



House of Hits: The Story of Houston's Gold Star/SugarHill Recording Studios

by Andy Bradley and Roger Wood (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010) \$34.95, 352 pp., cloth. ISBN 978-0-292-71919-4

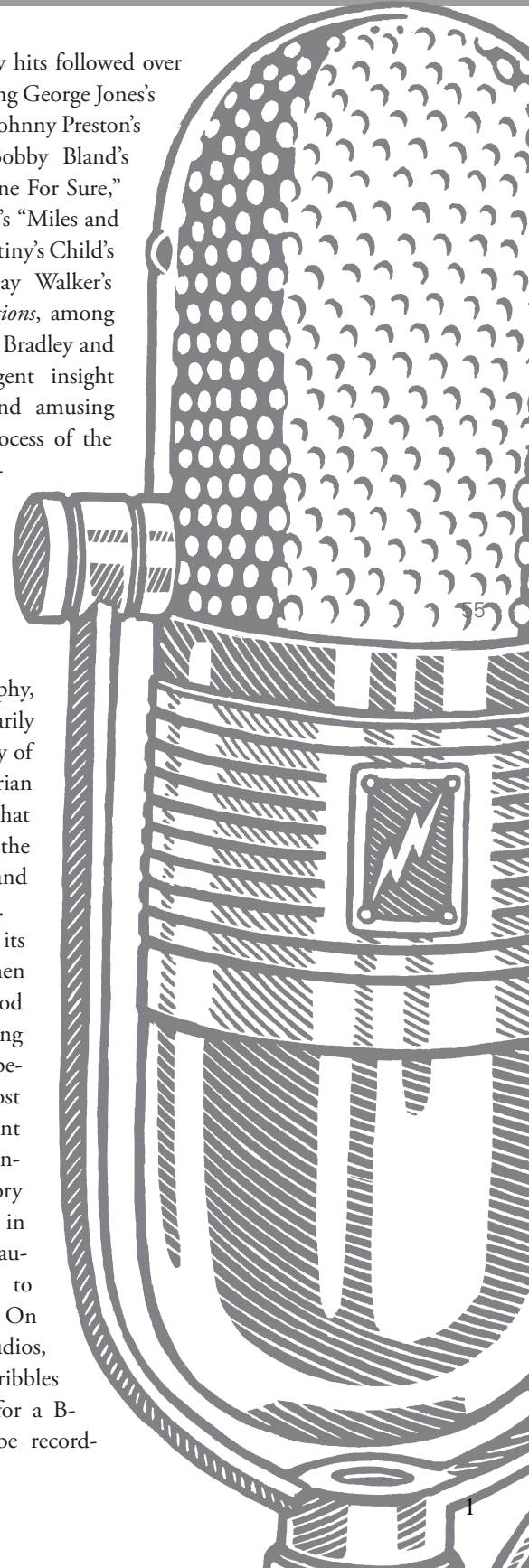
Chroniclers of Houston often invoke its no-zoning policy as a major structural flaw in the morphology of the city. This flaw, as the story commonly goes, exposes the compromised scaffolding of the city: civic narrow-mindedness, economic impertinence, and aesthetic *mélange*. Andy Bradley and Roger Wood, in their ethnographic history of Houston's Gold Star/SugarHill recording studios, take a contrasting, more generous approach to Houston's zoning-free notoriety. For Bradley and Wood, the esteemed Houston studios owe their existence and sustained success to the very spirit of accommodation and possibility symbolized by the city's attitude toward zoning. From their beginnings in a modest home to their longstanding tradition of producing and promoting a wide range of musical genres, the studios mimic Houston's commitment to free-enterprise and cultural diversity, functioning in symbiotic relation to the capacious dreams and fertile imaginations that have long found refuge in un-zoned Houston.

Founded in 1941 by part-time sound technician Bill Quinn in a mixed-use, working-class southeast Houston neighborhood, the Gold Star/SugarHill recording studios have launched numerous musical careers and produced dozens of Top-40 hits. Despite the vital role the studios have played in the last 70 years of American music, they labor under a relatively unheralded history. In *House of Hits*, Bradley, SugarHill's co-owner and chief recording engineer, and Wood, an English professor at Houston Community College, Central (and author of the award-winning *Texas Zydeco*), set out to change this. In their exhaustive, lucid, and entertaining account of the studios, they make a compelling argument for the consideration of the studios as the "most significant...in the rich legacy of popular music recording in the state of Texas" and as "one of the most noteworthy independent recording enterprises in the history of postwar popular music."

