern Mountaineers, recorded songs for the first time, and soon began to make a name for himself as a fiddler. In 1939, Ray joined the Texas Wanderers, led by pianist Moon Mullican, and in 1940, he joined the Village Boys, led by Dickie McBride. During his tenure with the Village Boys, Ray wrote the “Tulsa Twist,” a twin fiddle instrumental song in G minor, along with the ballad, “I Don’t Want Anyone But You.” By 1942, Ray had become the band’s leader.

Ray moved to California in 1943, because gasoline rationing during World War II made touring difficult, and the draft had taken a few member of his band. He made his living as an independent musician, touring with such notable performers as Tex Ritter, Merle Travis, T. Texas Tyler and his Oklahoma Melody Boys, and Jimmy Wakely. In his travels with the U.S.O., Ray went to such places as Japan, Hawaii, Guam, and Korea. For a short time, the “King of Western Swing” Bob Wills hired Ray to play in his Texas Playboys, but Ray soon left the group. “Bob Wills was a two-fingered fiddler,” Ray later said in an interview. While in Hollywood, Ray was a cast member in movies such as *Brigadoon*, *A Star is Born*, *Jail House Rock*, and *Giant*, which featured Hollywood icons Gene Kelly, Judy Garland, Elvis Presley, and James Dean respectively. Ray’s favorite musical experience, however, was playing with Nat King Cole and the Leighton Noble Orchestra.

Ray returned to Texas in 1970. He toured with Ray Price and Sammy Smith until eventually settling in Fort Worth. In 1994, he joined his last band, Bruton and Price Swingmasters Revue and played with the group until his retirement in 1998. When asked about his career in the late 1990s, Ray replied, “Heh, if I’d known I was going to live this long...well, I’d have paced myself.” He died in Waskom, Texas, on September 3, 2003.

Andrew Gray