Using first-hand accounts from the motley characters of the studios' 70-year history, culled from Bradley's documented interviews and experiences from working at the studios, the authors provide an intimate look into the life and times of "the most historic continuously operated studio in Texas," working to distill the essence of the studios' long and occasionally tumultuous history to a salient constant: musical success. The first national hit for Gold Star (as the studio was known until legendary producer Huey Meaux purchased and renamed the studio SugarHill in 1971), came in 1947 with Harry Choates's "Jole Blon." Known as "the Cajun national anthem," the hit "was the first and only Cajun song ever to make *Billboard's* Top Five in

any category." Many hits followed over the decades, including George Jones's "Why Baby Why," Johnny Preston's "Running Bear," Bobby Bland's "This Time I'm Gone For Sure," Asleep at the Wheel's "Miles and Miles of Texas," Destiny's Child's "Survivor," and Clay Walker's album *A Few Questions*, among many, many others. Bradley and Wood provide cogent insight into the pivotal and amusing moments in the process of the major studio recordings. At the end of the book, they also list the studios' hits and other musical recordings in a neatly arranged discography, which comes primarily through the courtesy of Texas music historian Andrew Brown, that will certainly please the casual music fan and avid researcher alike.

House of Hits is at its most appealing when Bradley and Wood trace the intriguing and quirky stories behind some of the most culturally significant songs of the 20th century. One such story comes from 1958 in the arrival of a Beaumont disk jockey to Gold Star Studios. On his way to the studios, the disk jockey scribbles down some lyrics for a B-side to a soon-to-be record-



ing. The disk jockey is J.P. Richardson, also known as “The Big Bopper,” and the hastily crafted lyrics become part of the now-classic song “Chantilly Lace.”

Bradley and Wood furnish particularly deft coverage of the story behind the recording session of “the first Platinum country album ever”—Freddie Fender’s “Before the Next Teardrop Falls.” Recorded at SugarHill studios in 1975 and produced by Huey Meaux, the title became the Country Music Association’s “Single of the Year” and earned Fender *Billboard*’s “Male Vocalist of the Year” award. However, as Bradley and Wood reveal, much of the song’s appeal (Fender’s version “was the thirty-fifth recording of the song”), comes from “random chance and linguistic improvisation,” with a touch of nimble resourcefulness. As documented by “the eyewitness testimony of recording engineer Pat Brady,” Fender was actually forced to sing the Spanish verse to the song because he had dropped the lyrics (which he had not memorized) on the floor during the middle of the session. To accommodate the unplanned linguistic shift in the recording, during a meal break at a Mexican restaurant, the staff asked “a little band from the restaurant” to accompany them back to the studio to “overdub accordion and Mexican guitars on the song.” The “little band” earned “a case of Tecate beer” for their work. *House of Hits* is filled with little anecdotal gems like these, all delivered in an incisive voice.

Another hallmark of the Houston studio company, and the wide range of owners, producers, and recording engineers who have operated it, has been its uncanny knack to launch the careers of major musicians. Bradley and Wood show how the studios have functioned for many promising musicians as an influential “initiation experience” into the music industry. At Gold Star Studios in 1960, Willie Nelson recorded the song “Nightlife” for the first time. Recognized by facility producers as “mature, deep, and thoughtful,” famed music producer and promoter Pappy Daily—who produced his Starday and D Records at Gold Star—dismissed the song “gruffly as not ‘country’ enough” and refused to release it. Apparently Nelson was undeterred by Daily’s assessment. Along with Nelson, Guy Clark, B.J. Thomas, Doug Sahm, Don Williams, Billy Gibbons, and Lucinda Williams all made some of their earliest recordings at Gold Star/SugarHill.

The story of the Gold Star/SugarHill recording studios, much like the city in which they were established, is one of perpetual renewal and unbounded ingenuity. Bradley and Wood, in their adept documentation of the studios, reveal the remarkable story of an upstart studio company that goes from making “novelty” recordings of “birthday greetings and such” to “produc[ing] a multitude of influential hit records and classic tracks for numerous labels in a diverse range of popular genres,” all while functioning in relative obscurity in a converted home in a hard-scrabble Houston neighborhood. By bearing witness to the influential history of the studios, Bradley and Wood do a valuable service for both a Houston icon and popular music.

James Wright

In Search of the Blues: A Journey to the Soul of Black Texas

by Bill Minutaglio (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010). \$50 cloth, \$24.95 paperback, 183 pp. ISBN 978-0-292-72247-7.

In the introduction to *In Search of the Blues: A Journey to the Soul of Black Texas*, Bill Minutaglio quotes one of his editors when he was a newspaperman: “You know what people say about you? Wherever there are two Black people, you’ll find Bill Minutaglio.” There is no doubt that this book was written by someone who has immersed himself professionally and personally into the African-American community of Texas for over 30 years. Minutaglio takes us on a journey that intertwines social and cultural history with the music and soul of black neighborhoods throughout Texas.

A Renaissance Man of Texas letters, Bill Minutaglio spent over 30 years as a journalist. He has authored several books, including biographies of George W. Bush, Alberto Gonzales, and Molly Ivins, and today is a journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin. *In Search of the Blues* draws from 15 articles he wrote for Texas newspapers beginning in the 1980s. Portraits of people and their neighborhoods appear through Minutaglio’s literary lens of oral history, ethnic studies, urban demographics, and musicology.

The articles are organized into three themes—people, communities, and music. Minutaglio establishes the common thread in his subtitle, *A Journey to the Soul of Black Texas*. The first theme profiles football legend Ray Rhoades from Mexia, black activist Fahim Minkah from Oak Cliff in Dallas, and San Antonio businessman Percy Sutton. Minutaglio’s narratives portray these powerful stories of individual achievement within the broader context of family and community. These articles—personal histories rich with detail—were written in the 1990s and serve not only as excellent primary sources for the historian but also sources of inspiration and interest for any reader.

Part Two is titled “Community.” These five eclectic pieces capture the spirit of Minutaglio’s journey. The approach is a unique one for a journalist, particularly a white writer covering Dallas neighborhoods that in most cases are still segregated. Minutaglio creates door-to-door histories that span three generations. He addresses the ravages of poverty and segregation, but the reader is left with a positive message that affirms the resilience and strength of the people. Minutaglio takes us to Congo Street, a small alley and street near Fair Park in Dallas. For 70 years this “island” of black culture has survived and evolved. Examples of urban politics comprise the articles on Oak Cliff, with its past and future dependent on the “Bottomland” of the Trinity River. Minutaglio also takes the reader to the “Hole” in South Dallas, an abandoned building where he warmed his hands with the locals over a fire in a barrel.

The last part of the book profiles several legendary Texas blues performers, as well as some not so famous artists. Minutaglio begins with Alex Moore, described as “a gateway to the musical history of Texas. He embodied several traditions that could be traced back to the influential Deep Ellum area.” Often known as Whistlin’ Alex Moore, he was one of the first barrelhouse blues pianists to have a substantial impact on later boogie-woogie and R&B styles.

Minutaglio looks at T-Bone Walker and the Dallas blues club scene, as well as Doris Standifer, the “Queen of the Blues” and the “Number 1 Lady of Song in Texas” during the 1940s. Portraits of Zuzu Bollin and Robert Ealey complement the accounts of clubs such as Wellington’s, Sadler’s Corner, and The Bluebird in Fort Worth. An article on Henry Qualls and his rise to critical acclaim in the blues world from Texas to Europe illustrates Minutaglio’s skills as a musicologist as he explores the roots of country blues.

Finally, the author examines Houston with a brief bio of Sam “Lightnin’” Hopkins. Minutaglio describes Hopkins as “the poet laureate of the streets, and the oral historian, in his way, of all those things and people that flowed from East Texas into the big city.” Other portraits from Houston’s Fourth Ward include R&B legend Amos Milburn and barrelhouse pianists Robert Shaw and Dr. Hepcat (Lavada Durst). Shaw once gave the author a lesson on blues variations played in the road sides (Black clubs) featuring the Louisiana style, the Mississippi style, and the Fourth Ward style.

The last article, “Zydeco Blues,” describes the Louisiana-meets-Texas blues of Gatemouth Brown, Clifton Chenier, and Buckwheat Zydeco. Again, Minutaglio’s prose moves from clubs to kitchens to church to outdoor festival—with the music always at center stage.

For the music lover, the major criticism of this book is that one is left wanting more—more artist portraits, more clubs, more personal stories. The author’s commitment to the blues tradition and the community of its origin is infectious and transcends the stereotypical image of a “white guy trying to discover the blues.” Ethnicity is irrelevant in understanding and embracing a culture as long as there is respect and passion—and Bill Minutaglio certainly meets that standard.

For the historian, this book is a superb oral history that celebrates neighborhood values and generational triumphs.

Larry Willoughby

Our Contributors

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James Wright

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